Charles University

Faculty of Arts

The Institute of Ethnology and Central European and Balkan Studies

Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology

Dissertation

Mgr. et Mgr. Timea Crofony

THE INTIMATE STATE OF ISRAEL: POLITICS OF DESIRE AND SECULAR ISRAELI JEWS

Intimní Izrael: Politika Touhy a Sekulární Izraelští Židé a Židovky

Dissertation supervisor: PhDr. et Mgr. Marcela Menachem Zoufalá, Ph.D

2025

I hereby declare that I have written this dissertation independently, using only the mentioned and duly cited sources and literature, and that the work has not been used in another university study programme or to obtain the same or another academic title.

In Prague on 29. 6. 2025 Mgr. et Mgr. Timea Crofony, v. r.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Marcela Menachem Zoufalá, for her supportive yet firm guidance throughout my studies. More than "just" a supervisor, Marcela has been a mentor, a trusted advisor, and a constant source of encouragement, ensuring that I stayed on course even during the most challenging phases of the research.

I am deeply grateful to all the individuals who shared their lives, stories, and perspectives with me. Without their contributions, this work would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank the professors from our Institute at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, as well as those from the Gender Studies programme at the Faculty of Humanities, who have played a fundamental role in shaping my academic identity and opening my eyes to new horizons.

Furthermore, I am grateful to Prof. Yaacov Yadgar for his valuable insights and for the opportunity to take part in his seminars and discussions during my research visit at the University of Oxford, which provided me with important experiences relevant to my work. I am also grateful to Prof. Hanna Herzog for her invaluable assistance for making my research fellowship at Tel Aviv University a reality, as well as for her steadfast support.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the Grant Agency of Charles University, which made my fieldwork and research possible by supporting project No. 84122 titled "The Interconnectedness of the Ethno-Religious Construction of Jewish Identity and the Relationship Preferences of Secular Israeli Jews." I also wish to acknowledge the Anglo-Czech Educational Fund for their generous financial support of my research stay at the University of Oxford.

On a personal note, I would like to extend heartfelt gratitude to my parents. I am especially thankful for their unwavering support and trust in my academic pursuits. Additionally, I appreciate their personal library, which not only shaped me but deeply influenced my intellectual trajectory.

I would also like to express my deep thanks to my friends, whether in Prague, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, or Oxford, who have supported me throughout my academic and personal journey.

Finally, my appreciation goes to my partner who stood by me during the challenging moments of my life that coincided with the dissertation writing, and who supported me tremendously during the final stages of my doctoral path. His emotional and practical support was incredible.

I wish to dedicate this work to all the people whose lives were upended since October 7th, 2023, in Israel and Palestine, and to those who, despite the pain, disappointment, and loss, continue to work towards building a new reality out of the rubble and ruins, both literal and symbolic.

Abstract:

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the politics of intimacy and desire among secular Israeli Jews in the State of Israel. It contributes to anthropological debates on the "politics of love," which examine how intimate life is entangled with the state, political projects, and broader social structures. Proceeding from the premise that intimate relationships are not merely private matters but deeply political and public, the study explores how "being secular" (*hiloni*) is lived and narrated in everyday life, and how it affects intimate relationships, preferences, and decisions. While sociological research often defines *hilonim* through religious observance or its absence, this study addresses the underexamined question of how secularity is experienced and related to intimacy. It asks: How do individuals who self-identify as *hilonim* understand and articulate their identity? What role do these articulations play in shaping their intimate relationships and choices? What do these relationships reveal about the society and state in which they are located? The fieldwork was conducted between mid-2022 and mid-2023 in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. It included 23 in-depth interviews, extensive participant observation, and informal conversations. The analysis and interpretation of the ethnographic data are informed by what is collectively known as post-theories. The study concludes that "secularity" does not serve as a stable point of reference, but emerges as a performative dialogue. In the context of the dissertation, it is narrated and gestured through six cumulative and interconnected tropes identified in the ethnographic material. The tropes influence the metaphorical movements of subjects through the tethers of the "infrastructure of intimacy." Such movements reflect negotiations between liberal ideals of autonomous love and genealogical attachments to Jewish continuity. Tensions unfolding within these movements, shaped by a multiplicity of forces including legal architecture, spatial separation, and cultural expectations, allow intimacy to be understood as a diagnostic lens for examining political possibility in contemporary Israeli society.

Keywords: Israel; Judaism; Jews; Secularity; Intimacy; Desire; Relationships; Politics; Ethnography

Abstrakt:

Tato dizertace je etnografickou studií politiky intimity a touhy mezi sekulárními izraelskými Židy a Židovkami ve Státě Izrael. Studie přispívá k antropologickým debatám o "politice lásky," které se zaměřují na to, jak je intimní život propojen se státem, politickými projekty a širšími společenskými strukturami. Vycházejíce z předpokladu, že intimita a touha nejsou pouze soukromými záležitostmi, ale hluboce politickými a veřejnými, tato studie zkoumá, jak je "být sekulární" (*hiloni*; "being secular") žito a vyprávěno v každodenním životě, a jak ovlivňuje intimní vztahy, preference, a rozhodnutí. Zatímco sociologické výzkumy často definují *hilonim* skrze dodržování náboženských předpisů či absenci takového dodržování, tato práce se zabývá nedostatečně prozkoumanou otázkou jak je sekularita prožívána, a jak souvisí s intimitou. Klade si následující otázky: Jak jednotlivci, kteří sami sebe označují jako *hilonim*, chápou a artikulují svou identitu? Jakou roli tyto artikulace hrají při utváření jejich intimních vztahů a rozhodnutí? Co tyto vztahy vypovídají o společnosti a státu, ve kterých se odehrávají? Terénní výzkum probíhal v období mezi polovinou roku 2022 a polovinou roku 2023 v Jeruzalémě a Tel Avivu. Zahrnoval 23 hloubkových rozhovorů, rozsáhlé zúčastněné pozorování a neformální konverzace. Analýza a interpretace etnografických dat jsou ovlivněny přístupy, které bývají kolektivně označovány jako post-teorie. Práce dochází k závěru, že "sekularita" není stabilním referenčním bodem, ale vynořuje se v rámci performativního dialogu. V kontextu dizertační práce je vyprávěna a gestikulována prostřednictvím šesti kumulativních a vzájemně propojených tropů identifikovaných v etnografickém materiálu. Tyto tropy ovlivňují metaforické pohyby subjektů skrze vazby "infrastruktury intimity." Takové pohyby pak odrážejí vyjednávání mezi liberálním ideálem autonomní lásky a genealogickými pouty k židovské kontinuitě. Napětí, která se odehrávají v těchto pohybech a která jsou formovaná mnohostí sil, včetně právní architektury, prostorové separace a kulturních očekávání, dovolují nahlížet na intimitu jako na diagnostický nástroj pro zkoumání politických možností v současné izraelské společnosti.

Klíčová slova: Izrael; Judaismus; Židé; Sekularita; Intimita; Touha; Vztahy; Politika; Etnografie

Introduction **9**
Politics of Intimacy and Desire 13
The Israeli Case 20
Towards the Dissertation's Topic 26
On Positionality and Politics of Location 29
Structure of The Dissertation 34
Theoretical Terrain: Points of Departure **38**
1.1. Post-theories: Discourse and Power 38
1.2. Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories 45
1.3. Postsecular Search for Secular Subject 52
1.4. Ethnic Jews: Beyond Ontological Jewishness 59
Summary: Implications and Reintroductions 66
Methodological Foundations **71**
2.1. Ethnographic Ground 71
On Ethnographic Creation: Writing Someone Else 74
2. 2. Field and Subjects 77
Interlocutors, Friends, and Informants 85
Time Frame and Ruptures 88
2. 3. In-Depth Interviews 89
Process, Locations and Language 90
Composition of Interlocutors 98
2. 4. Participant Observation 101
2. 5. Limitations, Challenges, and Side Effects 105
Language and Meanings 105
Challenge of a Mundane 106
Researching Desire, Creating Desire 108
2. 6. Ethical Considerations 111
Anonymization and Safety 113
Rapport, Responsibility and Betrayal 113
2. 7. Process of Analysis and Notes on Writing 114
The Intimate State of Israel **118**
3. 1. Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition 121
3. 1. 1. Tropology: Being a "Secular Jew" 131
Secularity as Personal Autonomy *134*
Tomer: I am my own religion 134
Lea: I create my own destiny 136
Nir: I'm not a Jew, I'm a Hebrew 138
Secularity as Counter-Position *142*
Alona: I have antagonism towards religion 142
Nitzan: I'm an atheist and this isn't democracy 144
Secularity as Israeliness *149*
Ishai: Tradition is a peer pressure from dead people 149

Secularity as Reason and Common Sense.. *153*
Sagi: You can't do half of Torah... 153
Secularity as Judaism...*158*
Hila: Rhythm of life here is the rhythm of my people................. 158
Daniel: Judaism is an ongoing conversation................................164
Secularity as Zionism.. *169*
Joni: Zionism is a word of the past.. 170
Conclusion: Gestures in Multiple Directions....................................176
3. 2. Topography of Locations: Shabbat Shalom, Ramadan Kareem............ 182
Jerusalem: "City of Madness"...187
Tel Aviv: "Secular Dungeon"..192
Dialogical Windows: Jerusalem-Tel Aviv Axis....................................... 194
Conclusion: Mirror Images.. 208
3. 3. Infrastructure of Intimacy: Thick Life, Thin Lines................................215
3. 3. 1. Moving Through the Tethers: Imagined Futures, Potential Pasts 227
Movement I: Claim of Freedom...232
Movement II: Possible Lovers, Impossible Others............................237
Movement III: Inherited Legacies..248
Movement IV: Bargaining With the Audience...................................253
Movement V: Imagined Elsewheres, Otherwise................................261
Conclusion: No Clear Endings...271
Final Discussion: If There Is Love, Then What?...285
Epilogue: And Then The War Came...292
References... 296

Introduction

“[...] there is nothing more alienating than having one’s pleasures disputed by someone with a theory.”
(Berlant, 2012: 5)

This dissertation is an ethnographic exploration of what I term the “politics of intimacy and desire,” situated in the State of Israel and focused on the lives of secular Israeli Jews. It engages with anthropological debates on the “politics of love,” which examine the entanglement of intimate relationships with broader structures of power, the state, and political projects. The dissertation works with the premise that intimacy and desire are not merely personal or private matters, but also deeply public and political.

Sociological surveys repeatedly indicate that “being secular” (*hiloni*) is the dominant form of self-identification among the Jewish segment of Israeli society. However, these studies often define *hilonim* mainly through religious observance or its absence. What remains underexplored is how secularity is contextually lived, embodied, and narrated, and how individuals who identify as *hilonim* navigate intimate choices, partnerships, and their own desires. This dissertation addresses that gap by approaching *hilonim* through a contextual, situated reading of the landscape they inhabit and the intimate lives they construct within it.

As a qualitative study, the dissertation explores the following questions: *How do the subjects understand and articulate their identity? What role do their narrations of identity play in their intimate relationships? What do these relationships reveal about the state and society of which they are part?* To address these questions, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv from mid-2022 to mid-2023, which consisted of 23 in-depth interviews, an uncountable number of informal conversations, extensive participant observation, and overall “ethnographing.”

The resulting ethnography and interpretations are influenced by what is collectively known as “post-theories.” Through the conceptual tropes of “secularity” and metaphorical movements within the “infrastructure of intimacy,” the study traces how intimate lives unfold within, and respond to, inherited

legacies, spatial imaginaries, and ethno-national logics, where the competing pulls of liberal autonomy and genealogical embeddedness converge.

Based on the findings, I argue that "secularity," as one of the discursively available modes of Jewish subjectivity, emerges not as a stable point of reference but as a performative dialogue. I identify six cumulative and interconnected tropes of secularity as they appear in the ethnographic material. Rather than approaching secularity as something "measurable" through religious observance, I argue that it is better understood by analysing how it is narrated and gestured—towards what and whom, and in which contexts. That, in turn, influences the metaphorical movements of subjects through the tethers of the infrastructure of intimacy, and negotiations they navigate along the way.

These movements range and oscillate between the claims of liberal autonomy in love, where free choice equates with "being secular," and genealogical embeddedness where affective ties to "tradition" and "Jewish" continuity must be taken into account. I show how this oscillation produces hierarchies of acceptability among potential partners, sorting them into categories of "possible lovers" and "impossible Others," further reinforced by the state's legal architecture as well as structural and spatial separations. I conclude that the tension between simultaneous pulls, and the ambivalent practices that emerge from them, may give rise to new forms of "world-making." In this sense, I suggest, it illuminates the potential of intimacy to serve as a diagnostic of political possibility.

At a general level, this dissertation contributes to anthropological debates and research on the "politics of love," specifically to ethnographic studies that place the politics of intimacy and love at the centre of their analysis (Mody 2022). As the subjects of this study are Jews, it also falls within the anthropology of Jews, particularly in relation to research on contemporary Jewish identities. By situating the study in Israel, it also enriches the field of Israel studies.

As the fieldwork was conducted during 2022 and 2023, prior to the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023 and the subsequent war in Gaza, which at the time of submission is still ongoing, this work's contribution also lies in its ethnographic exposure of and temporal "window" to the situation before the onset of the current tragic geopolitical situation. One possible direction for future

research could therefore be the question of how these events may have potentially reshaped the landscape in which intimate relationships unfold.

Furthermore, the study differs from previous work in that it focuses on the "centre," that is, the dominant segment of society, the "norm," rather than on its margins. In the realm of intimate partnerships, it does not primarily examine relationships that are, by their very existence, already "transgressive" and threatening to the hegemonic order. Instead, it explores what takes place within the ordinary, everyday, and "taken-for-granted" aspects of life.

The methodological contribution of this work lies in the development of "tropology" as a tool for tracing narrations and gestures of claimed "secularity"; "dialogical windows of mirror images" as a means of observing how narrations about "space" and environment within the imagination of subjects lead to deeper insights into questions such as who constitutes the "We," who are the "Others," whose presence is "asymptomatic," and whose is troubling; and the "infrastructure of intimacy,"[1] through which the "movements" of subjects can be examined without compelling them to choose between "autonomy" and "embeddedness."

In the context of the Czech Republic, the dissertation brings a novel and as yet unexplored topic. It contributes to advancing Czech scholarship on Jews and the State of Israel, while also facilitating a cross-disciplinary dialogue between local perspectives and global frameworks. In this respect, it is important to note that only a few scholars in the Czech Republic systematically focus on contemporary Israel, particularly from perspectives grounded in socio-cultural anthropology, gender studies, cultural studies, critical sociology, and related

[1] My use of the term "infrastructure of intimacy" is informed by a diverse range of sources, which I draw on to develop its specific meaning in the context of the dissertation. Most notably, it is inspired by Lauren Berlant's writing on infrastructures, which I address in more detail later in the text. The "infrastructural turn" is traceable in multiple fields, and the overview is provided by Ara Wilson (2016), see also, e.g., Star 1999; Amin 2014. In fact, Wilson uses the very same term to bring attention to the analytical utility of "infrastructures" for exploring "intimacy," where both infrastructure and intimacy are treated as "as an object in itself and as a rubric to describe the construction of that object" (Wilson, 2016: 267). Wilson further notes that "understanding how infrastructures enable or hinder intimacy is a conduit to understanding the concrete force of abstract fields of power by allowing us to identify actually existing systems rather than a priori structures" (Ibid.: 248). That is highly instructive and inspirational also for my work. Yet, Wilson's suggestions are more situated in the materiality of infrastructure, for example how public restrooms enforce gender binaries. My attention is oriented towards the "embroidery" of intimate infrastructure, which is created through the movements of its subjects and, at the same time, both enables their subjectivity and constrains it.

fields. The exception is the work of Marcela Menachem Zoufalá, who has examined topics such as the influence of rabbinic authorities on the lives of Jewish women in Israel (2012a), divorce practices in modern Israel (2012b), and the relationship of the Czech Jewish Diaspora with Israeli society (2020). Contemporary Israel is otherwise mostly covered from the perspectives of political science, international relations, and security studies. From this perspective, Israel is examined systematically by Irena Kalhousová (2024) and Jakub Záhora (2021; 2023).[2]

As part of this *Introduction*, I first explain what "politics of intimacy and desire" means in the context of the dissertation, using fragmentary personal memories as a starting point for a broader story of the convergence between the "intimate" and the "public," as reflected in the scholarship I engage with—primarily from anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, but not limited to these fields. I then turn more specifically to the question of contemporary Israel and explain why I chose to "intimately" visit the country, to explore its internal processes and lives of secular Israeli Jews through the lens of the politics of intimacy and desire, and in which ways such a lens might be productive.

Further, I provide an overview of the journey leading to the dissertation's topic and explain what was the initial encounter which later led to the whole research. In this section, I also describe the gradual shift in my understanding of "religion" and "secularity," which changed the course of the work since the initial research project.

Since I consider the researcher's positionality to be a highly important matter, especially in ethnographic work where the "Self" is used as an "instrument of knowing" (Ortner 1995: 173), I include a reflection on my own positionality early on as part of the *Introduction* as well. I close the *Introduction* by presenting the structure of the dissertation, which includes an annotation for each part and its chapters.

[2] This summary does not, however, aim to list all Czech works on the topic of contemporary Israel and its society, primarily because they are based on entirely different premises than this dissertation: in terms of focus, methodology, research subjects, and disciplinary orientation.

Politics of Intimacy and Desire

"There is nothing more public than privacy."
(Berlant and Warner, 1998: 547)

"*Our story is about the dilemmas of desire, the struggle between contradictory attractions, rather than the history of a monolithic dogma. As such, it is the story of a profoundly ambivalent culture."*
(Biale, 1992:5)

The year is 2020, and I have been accepted into the doctoral program in Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology with a project proposal entitled "The Impact of Religion on Dating Patterns of Secular Israeli Jews." I get the usual "lovey-dovey" comments of congratulations from friends and colleagues but with a twist of sarcasm and suspicion: *That's great! I guess you'll be dating like crazy in Tel Aviv as part of your "research" then, huh?* Wink, wink.

Cut.

It is 2016, and I am on the beach in Tel Aviv, visiting a friend. My repeated visits to Israel come up in her group of locals: *Why do you come here so often? Are you Jewish? No? So, you're a Christian? Or not? Then what are you? Would you like to date here?*

Cut.

It is early spring 2023, and I am arriving in Jerusalem for the second part of my fieldwork. My local roommate and I head straight to the supermarket because there is no food in our new place. In the checkout line, an elderly couple starts talking to me in Hebrew. I do not catch on, so they try French. My roommate steps in: *They want to know who you are, what you're doing here, why you have so many tattoos, and whether we're married or at least dating. They asked me if we are a couple.*

Cut.

It is autumn 2022, and Mohmoud, the taxi driver, asks me where I am from and what I am doing in Jerusalem. He asks if I am Christian. I say no, but that I come from a Christian family. He asks if I came to Jerusalem because of some man. I say no again, I came for the research. He concludes our conversation by saying that we all want to live here in peace—and to take care of our families.

Cut.

It is 2025, and I am writing the final parts of this dissertation. I discuss my findings and local experiences with a Jewish Israeli researcher in Oxford. She asks me: *How on earth did you think to research this? Are you Jewish? Was there a man behind the initial thought?*

Cut.

It is almost summer 2023, and my scheduled fieldwork is coming to an end. A local friend of mine, with whom I have become very close during my stay, says to me: *Timea, it's time for you to come home. You have a Jewish soul. Go back to Judaism and find yourself a nice Jewish boyfriend. A nice gever Mizrahi*.[3]

American social and cultural theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner open their paper *Sex in Public* (1998), which addresses the negotiation of queer culture amidst the hegemony of heterosexual culture, with the sharp claim that *"there is nothing more public than privacy."* As we reflect on the fragments of our lives and daily interactions with others—as I just did—it becomes impossible to ignore how deeply invested both we and those around us are in what might unhesitatingly be called "privacy": who we are, where we come from, what "makes" us who we are, and with whom, how, and why we live. These are, after all, fundamental questions that underpin anthropology itself, shape ethnographic approaches, and reverberate through much of sociology.

Who we are, what we do, with whom and how we live are not only of interest to nosy neighbors or curious passers-by unashamed of their questions (or to us, annoying researchers). These aspects of our lives are also highly significant to the state and to both formal and informal collectives. The answers to these

[3] Nice Jewish man of Mizrahi origin. The explanation of the division between *Ashkenazi* and *Mizrahi* Jews can be found later in the text, in the footnote n. 24.

questions shape our possibilities for belonging (Bell 1999; Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011), they define our inclusion in collective identities, our participation in shared histories, memories, and sentiments. At the same time, they determine—and are determined by—our rights and responsibilities as citizens.

What we are witnessing here is the interplay between what we perceive as personal and public, as well as what we enact as private and public. Hardly anyone questions that incest is not right,[4] that children must be protected, or that there should be a minimum age for marriage. However, only some people are troubled by the fact that, in certain states, gay people cannot marry or adopt children. Even fewer are disturbed by the requirement for castration in some countries as a condition for gender transition. These are, of course, blatant and striking examples of how our identity, desires,[5] intimacy, and reproduction are regulated and governed.

Yet, the regulation of what I call *intimacy and desire* for the purpose of this dissertation does not always take such overt forms. More often, it is embedded in something less tangible than "just" legislation[6]: cultural expectations, traditions we label as religious, latent norms of a given community, nation-building narratives, and, of course, the emotions and affects surrounding the potential or actual transgression of these boundaries. Together, they shape who we are "allowed" to love, marry, or even date.

Intimacy—derived from the Latin *intimus*, meaning something inmost, secret, or internal—may be enacted and embodied within the "private," enclosed spaces of our homes, but its character is far more complex and expansive. It unfolds within a dense web of influences, regulations, discourses, and

---

[4] However, legislation, including criminal sanctions, varies from country to country. For example, Czech law criminalizes intercourse between relatives in the direct line, but this is not necessarily the case in other countries.

[5] At this point, it is worth clarifying the specific forms of *desire* I am not engaging with in this dissertation. The focus here is not on the philosophical debate surrounding "desire" as a concept, its ontological status, whether as force, affect, or an effect of power, or the interplay between its objective and subjective dimensions. Nor am I addressing psychoanalytic interpretations of desire. Rather, within the scope of this work, desire is something far more ordinary: a broad, simple term for "wanting" that encompasses both sexual and romantic desires, as well as preference for structuring one's life in particular ways. For the "desire" debated in ways I do not engage with here, see, e.g., Deleuze and Guattari 1972; Kristeva 1980; Butler 1987; Berlant 2012.

[6] Let me take the example of Czech legal regulations on marriage once again: marriage between relatives in the first and second degrees is forbidden, but this restriction does not apply to the third degree. Therefore, it is legally permissible to marry a cousin. From a legal perspective, this is acceptable, but most people I have spoken to are unaware of this possibility and do not consider it "natural" or "right." Such a couple would certainly raise at least a few eyebrows with their decision. What is possible legally, can still be sanctioned socially.

corporealities. And intimacy itself is such a tangled web: intimacy always occurs in relation to someone or something, and our decisions and desires—though influenced, usurped, meandered, governed, and sanctioned—are at the same time never completely free from agency and reimagination, at least in potential.

In the introduction to a special issue of *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* entitled *Intimacy Revisited,* social anthropologists Sertaç Sehlikoglu and Aslı Zengin (2015) pose the fundamental question: Why is it useful to revisit intimacy using it as an analytical lens? They conclude that because, from the perspective of anthropology, intimacy, or rather intimacies, are "integral to the formation of human selves and subjectivities, as well as communities, publics, collectives, and socialities" (Sehlikoglu and Zengin, 2015: 20).

Because of its elusiveness, intimacy, like love or desire, is also "an enthralling object of enquiry," yet "its meaning is ambiguous" (Ibid.). Referring to the work of Henrietta Moore (2014), the authors argue that "intimacy easily creates an almost aphasic, polysemic confusion" (Ibid.) Our aphasic "chatter," which arises when we talk about relationships, sex, dating, secret desires, and acts that take place behind closed doors, also functions as an effect of intimacy: we often lack the necessary words to fully grasp intimacy, much like love as an object of inquiry.[7] In fact, intimacy, desire, and love are interconnected, though they do not necessarily occur simultaneously. Intimacy is deeply entwined with the regulation of gendered and ethnicized bodies[8] and desires, often serving as a site where inclusions and exclusions, as well as the state itself, are enacted.[9]

When I refer to the "state," I distinguish between two meanings: the "state" with a lowercase "s," which reflects a conceptual and theoretical approach, and the "State" with a capital "S," referring specifically to the State of Israel. The latter's concrete conditions are discussed in the third part of this dissertation. By

---

[7] For "love studies," see, e.g., Giddens 1992; Kipnis 2003; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Mody 2008; hooks 2000; Berlant 2011; Illouz 1997, 2012, 2018, 2023; Jónasdóttir and Ferguson 2014; Wright 2016; Ferguson and Toye 2017.

[8] Or, as Sara Ahmed (2002) terms it, the "racialized body," which serves as a site for the process of racialization; or, as Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) describes it, the "racialized constructions of collectivities," where "race" acts as a trap of naturalistic thinking (Šmausová 1999).

[9] As we can find, for instance, in the works of authors who considered the intertwined nature of sexuality and the state (Cooper 1995); the gendered sexuality and reproduction of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1993, 1997; Boellstorff 2004); the politicization of intimate matters in colonial, postcolonial and neoliberal times (Berlant 1997; Stoler 1995, 2002; Povinelli 2006); the politics of gender and sexuality under state socialism (Havelková and Oates-Indruchová 2014; Sokolová 2021); the politics of reproduction (Gisburg and Rapp 1991; Constable 2009; Taragin-Zeller 2023); the intimate citizenship (Plummer 2003); or the globalization of intimacies (Plummer 2001).

speaking of the "state" in lowercase, I align with perspectives that critically interrogate state-centric theories that conceive "the state [...] as a clearly bounded institution distinct from society, often portrayed as a unitary and autonomous actor that possesses the supreme authority to regulate populations within its territory" (Sharma and Gupta, 2006: 8).

In contrast, ethnographic scholarship over recent decades has problematized this assumption and emphasized the entanglement of state power with subject formation.[10] Drawing on Michel Foucault's insights, this body of work views the state not as a preexisting entity that stands apart from society but rather as a network—as "an assemblage of agents, mechanisms, institutions, ideologies, and discourses through which power circulates" (Kravel-Tovi, 2017: 38 in Taragin-Zeller, 2023: 7). My approach follows this perspective, understanding the state as something continuously negotiated rather than as a static or monolithic entity.

By focusing on intimacy as a deeply relational and politicized arena, I attempt to underscore its potential to illuminate the intersections of personal life with larger social patterns, cultural practices, historical processes, ideologies, and state policies. Intimacy, in this sense, might be perceived as a site where boundaries of permissibility are not only drawn, built, and constructed, but where they also sometimes completely crumble: between what is understood as the "religious" and the "secular," the public and the personal, the normative and the transgressive, while giving rise to something unexpected.

In this dissertation, I follow in the footsteps of authors who engage with the topics of intimacy, love, desire, and their entanglement with power structures, the state, and political projects. Specifically, I focus on what anthropologist Perveez Mody, in her research on the conditions in India, calls the "politics of love" (2022).[11] It captures the dual nature of this "politics": the state's interventions into personal and intimate relationships, and the negotiation and

---

[10] See, e.g., Michael Herzfeld's *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (1997), where he speaks about "creative dissent" and argues that in the modern nation-state, one can be "fiercely patriotic and just as fiercely rebellious at the same time" (1997: 91). See also Sara L. Friedman's *Intimate Politics: Marriage, the Market, and State Power in Southeastern China* (2005), who discusses how marital reforms in socialist China, intended to forge a "socialist subject" aligned with state goals, resulted in the unintended formation of subjects not necessarily committed to those original political ideals. See also Sharma 2006.

[11] She also works with the terms "politicized love" (2020) and "love jurisdiction" (2013). I explain it further in the *Infrastructure of Intimacy: Thick Life, Thin Lines* chapter in the third part of the dissertation.

navigation of one's personal "Selves" and desires against and along with those interventions within a specific socio-political context. As a cultural anthropologist, I am primarily concerned with the lived experiences and their narrations through the personal stories of the interlocutors, with the "gestures" of one's being—both literal and figurative—and with the observations of such a precarious navigation.

As I already mentioned previously, desire, love, and intimate relationships are often assumed to belong to the private sphere, understood as deeply personal experiences shaped by autonomous choice of an individual. This assumption persists not only in everyday discourse but also, at times, in academic discussions that do not fully engage with feminist, queer, and critical perspectives. It assumes that desire is somehow pre-political—an internal, almost primordial force that exists outside social, historical, and political formations.[12] Yet, as scholars across disciplines have shown, desire and intimacy are not simply personal matters; they are also profoundly shaped by power relations, and broader political structures.[13]

Sociologist Ann Swidler reminds us that "although love is a quintessentially personal, private experience, love is just as profoundly social and

[12] Just as Judith Butler, whose work I address later in the *Theoretical Terrain* part, critiques the discursive distinction between "sex" and "gender," in which sex is perceived as a biological given and gender as a constructed identity built upon that "fact." Butler argues that "sex" itself is not a pre-discursive material fact but is also produced within discourse (see *Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories*). For a discussion on the medical-scientific construction of masculinity as rooted in the "essence of the body," see Fausto-Sterling 1997.

[13] Consider, for example, Foucault's famous and multivolume *History of Sexuality* (with the first volume published in 1978 [1976]), in which he addresses and challenges, among other things, the repressive hypothesis—that sexuality and the discourse surrounding it were repressed before the development of modern societies, in which sexuality is now free to flourish. Or David Halperin's *Is There a History of Sexuality?* (1989), in which, building upon Foucault, he traces the history of sexuality. Similarly, Jonathan Katz (1995), in *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, shatters the notion that heterosexuality is a timeless norm, existing without its own genealogy. In the same vein, see, e.g., Rupp 1999. Likewise, "love" as a concept has its own history and territoriality: e.g., Anthony Giddens, in *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), traces the transformation of the perception of romantic love in modern "Western" society, which has reoriented itself towards individual needs, emotional closeness, and the pursuit of fulfillment. For an overview of ethnological research on love, see Jankowiak and Nelson 2021. In *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* (1997), sociologist Eva Illouz explores the commodification of romance and romantic encounters, which go hand in hand with capitalism. Similarly, in her next book, *Why Love Hurts* (2012), she examines love and its transformations, especially the emphasis on "choice" as firmly tied to modernity. See also Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Love: On the Fragility of Human Bonds* (2003), in which he discusses "being without bond" in "liquid modernity," where none of the relationships are guaranteed to be stable. "Love" as the main parameter for partner selection and as the endpoint of personal satisfaction is, after all, a quite recent phenomenon and remains plausible only in certain parts of the world (Coontz 2005). For an anthropological perspective, see, e.g., Jankowiak and Fischer 1992, or Jennifer S. Hirsch and Holly Wardlow's (2006) collection *Modern Loves: The Anthropology of Romantic Courtship and Companionate Marriage*, which traces the transformations of "modern love," the concept and institution of marriage, partnership, and desire, all in dialogue with global change, migration, shifting economic structures, and state policies. On a similar note, see, e.g., Dikova et. al. 2023.

cultural" (2001: 2). Expanding on this, we can assert that love is also political.[14] As Berlant suggests, intimacy is not just a private affective state but one that "poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective" (1998: 293). In other words, the ways we relate to one another—whom we desire, whom we form relationships with, and under what conditions (or, as Sara Ahmed [2006: 1] would ask, how we are "oriented" in our desire and towards what and whom)—are never neutral, as they emerge within historically specific configurations with distinct implications.

The distinction between private and public, or between culture and politics, is thus misleading. Philosopher Amia Srinivasan points to this entanglement when she writes that "whom we have sex with and how" is a political question with its own history (2021: 86). As she further notes: "The question, then, is how to dwell in the ambivalent place where we acknowledge that no one is obliged to desire anyone else, that no one has a right to be desired, but also that who is desired and who isn't is a political question, often answered by more general patterns of domination and exclusion" (Srinivasan, 2021: 90).

Similarly, the editors of *Intimate States: Gender, Sexuality, and Governance in Modern US History* remind us that while intimacy and state power may appear distinct, "sexuality, marriage, and reproduction—our most private expressions of self—are bound up in a vast legal architecture meant to support what is seen as public order and the public good" (Canaday et al., 2021: 8).

In this light, the choices we make in our intimate lives are often not as autonomous or free from external influence as we might like to think. My ethnographic inquiry into the politics of intimacy and desire of secular Israeli Jews is shaped by a broader set of theoretical engagements that have informed how I think about subjects, that is, how they come into "being" and experience "Selves." I outline these theoretical engagements and their meaning for the further writing in the first part, *Theoretical Terrain: Points of Departure*.

[14] Here, Hannah Arendt would not agree, as she argues that love "is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces" (Arendt, 1958: 242 in Hardt 2011).

The Israeli Case

At this point, it may be clearer why I have chosen to revisit Israel in an intimate way for this dissertation and focus on questions surrounding the politics of desire: it is our intimate, private spheres of relating to the "Other"[15] that possess both unique characteristics and reflect, in their everyday and seemingly non-political nature, the highly politicized and public affairs of reproduction, identity, and belonging. In intimate encounters and partnerships, the state can function as a "matchmaker," our grandparents as guardians of family tradition and continuity, and our partners as reminders of who we are, who we want to be, and what we are willing or not willing to compromise. From this perspective, I now turn to the specific context of Israel.

My inquiry is situated in the State of Israel, with its contested self-characterization as "Jewish and Democratic,"[16] which actively draws normative boundaries around who is considered as "Jewish enough" to belong to the nation, as part of the nation-building Zionist[17] project (Smooha 1997, 2002; Yiftachel 2006; Kimmerling 2005; Ram 2010; Ben-Porat 2013; Yadgar 2017, 2020, 2024; Dalsheim 2019). The state's claim to a dual identity as simultaneously Jewish and democratic represents a source of tension, particularly where it intersects with the precarious terrain of love and intimate relationships. It is precisely this terrain that is affected and shaped by state policies that delineate who is allowed to marry whom, build a family, or gain citizenship.[18] However, viewed through an ethnographic lens, it would be too simple to claim that these policies and the boundaries of "Jewishness" constructed and reproduced within and through them are simply received and passively accepted by the subjects.

[15] But of course, in all their variability, if we do not wish to remain trapped in the heteronormative presumption of the couplehood as an alliance of "one woman" and "one man."

[16] Or, as Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin terms it, "Jewish and demographic," alluding to the state's emphasis on maintaining a Jewish demographic majority. Prof. Raz-Krakotzkin used this term during the discussion following his lecture in Oxford in 2025.

[17] At this point, I want to emphasize that the period during which I wrote this dissertation was significantly marked by the massive Hamas attack on Israeli territory in the fall of 2023, and by the subsequent destructive war in Gaza which led to multiple flashpoints of conflict in the region. At the time of finalizing this dissertation, the dramatic situation continued to persist. I discuss the effects of these events on my writing in the *Epilogue*. During this time, I subjectively observed a shift in the discursive framing of "Zionism," which in certain cases escalated into racist slurs with antisemitic connotations. In this dissertation, I refer to Zionism as an ideology and political project rooted in ethno-nationalist thought during the emergence of nation-states in the late 19th century. Very simply put, it articulates a claim to the political sovereignty of Jews. This inevitably carries specific implications for subjects who, for various reasons, do not belong to this national framework.

[18] These questions are further explored in the third, ethnographic part of the dissertation.

They are also questioned, negotiated, and, at times, reimagined in new configurations that do not necessarily follow the logic of the state.

Demographically speaking, Jews, unsurprisingly, constitute the majority of Israeli society. However, it is secular Jews who dominate this segment of the population. Ethnographic scholarship has long focused on minorities, subalterns, and the marginalized, as well as being preoccupied with the resistance of the subaltern[19] (Ortner 1995). This focus often centers on "exceptions"[20] as specific examples that subvert a certain hegemonic order by their very existence. Such work is vital because it exposes otherwise invisible power dynamics and gives voice to those who have been silenced or rendered invisible. By challenging dominant narratives, it provides a critical lens on inequality and systemic oppression. Yet, this focus on the margins can inadvertently reinforce the invisibility of the center. Groups perceived as dominant—whether due to their numbers, economic status, or symbolic capital[21] (that is, power)—are often seen as monolithic, unworthy of deeper interrogation, or too broad to be considered as proper "objects" of scholarly grounded inquiry. However, power[22] is rarely homogeneous or operating through a single trajectory; majority groups, such as secular Jews in Israel, are also sites of complexity, negotiation, and contestation.

Looking at the specific numbers, recent sociological survey[23] of the Pew Research Centre (2016) shows that 81% of Israeli adults identify as Jewish, with

---

[19] For a critical discussion on the Eurocentric and/or romanticising perspective of certain works of resistance, subaltern and feminist studies, see, e.g., Mohanty 1988; Spivak 1988; Abu-Lughod 1990.

[20] This is not to say that other topics do not appear or escape anthropological attention (e.g., ethnographies of the home, everyday life, the school classroom, the fan site, the playground, etc.). Yet I discern a nuanced distinction: ethnographies of the *small* and the *ordinary* negotiate their position in relation to the grand narratives of anthropology, that is, in relation to what is considered the appropriate "object/subject" of scholarly inquiry. Rather, in this case, I want to emphasise that if we focus our attention on what we perceive to be unquestionably dominant, i.e., what already occupies a significant space, we can gain insight into "what is going on" within such dominance and hegemony.

[21] Symbolic capital, a concept coined by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), refers to the resources available to an individual or group based on honor, prestige, recognition, or status. It derives its power through collective recognition and legitimization.

[22] I address the question of power in the context of this dissertation in the chapter *Post-theories: Discourse and Power.*

[23] See also Levy, Levinsohn and Katz 1993, 2002; Rosner and Fuchs 2019; Staestky 2023. In the following text, I provide the numbers published in the survey *Israel's Religiously Divided Society* by the Pew Research Centre (2016). Different studies, unsurprisingly, come up with different quantifications. The percentage can vary depending on the chosen methodology. Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, for instance, uses both *de jure* and *de facto* divisions for population demographic metrics, as well as categories such as the "Area of the State of Israel" and the "Population of Israel." These divisions are influenced by what is included in the territory of Israel. For example, East Jerusalem, the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and so on.

49% of them defining themselves as being secular (*hilonim*[24]). Among *hilonim,* 83% consider being Jewish primarily a matter of ancestry or "culture," rather than "religion," which distinguishes them from more religious subgroups, such as *haredi* (ultra-religious), *dati* (religious), and *masorti* (traditional).

Most *hilonim* identify as "Israeli" first and as "Jewish" second. In terms of what the surveys define as "religious practices," *hilonim* are the least religiously observant subgroup: 79% never pray, and 60% never attend synagogue. Despite this, many still engage in what are considered "cultural religious traditions," such as hosting or attending a Passover *Seder* and lighting candles before *Shabbat*. In this case, we can draw an analogy with the celebration of Christmas in the Czech Republic: although people are aware that Christmas commemorates the birth of Jesus, it is celebrated even by those who are not Christians as a "family tradition"—something we do, pass on, and even sing carols about "Christ the Lord was born," despite not believing in him, nor identifying with Christianity.

When it comes to relationships and marriage—a focus of my interest—*hilonim* predominantly marry within their own group: 93% of married *hilonim* have also secular spouses. Intermarriage with other Jewish subgroups is rare, with 89% expressing discomfort at the idea of their child marrying a *haredi* (Ultra-Orthodox) Jew. While *hilonim* are more open to intermarriage with non-Jews compared to other Israeli Jewish subgroups, they still largely marry within Jewish circles.

The Pew Research Centre survey further reveals that nearly all Israelis, regardless their "ethnicity," who are married or cohabiting report that their partner shares their religious affiliation. Among Israel's other significant religious communities (Muslims, Christians, and Druze) intermarriage is equally uncommon. Only 1% of married individuals from these groups report having a spouse from a different religion. Similarly, just 2% of married Jews indicate that their spouse is from a non-Jewish religion or is religiously unaffiliated.

---

[24] I explain the category of *hiloni* (secular) and its genealogy in greater detail in the third part of the dissertation, in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter. The Pew Research Center study (2016) further subdivides the Jewish population—that means also the secular part—according to intra-ethnic divisions based on their origin: *Ashkenazim* (Jews from Central and Eastern Europe) and *Mizrahim* (Jews from the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and the Spain's Iberian Peninsula; the latter are also referred to as *Sephardim*, though the survey categorizes them under the *Mizrahim* group). This approach also reflects the division of religious authority in Israel, where the Chief Rabbinate is led by two chief rabbis: one *Ashkenazi* and one *Sephardi*. 66% of *Ashkenazi* Jews define themselves as secular, in comparison to only 32% *Mizrahim*.

Overall, intermarriage is rare in Israel and is further discouraged by the absence of civil marriage, as questions of personal status and marriage fall under the jurisdiction of the religious authorities of the respective denominations. The survey also highlights strong preferences for in-group marriages among Israeli Jews and Arabs.[25] Specifically, 97% of Jews express discomfort with the idea of their child marrying a Muslim, and 89% feel similarly about a potential marriage to a Christian. This sentiment is mirrored by 82% of Muslims, 88% of Christians, and 87% of Druze, who would feel uncomfortable with their child marrying a Jew.

To summarize the above, the following points for the research emerge: secular Jews are one of the key categories of self-identification within the State of Israel which represents a majority within the Jewish segment of the Israeli population. Secular Jews exhibit high levels of endogamy, which mirrors patterns in other parts of the population. Besides endogamy based on Jewish identity, there exists a significant intra-ethnic-religious endogamy, where secular Jews predominantly form partnerships with other secular Jews. Most secular Jews also express discomfort at the idea of their children marrying an ultra-Orthodox Jewish partner, and this discomfort extends similarly to the thought of a Muslim or Christian partner.

The discomfort surrounding inter- and intra-group marriage reveals the deeply entangled social, cultural, and political divisions within Israeli society. Intimacy then—expressed also through forms of partnership, marriage, and the choices made within them—might be perceived as a space where these divisions take an intimate form. Endogamy, in this context, matters not simply as a demographic pattern, but as a socially meaningful expression of how secular Israeli Jews navigate their narrated sense of "Self" in relation to "Others" and the state, and *why*. If most secular Jews in Israel are the least "religiously observant," and if they understand their "being Jewish" not in terms of "religion" but primarily as "culture" and/or "ancestry," then why do so many of them express

[25] Although the term "Israeli Arab" (referring to a group that constitutes around 20% of the state's population) is commonly used—such as in the aforementioned survey—it is often criticized for erasing Palestinian national identity, history, and sentiments. For this reason, the term "Palestinian citizen of the State of Israel" tends to be preferred. At the same time, I believe the choice of self-identification should rest with the individual, as these preferences, and the reasons behind them, can vary widely. Additionally, some authors also argue that the terms *Jew* and *Arab* were juxtaposed in the Zionist nation-building project as mutually exclusive categories. However, some Jews who immigrated to the newly formed State of Israel after 1948 from predominantly Arab countries identify as "Jewish Arabs" or "Arab Jews." For more on this topic, see Sehnahv 2006; Shohat 2017; Behar 2009, 2021; Shlaim 2023. For the discussion on the "Palestinian citizens of Israel" as "trapped minority," see Rabinowitz 2001.

such strong discomfort with the idea of their children partnering with someone from a different Jewish segment, let alone with a non-Jewish partner? That is what led me to formulate the research questions in the following manner: *How do the subjects understand and articulate their identity? What role do their narrations of identity play in their intimate relationships? What do these relationships reveal about the state and society of which they are part?*

Sociological and demographic data offer an important entry point, but one that needs to be further problematized. At first glance, it might seem that secular Jews simply reject "religion" altogether, lean toward an "ethnicized" version of "Jewishness," and merely reproduce the state's ethno-national logic. But this is problematic, because such simplified readings overlook the deeper contexts and meanings within which choices, preferences, and desires "happen." These preferences may be shaped by ideas of what is "normal," what is "compatible," what fits into one's "self-image," what is considered "liveable" in a given context, and what is even "imaginable" as possible. At the same time, the issue may not be solely about "religion" or "ethnicity" but also about political views and the negotiation of multiple loyalties: both to the ideal of liberal autonomy in love, and to the Jewish continuity and survival.

This is why I see the lens of the politics of intimacy and desire as particularly productive: it allows me to explore the negotiating movements of people navigating competing commitments, and how seemingly private, apolitical choices—about love, attraction, and partnership—are embedded in a complex web of tethers. When approached ethnographically, this lens enables a soft attunement to tensions and contradictions, to the multiplicity of pulls, and to the navigation of what feels "possible" or "impossible," and why.

Last but not least, it is noteworthy that the emphasis on the self-identifying aspect of the category "secular Jew" is not chosen randomly for this dissertation. A linguistic comparison with Czech may help illustrate why. In Czech, the distinction between "ethnic" and "religious" identity is reflected linguistically: "Jew" (with an uppercase J, *Žid/Židovka*) refers to the ethnic or national category (as in Czech, Brit, or Kurd), while "jew" (with a lowercase j, *žid/židovka)* denotes religious affiliation. This follows the general Czech convention of using lowercase for members of religious groups, unlike in English (Christian versus *křesťan/křesťanka* in Czech). The Czech language thus encodes, in a subtle form

of linguistic notation, a distinction between “being Jewish” by “blood/ancestry” and “being Jewish” by practice, faith, or way of life. Therefore, writers must be conscious at every moment of what they are discussing and how, in order to choose the appropriate mode of notation.[26]

In contrast to other contexts, Jews are, in the Czech common usage, not categorized as “observant” or “non-observant,” but the distinctions are made between a “practicing Jew” (*praktikující žid/židovka*) and a “non-practicing Jew” (*nepraktikující Žid/Židovka*). Non-practicing Jews in the Czech context are thus those who are Jews by “blood,” as required by *halacha*,[27] but who do not actively live as Jews—they do not “practice.” Therefore, they remain categorized under the spelling rules for other nations, ethnicities, and members of states. In this respect, the Czech language considers the practice as a necessary component of “doing religion.” However, this linguistic convention cannot fully accommodate intra-Jewish distinctions or address religious reasoning itself: even in the complete absence of “doing religion,” according to *halacha*, Jews remain Jews.

In the Czech context, I have never heard anyone declare, “I am a secular.” However, in the Israeli context, it is not only a category of surveys but a widely and commonly used term for self-identification. “Being *hiloni*,” is not only a descriptive label; it is one of the discursively available modes of Jewish subjectivity—a form of identification that both shapes and reflects what it might mean to “be a Jew.” This discursive construction thus carries much more than it may seem at first glance, because it also operates as a socially and politically

[26] Basically, all authors writing in Czech on topics related to Judaism and “being Jewish” must contend with this grammatical rule, even if they find it reductive (myself included). For a discussion of how various authors in the Czech context address this issue, see, e.g., the dissertation by Marina Vohralík Šternová (2022), defended at the Department of Ethnology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University.

[27] *Halacha* is the collective body of Jewish religious laws based on both the Written and the Oral *Torah*. The Torah is the central “entity” of Judaism and includes the Five Books of Moses, also known as the Pentateuch. In rabbinic (Orthodox) Judaism, the Torah also encompasses the Oral Torah, which consists of codified rabbinic teachings and interpretations compiled into the texts of the *Talmud* (with *Mishna* and *Gemara*) and *Midrash*. They help to explain and expand upon the Written Torah and guide Jewish religious practice and thought (i.e., Jewish life). Being a “halachic Jew” means being recognized as Jewish according to halacha, which requires that the person's mother is Jewish, following the principle of matrilineality, or alternatively, to undergo a recognized conversion. This interpretation is characteristic of Orthodox and Conservative Judaism. However, in Reform and Liberal Judaism, patrilineality is also considered in determining the answer to the question “Who is a Jew?”, though it is important to note that this rule is not universally accepted. The second way to become a halachic Jew (besides matrilineality) is through conversion (*giur*), which must be performed before a rabbinical court (*beit din*). The questions of conversion in the Israeli context are addressed by scholars such as Michal Kravel-Tovi. Her book, *When the State Winks: The Performance of Jewish Conversion in Israe*l (2017), provides an ethnographic exploration of this subject. For more see also Kravel-Tovi 2012, 2018.

charged modality.[28] The category itself encapsulates the ambivalence referenced in Biale's quotation at the very beginning of the *Politics of Intimacy and Desire* section. His comment, although addressing Judaism and its relationship to sexuality, resonates more broadly. "Being Jewish" does not have to be understood as a monolithic dogma but rather as an evolving and ongoing process of "becoming."

Therefore, I do not seek to present a unified, homogenous, and stable portrait of secular Jews in contemporary Israel, but rather to offer a conflicted, potentially troubling, and dialogical one in its temporality. It is also not intended to criticise the subjects, specifically the interlocutors and informants. The research is aimed to provide a critique, not criticism. In this regard, it can only extend an invitation to a form of reading that is perpetually open and dialogical, and never reaching a conclusive endpoint. As Saba Mahmood reminds us, "to critique a particular normative regime is not to reject or condemn it; rather, by analysing its regulatory and productive dimensions, one only deprives it of innocence and neutrality so as to craft, perhaps, a different future" (Mahmood 2016 in Fernando 2019: 17).

What such a future should look like, I leave to the subjects themselves. It is not for me to prescribe or define the contours of a future that must emerge from the aspirations of those who were part of this study. Instead, my role is to offer a space for these voices to resonate, to allow them to articulate their own visions of possibility—even in the moments when my internal compass may freeze in disagreement. After all, as the anthropologist Myanti Fernando aptly notes in her paper (2019) dedicated to the legacy of Saba Mahmood, to critique *is to care.*

Towards the Dissertation's Topic

When I reflect on the journey that led to this dissertation, I must admit it was a gradual one, with its roots perhaps planted long before I recognized them. I grew up in an actively Christian family adhering to the Czechoslovak Protestant tradition. Within this orientation, significant emphasis was placed on the Jewish roots of Christianity and the Old Testament, particularly given Jesus' ancestry, and his life as an observant Jew. Our family library was rich with books on Judaism,

[28] See the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter, in the third part of the dissertation.

the history of the Jews, ancient Israel, and the modern State of Israel. Looking back, however, I can now see the gaps: there were no sources on Palestine, Arab people, Jews in Arab lands, Islam, or perspectives offering alternative or critical views.

Inspired by these early readings though, and after moving beyond my "Christian phase," I began attending Hebrew classes and participating in Jewish community holiday celebrations. Although I eventually distanced myself from any institutionalized and collective forms of "religion," my curiosity about what to "be a Jew" might entail remained deep. This curiosity, purely personal and non-academic at the time, led me to nearly annual visits to Israel and Palestine. Later, my personal interest developed into an academic direction. Both of my master's theses focused on related topics: at the Faculty of Law, I explored the legal status of the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic (2013), and at the Faculty of Humanities, I examined the negotiation of *mechitza*—the spatial practice of separating men and women in synagogues—using poststructuralist discourse analysis of texts published by the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (2020).

I began this *Introduction* with fragmentary memories—one of which also includes an informal, almost accidental, yet important conversation I had in Tel Aviv with a secular Israeli-born Jewish man. Somehow, the topic of dating and the importance, or unimportance, of having a Jewish partner came up. The man expressed a willingness to date someone non-Jewish but drew a line when it came to marriage: *"Of course I would date a non-Jew, but I would not consider her as a wifey material."* The main reason for this distinction was his concern that the children would not be considered Jews *halachically*, and therefore not "proper" Jews in Israel. That sparked my curiosity once again. Is it because children would be stigmatized as non-Jews in a state where "Jewishness" is embedded in its structures, laws, and character? And what does this claimed "Jewish" character of the state actually mean? Or is it because, though fully "secular" himself (as he told me), this man, in the post-Holocaust era, regards the *halachic* preservation of "Jewishness" as imperative for future generations, ensuring that Jews do not disperse among other nations and groups? Is it driven by sentiment, tradition, by what we call "religion," or by a specific kind of loyalty? Or perhaps all these factors operate simultaneously?

While already writing this dissertation, I later discovered a similar set of questions in a modified form in the book *Being Jewish (and) in Love* by German sociologist Ina Schaum (2020), which focuses on love (and non-love) between Jews and Germans.[29] In the book, she lays out the questions for a sociological analysis of love relationships as follows: "Firstly, how intimate relationships intersect with power relations and attraction [and how they might involve][30] processes of exoticizing and othering, both in the present and in the past; and secondly, how questions of identities and belongings are part of love relationships, dating, and the choice of partner" (Schaum, 2020: 13).

The original focus of the dissertation was intended to explore the influence of religion on the intimate relationships, dating patterns and preferences of secular Israeli Jews. At that point, my theoretical understanding of "religion" was in its early stages, although I was aware of distinct approaches in various contexts. Back then, I understood religion as something structured, encompassing pillars such as *teaching* (theological questions), *practice* (rituals, religious prescriptions), and *belief.* Choosing a "secular subject" within an environment normatively connected to religion, such as the case Israel, then seemed logical.

At that time, I interpreted "religion" (in this case Judaism) as a system legislatively woven into the Israel state's structures, yet distinct from and external to both the state and the individual. I assumed tensions and contradictions within the "secular Jewish subject" stemming from ethno-religious construction of Jewish identity. In this (previous) understanding, secularity meant non-religiousness and being outside the normative sphere of religion on a personal level. For the secular subject, religion then should hold little importance and was deliberately renounced through labelling. Given this perspective, it made sense for me to question the significance of a man choosing to marry only a Jewish woman (in his understanding, we would say Jewish "ethnically," not religiously). Additionally, I contemplated how religion, with its prescriptive requirements, might impact the relationships of assumedly non-religious individuals (those without faith and/or practice).

However, as my research and fieldwork evolved, it became clear that the more pressing question was not how "religion" impacts "secular Jewish" intimacy,

[29] Among other scholars who explore topics of love, relationality, and encounters between Jews and non-Jews in Germany are anthropologist Dani Kranz and sociologist Vanessa Rau.

[30] The original sentence in the cited work appears to contain an omission. For clarity and readability, I have inserted the missing words in square brackets.

but rather how secularity itself relates to “religion,” and how it intersects with the state’s ethno-religious and ethno-nationalist framework, as well as individuals’ intimate choices. If I am to understand what it means to “be a secular Jew” in Israel, it is not enough to view this secularity in isolation. It must be understood within the unique conditions from which it emerges. This exploration forms the core of the theoretical section on the *Postsecular Search for Secular Subject*, and the ethnographic inquiry in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter.

On Positionality and Politics of Location[31]

Before I can even start on the research topic itself, I want to focus on the question of positionality, since it is the positionality of the researcher that influences not only the choice of the topic itself but also plays an important role in determination of the epistemological foundations, possibilities of analytical horizons, and the interpretive manner of the conclusions. Eventually, my positionality predetermined the accessibility of the environments and spaces, the way in which I was “read” and perceived within the given contexts, and not surprisingly, it also influenced the interlocutors I engaged with and other people I encountered and learned from.

It is evident that positionality of the researcher functions as a kind of discerning filter. Initially, it shapes the very architecture of knowledge, delineating the framework through which information is subsequently sifted. This positioning not only determines the structural position but also influences the specific substances, both in a metaphorical and perceptual sense, that traverse and emerge from this filtering process.

Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer (2005: 76–77),[32] referring to Donna Haraway (1988) and Rosi Braidotti (2003), argues that the production of knowledge is epistemologically shaped by the researcher's situatedness. Reflexive awareness of one's situatedness is a means of disrupting androcentric understandings and constructions of science (Harding 1986). Lorenz-Meyer divides the politics of location into two dimensions: the psychosocial and the epistemological. The

[31] The introductory part of the positionality section significantly draws on, translates and reformulates the positionality section of my Master’s thesis, *Mechitza as a Metaphor: Separation or Unity?* (Crofony, 2020: 44–47).
[32] See also Adrienne Rich’s *Notes on the Politics of Place* (1984).

psychosocial dimension involves reflecting on personal and structural locations and is associated with five conceptual categories: the location of the knowing subject, the subject's positions, desires and emotional investments, motions and struggles, and experiences (Lorenz-Meyer, 2005: 81). These categories require careful consideration as they possess the capacity to impact and structure our research, and more often than not, they actively exert such influence.

The epistemological dimension pertains to determining one's own location. In this dimension, Lorenz-Meyer works with four conceptual categories: available conceptual resources, the choice of authorized and/or ignored sites of knowledge, the use of established categories of knowledge and their relations and arrangements, and conditions that silence the "Other" (Ibid.: 82). Essentially, it is a matter of laying out where I am structurally situated as a researcher and how this set of positions and locations may impact the production of knowledge.[33]

It is necessary to examine whether and *how* the "Self" is involved in anchoring and reproducing certain hierarchies and in a production of the "Other." Such exposure leads to a deconstruction of the "self-evident," allowing for the possibility of socially responsible science, which is what we should strive for. Lorenz-Meyer states, "[...] the one who knows is part of the matrix of what is known, and the location from which we speak is a place from which other voices, including voices within ourselves, can be suppressed" (Ibid.: 85).[34]

Some scholars advocate for concise positionality statements to maintain clarity of the text. However, I contend that a mere enumeration of personal characteristics falls short of capturing the complicated interweaving of the researcher's "I" into the final text and its profound influence spanning from initial

[33] The exploration of positionality and the politics of location in this dissertation is informed by a synthesis of various theoretical perspectives, which are based on distinct, yet interconnected, intellectual traditions. Donna Haraway's *situated knowledge* (1988) critiques the illusion of "objective" or universal knowledge and emphasises that all understanding is shaped by specific social, cultural and historical contexts. Haraway highlights the importance of reflexivity in knowledge production and challenges the "God trick" in disembodied, impartial observations, which are presented as stemming from a neutral "nowhere" and thus universal. One can also recall Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (1977), through which he explains how social dispositions, built up through processes of socialization, shape individuals' practices, perceptions, interactions, understandings and interpretations. In this sense, one might also mention Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical *interpretive horizon* (2013 [1960]), which refuses the position of "absolute knowledge." Shared understanding is based on a dialogue through the "fusion of horizons" of each of the involved in such a dialogue. Sandra Harding's *feminist standpoint theory* (1986) goes even further to argue that, because knowledge is socially situated, marginalised groups occupy a unique epistemic point, and their experiences on the margins of dominant structures provide crucial insights..

[34] Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Czech are my own.

thoughts to the current moment of writing. Therefore, I find no alternative but to embrace the concept of the "vulnerable observer" (Behar 1996). This entails a continual process of balancing and cultivating awareness of the myriad roles the "I" inhabits the entire knowledge production process.

Writing from a position of vulnerability becomes meaningful only when it allows for the exploration of profound connections between personal experiences and the subject under study. Kari Lerum (2001) critiques how researchers often reduce positionality to static categories, such as "White, lesbian, middle-class, female academic," which, while situating the researcher structurally, fail to address the dynamic, interactive aspects of fieldwork. She also warns against the pitfalls of many postmodern ethnographies that excessively privilege the personal while neglecting structural or comparative contexts, leading to what she terms an "apolitical vortex." Instead, Lerum advocates for shedding the "academic armor"—linguistic, physical, and ideological mechanisms of detachment—and embracing emotional engagement as ethnographers. This openness enables deeper, transformative relationships with participants and grounds critical analysis in shared experiences (Lerum, 2001: 468–471).

In the context of my research, Lerum's call to shed academic armor resonated deeply. Exploring intimacy and identity requires openness to emotionally charged moments and an awareness of how my own position and vulnerability shape these interactions. At the same time, it requires viewing these tense moments as valuable sites of knowledge. By embracing emotional engagement, I seek to move beyond the static and detached towards a deeper understanding of how intimacy is negotiated at the intersection of the personal and the structural. In the following pages—not only in this section on positionality—I wish to acknowledge ambivalences, contradictions, failures, feelings, and conditionings; that is, how the "Self" moved within a particular network of relationality. I have already partially addressed positionality in the previous section, in the section about the path leading to the chosen topic and the origins of my interest in it. While the shedding of academic armor is approached in a more structured way in the following paragraphs for the sake of clarity, I hope it will also emerge throughout the entirety of the resulting writing.

My work has been and continues to be influenced by a multitude of factors. These factors do not operate in isolation; they overlap and interact based

on the situational context. Nevertheless, to enhance clarity, I categorize them into several groups: the initial set of factors revolves around my positioning as a person-subject-body concerning both my self-perception and my interaction with the external world: I identify and pass as a woman. However, in alignment with Gerlinda Šmausová (2002), I acknowledge the non-coherent nature of gender identities, recognizing that we all navigate various gender roles within specific contexts. Simultaneously, I am typically perceived as a heterosexual woman. The confluence of these two categories exerted an influence on the environments accessible to me, the motivations of the interlocutors in engaging with me, and the established mutual expectations. The acceptance of my presumed heterosexual identity during interviews, covering personal matters, intimacy, and desire, has, in certain instances, not only elicited desire but also mirrored a dating dynamic. This topic is further explored in the *Researching Desire, Creating Desire* section.

The second set of factors comprises personal "situational" adjectives or attributes associated with expectations, hierarchy, authority, and affinity when read in a social interaction. These attributes include the fact that I entered the field as an academic doing research, as an able-bodied "White" European, in her thirties, from a middle-class background, visibly tattooed, and as a non-Jew. Not all these aspects or attributes were immediately apparent in every situation; rather, they gradually emerged, becoming clearer or more significant over time.

Notably, my "non-Jewishness" played a major role. However, in certain contexts, my "Jewishness" was, on the other hand, presumed due to my academic interests and focus. The presence of large and visible tattoos, along with my style of dress, led to the presumption of being a "secular Jew" in such a case. If my non-Jewish identity became explicit, an affinity and interest in Judaism and Israel were then presumed, particularly because, again, of my academic pursuits. I could say that this dynamic created feelings of trust, familiarity, and closeness. Simultaneously, being a non-Israeli, non-Jewish (and importantly, also non-Arab, non-Palestinian, and non-Muslim), yet possessing a somehow "Jewishly informed perspective" allowed me to navigate the given context to certain extent as a "knowledgeable stranger" (Reinharz 1992), yet not as "embodied stranger" (Ahmed 2000).

The third cluster of factors (which, as initially noted, inherently encompasses the preceding ones) comprises my personal history, along with the

beliefs and opinions that stem from it, that is, the available modes of knowledge. I have already addressed my personal motivation in the section on the path to the research topic. But what I still consider important to mention is that in self-identification, I align with feminist principles, holding a degree in Gender Studies that played an important role in shaping my intellectual identity and views. Exploring feminist and gender theories marked for myself a significant emancipatory shift. Through the studies I have come to recognize that aspects I once considered as given and unproblematic are, indeed, complex, problematic, and multifaceted (where the personal is political and vice versa).

Interestingly, as someone exposed to post-colonial scholarship (as part of her studies) that emphasizes how "We" other the "Others," how the Global South and the Oriental imaginaries are shaped by a colonial, "Western" gaze, I became highly self-aware and self-conscious about my positionality as a researcher. However, while writing this dissertation, I realized that my situation was not entirely comparable to the paradigmatic "Western researcher."

I come from a post-communist Central European country that does not shape the dominant academic discourse; my maternal grandparents only completed elementary school, and I am the first in my family to pursue a doctoral degree. Also, I have never undertaken research that was so important: in its significance to me, in its scope, and in its financial, time, and, above all, emotional demands. For me, to achieve a doctorate degree is a major thing and I do not take it for granted.

Many of the people I interviewed were certainly not fragile or vulnerable in ways that the post-colonial framework often presupposes.[35] Despite holding the

---

[35] I want to refer to a recent summary as a reminder of the discussion that has been ongoing since at least the late 1980s on this topic provided by Israeli sociologist Nissim Mizrachi (2022) in his article *Transcending the Liberal Grammar of Critical Sociology: The Theoretical Turn in Israeli Sociology*. He addresses positionality, the limits of interpretation, and the representation of subjects who do not fit into the moral and ethical framework of the liberal grammar of contemporary critical social sciences. He refers to the liberal-emancipatory project of "Western" science and the clearly defined roles it assigns to subjects in the "choreography" of universalism, in which the subjects are divided into clear-cut categories of oppressors and victims, privileged and marginalized. The "bad subjects," the non-liberal subjects who resist this liberal script, are framed within a (Marxist) false consciousness from which they should be rescued. Referring to Gayatri Spivak (1988), Mizrachi asks: *Can the Non-Liberal Subaltern Speak?* To avoid depriving subjects of their subjectivity, agency, and voice, he suggests that researchers should remain open to alternative moralities. He terms this approach "methodological parochialization," which is linked to positionality. Relating this to my own work and its reflection: if I consider my interlocutors as subjects over whom I, as a researcher, always hold power and dominance, and whose voices can be moderated, I would fail to discover anything new within the situation. I would be searching for the data that aligns with my predetermined moral position and script.

power to “depict” or “make sense” of their lives, stories, and words, my hyper-awareness turned out to be, in some respects, “symptomatic” of an underlying assumption: that, because I am “White” and “European,” I am always the privileged one, occupying a higher hierarchical position. This, I now reflect, is itself a form of “othering,” orientalization, and paternalization of the interlocutors. However, as the research process continued, it became evident that our relationship was far more complicated. Hierarchical positions existed in multiple, overlapping dimensions for all of us, simultaneously. This realization led me to question the simplicity of my initial framing and to appreciate the shifting dynamics at play, in which each of us brought our own set of complexities, vulnerabilities, and sources of authority to the “table.”

Structure of The Dissertation

The dissertation is, besides *Introduction* which explains the topic, the contextual anchoring, the journey leading to the research, and positionality, divided into three parts: theoretical, methodological, and “ethnographic.” In the first part, *Theoretical Terrain: Points of Departure,* I present the theoretical-conceptual background that I use and engage with throughout the dissertation.

In the theoretical part, I begin by outlining my overarching meta-approach influenced by what is collectively termed as *post*-theories, encompassing the perspectives of poststructuralism and the expansive realm of postmodernism, and particularly their explicitly feminist branches and iterations. I then explain how this approach shapes the work, and how it allows for discussions of subjects and subjectivity that avoid simplistic, one-dimensional representations and offer a more complex framing of the “secular” subject.

Further, I discuss the subject and subjectivity through the lens of post-theories, specifically with a reference to the works of Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood and Stuart Hall. Then, I proceed to examine the possibilities and limits of postsecular “search” for “secular” subjects in the context of the dissertation, without confining them to pre-given roles and contents. Next, I confront a challenge in the anthropology of Jews: how to avoid the epistemological and methodological assumption that we already know “who

the Jew is" in any given context. I address the category of "ethnicity" that tends to be used for the purposes of defining Judaism and Jews. Through a discussion of non-ontological, post-Barthian approaches to ethnicity, I highlight the importance of grounding our understanding of "Jewishness" in specific historical, social, and political conditions. As the last step, I summarize my meta-approach and explain the implications for the resulting work.

In the second part, *Methodological Foundations*, I address the methodological foundations guiding the research process, as well as the choices and decisions I made during the fieldwork. I closely elaborate on the process of "ethnographing," the methods, and the ethical and methodological dilemmas I encountered in the "field." This reflexive approach helps to reveal how my choices affected not only the research process itself, but also the interpretation of its outcomes. I also discuss the pitfalls of ethnographing, especially surrounding those related to language, the "mundanity" of certain experiences, and the unintended consequences of the research, where my presence as a researcher actually created a space filled with "intimacy and desire." Even though the dissertation does have specifically theoretical and methodological parts, both the theory and methodology, as well as the reflections of positionality, are woven also into the third, "ethnographic" part.

The third part, *The Intimate State of Israel*, constitutes the core ethnographic work and is itself divided into three chapters. This division is guided by three seemingly simple questions: *Who? Where? With whom and with whom not?* In other words: Who are the subjects of the research? What does it mean that they self-identify as "secular Jews"? How do they understand and articulate this identity? Where was the research conducted, and how do people describe and make sense of their environments? With whom do they share space? What role do their narrations of identity play in their intimate relationships? And what do these relationships reveal about the state and society of which they are a part? These questions are further refined and developed throughout the final text.

In the first chapter, *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition,* I begin by offering an overview of the identity framework governing the Jewish population as part of the broader Israeli identity discourse within the Zionist nation-building project. Rather than focusing on the secular-religious cleavage in Israel or the state's character and identity, my primary interest lies in how the

"secular" subject is formed and how "secularity" becomes an embodied and lived experience for Jewish subjects in Israel as one of the discursively available modes of Jewish subjectivity. To address these questions of interest, I develop what I term a "tropology," which works in three, interconnected senses: first, it represents a typology of tropes emerging from the in-depth interviews I conducted and how I read them; second, as a method of analysis; and finally, as a way of presenting the tracing of meaning-making through narrations and gestures that compose the figurative tropes of secularity. I offer the tropes of secularity as interpretive possibilities and in total, I present six intertwined and cumulative tropes of "secularity." The "tropological" subchapter is divided according to the identified tropes: *secularity as personal autonomy, secularity as counter-position, secularity as Israeliness, secularity as reason and common sense, secularity as Judaism, and secularity as Zionism.*

The second ethnographic chapter, *Topography of Locations: Shabbat Shalom, Ramadan Kareem*, expands on the first one by engaging with the spatial aspect of possible and impossible encounters, where the topography of the research locations is inscribed with local identity politics. I first provide a personal ethnographic recounting and mapping of these locations, and then, through the "dialogical windows" that emerged from the interviews I conducted, I position them through the imaginaries they invoke and their symbolism. Through these dialogical windows, I trace how the cities, and the spaces they represent, are imagined by the interlocutors. These windows are not only about the cities themselves but also about the multiplicity of ways in which people understand themselves and their surroundings, and how the cities allow for certain kinds of being.

The last chapter, *Infrastructure of Intimacy: Thick Life, Thin Lines*, serves as an interpretive culmination of the preceding ones and builds upon the knowledge created through them. I borrow Lauren Berlant's poetic vocabulary of "infrastructure as a living mediation of what organizes life" (2016) to attend to "intimacy and desire" as an entangled site of multiple tethers, where intimate choices, hesitations, and acts unfold within a matrix of historical, legal, and affective forces. Her language allows me to approach the realm of "intimacy and desire" in a way that remains (as far as I am able) both loyal to the intellectual tradition that has shaped my academic identity, and responsive to the concerns I

lay out at the beginning of the chapter: how to reflect the "thick life" (Povinelli 2006) in a form of ethnographic writing that can "traverse comfortably between the personal and political" (Mody, 2022: 276).

Berlant's note that "infrastructure is defined by the movement" inspired me to organize the ethnographic material through a set of five conceptual and metaphorical movements, namely: *The Claim of Freedom, Possible Lovers and Impossible Others, Inherited Legacies, Bargaining With the Audience,* and *Imagined Elsewheres, Otherwise.* Following metaphorical movement rather than strict analytical containers highlights the processuality and dialogical character of the "politics" of everyday life. It also enables one to remain attuned to both possibilities and constraints, to unexpectedness and surprise, while holding space for autonomy and embeddedness at once, without insistence on resolution.

The dissertation itself is closed with the final discussion on findings and their interpretations, and by *Epilogue*, where I reflect on October 7, 2023 and its aftermath. In *Epilogue*, I discuss the "explosivity" of writing about Israel in the current landscape, and the paralyzing effect it had on the dissertation.

Theoretical Terrain: Points of Departure

This part of the work, as the title suggests, introduces the theoretical-conceptual background that I use and engage with throughout the dissertation. I begin by outlining my overarching meta-approach influenced by what is collectively termed as *post*-theories. I then explain how this approach shapes the work, particularly in terms of how it allows for discussions of subjects and subjectivity that avoid simplistic, one-dimensional representations and offer a more complex framing of the "secular" subject. Then, I proceed to examine the possibilities and limits of postsecular "search" for "secular" subjects in the context of the dissertation. Next, I confront a challenge in the anthropology of Jews: how to avoid the epistemological and methodological assumption that we already know "who the Jew is" in any given context. I address the issue of the category of "ethnicity" that tends to be used for the purposes of defining Judaism and Jews. I highlight the importance of grounding our understanding of "Jewishness" in specific historical, social, and political conditions. Each of these chapters concludes with a brief summary of the main points discussed. As the last step, I summarize my meta-approach and explain the implications for the resulting work.

1.1. Post-theories: Discourse and Power[36]

My overall work is notably influenced by what is collectively termed as *post*-theories (Lather 2007; Zábrodská 2009; Gannon and Davies 2012 [2007]). This encompasses the perspectives of poststructuralism and the expansive realm of postmodernism, and particularly their explicitly feminist branches and iterations. These are the starting points that have shaped my "intellectual identity," as Anette Lareau calls it, "one that often includes a theoretical as well as a methodological orientation" (1996: 225).

Post-theories can be characterized by their challenge to and erosion of grand historical narratives; their questioning of fixed identities and their meanings; their systematic defiance of ostensibly "natural" binary categories; and

[36] The introductory section of this chapter, along with the part addressing subject and subjectivity, significantly draws on, reformulates and translates content from my master's thesis, *Mechitza as a Metaphor: Separation or Unity?* (Crofony, 2020: 17-26).

their emphasis on fluidity, multivocality, hybridity,[37] and their exploration of context, the operations of power, and of the discursive construction and stratification of society.

These theoretical frameworks have left a significant mark, both implicit and explicit, on the fields of social and cultural anthropology and ethnography.[38] While post-theories do not adhere to any singular or unified approach, they can be understood, as per Gannon and Davies (2012 [2007]), as "diverse threads that intersect in many places and can be strategically linked to produce a consistent, but not uniform, pattern-text" (Zabrodská, 2009: 23). However, it is possible to delineate certain shared points of intersection among "post-approaches" that are relevant in the context of this dissertation.

Post-theories have directed the attention to language and discourse, destabilized essentialist understanding of categories, and questioned their presumed universalism. Rather than asking about the essence of "things" (what the thing *is*), such as "gender" or "ethnicity," they have shifted towards questioning how such constructs are enacted (how the thing is *done*), what consequences ensue from such enactments (what the category *does*), and *why*.

Post-theories also challenged the liberal-humanist ideal[39] of a coherent, intelligible, unified and sovereign subject that creates its own destiny on the basis of rational deliberations devoid of external forces: they question the subject in clearly delineated and describable boundaries. The *post-subject* resists delimitation and its own discursive formations since such a "troubling" subject is "open to the not-yet-known" (Davies and Gannon, 2005: 312). Specifically, poststructuralist assumptions centre on the role of discourse in creating and producing social reality. Discourse is closely linked to language as an active agent in cultural practices. Here, discourse can be understood as "a recognizable mode of signifying and organizing social reality that has always specific consequences in terms of the distinct rights, privileges, and power relations in which it situates social actors" (Zábrodská, 2009: 12).

---

[37] For the conceptual grasping of "hybridity" rooted in postcolonial studies and poststructuralism, see the influential work of Homi K. Bhabha (1994).

[38] In the Czech context, Soukup (2011) provides an overview summary of anthropology informed by feminist and postmodernist approaches. For comparison, see also Hasmanová-Marhánková 2013.

[39] And in this respect also Cartesian metaphysics based on the hierarchical dualities of body and mind, nature and culture, male and female (see, e.g. Ortner 1972; Haraway 1991; Bordo 1999; Mansfield 2000; Williams 2005).

The terms "secular," "ethnicity," "religion," as well as "woman" and "man," carry specific meanings within a discourse that is confined to a particular time and place. The discourse is dynamic, subject to change, and concurrently contends with alternative, competing discourses vying for hegemonic status. Being in the world is stratified through specific linguistic means and the cultural practices linked to them, since "discourse is characterized by a 'delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts or theories'" (Foucault, 1977: 199 in Mills, 2004: 46). This stratification often results in rendering certain individuals or groups invisible or marginal. Language can obscure someone's being and thereby paradoxically silence it: it creates the reality of some while condemning others to a state of "non-being."[40] In this respect, language is constitutive and normative: "discourse, or more properly, discursive practices, have the power to hold the normative order in place, and the power to open up the not-yet-know." (Davies and Gannon, 2005: 313).

The awareness of the constitutive and normative effect of language, otherwise known as the discursive or linguistic turn, turned attention to categories that appeared to be self-evident, unambiguous, and definitively revealing of a concrete meaning. This is not to say, however, that the discursively constructed notions of, e.g., "woman" or "Jew" do not exist (in their materiality/corporeality) or that they feel less "real" once they are deconstructed. It does mean, however, that we can inquire into the modes of this construction, the particular content associated with these constructions, and the ways in which the construction of meaning is negotiated, accepted, rejected, subverted, or "done," and where the ruptures and contradictions of meanings emerge to upset the hegemonic order.

Indeed, awareness of discursive construction does not imply that people do not live through once-made and bodily sedimented categories; on the contrary, even if "the meaning of categories [...] is uncertain, unstable, and plural [...] and is more or less temporarily ascribed to them" (Zabrodská, 2009: 33), it carries very real and tangible implications. The contents associated with these categories can serve a disciplinary function, maintain social inequalities, establish hierarchies, stratify the society, maintain rules of inclusion and exclusion, and generally dictate the range of possibilities for living a particular life.

[40] The sentence is a direct citation from my Master's thesis (Crofony, 2020: 18).

The discursive turn was fundamentally influenced by the work of Michael Foucault and his observations on the interconnectedness and mutually productive relations of discourse, power and knowledge. Foucault's analysis brought a new understanding of power as having not only repressive, but also a productive quality: as omnipresent, decentralized and diffuse, operating through institutions (e.g. family, schools, religious institutions, prisons, hospitals) and practices it produces knowledge, discourse and subjectivities.[41] An understanding of power that is neither possessed (power does not have a quality of a commodity) nor solely repressive, but operates in nuanced and often subtle ways, has had a profound influence on various disciplines.

Foucault’s perspective has enabled to reconsider the formation of the subject and its agency. Thus, for example, feminist poststructuralist analysis[42] does not seek to obtain some “truth” about the pre-discursive “essence” of sex and/or gender, “but to trouble that which is taken as stable/unquestionable truth” (Davies and Gannon, 2005: 314), that is, to expose and deconstruct the ways through which the appearance of this “stable truth” is accomplished.

Hence, as another influential philosopher Judith Butler, referring to Foucault, writes: “The idea that there might be a 'truth' of sex, as Foucault[43] ironically terms it, is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through a matrix of coherent gender norms.” (Butler, 1990: 23-24). The social intelligibility of an individual is then dependent on how well they are able to perform a coherent gender identity. Such a generation of seemingly coherent gender identities is precisely the productive aspect of power. Butler therefore builds on Foucault's conception of discourse as “practices that systematically shape the objects they discuss” (Foucault, 1972: 54).

Foucault's, albeit partially fragmented, work on the interconnected triad of power, discourse, and knowledge enabled further exploration of the “discourse effect”: what initially appears to be pre-discursive or beyond cultural and social influence is revealed as an effect, consequence, or result of the discursive

[41] For more on the topic of discourse and Foucault see, e.g., Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983; Mills 2004.

[42] See also, e.g., Weedon 1997; Leavy 2007; Ganon and Davies 2012.

[43] The subject and its subjectivity (also sexed subjectivity here) does not exist before power relations for Foucault; rather, it is produced (as Butler says “enabled”) through these power relations (Foucault 1980). See below the discussion on the subject in Althusser's and Butler's work.

regulation and disciplining action of power, which subsequently conceals its constructed nature in retrospect.

Turning back to the question of gender and gender identity—while not the central focus of this thesis—Butler's work holds particular significance in this regard, as their re-evaluation of sex, gender, and subjectification[44] prompts further later reflections on the issues surrounding the possible ambivalence of the "secular Jew" category. Butler proposed that gender is not a stable identity and point of reference determined by one's assigned sex category or let alone a cultural extension of essentialist understanding of a biological sex. Instead, they argued that gender is unstable and performative, formed through repetitive and stylized acts. Gender is not the essence from which bodily acts emerge, but it is the gender that is created by an individual's repetitive (reiterative) acts and bodily gestures; the gendered body "is constituted in repetitive acts, using available codes of masculinity and femininity" (Kobová, 2014: 248).

Butler understands "gender" not only as inscribed within individual bodies but also as a system, an apparatus, an abstract ideal, and a potent instrument of discursive power, transcending the materiality of the body (Kobová, 2014: 248). Gender, thus, functions as both an organizing system and a normative ideal, detached from any concrete embodiment. However, it is through the individual body that gender is enacted-performed and perpetually produced in a repetitive process. Butler, at the same time, challenges the perception of the body as a passive object anticipating the inscription of cultural meanings, that is, the body in some pre-discursive state of being without a genealogy of its own (Butler, 1990: 175–177). For Butler, the body is necessarily anchored in language—in the signifying practice of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. The gendered body may thus appear as some stable point once it is "done," but as Kobová notes, "it is only gender norms, underpinned by a heterosexist regulatory framework, that settle and sediment in the body." (Kobová, 2014: 248). Bodies, then, always exist only within a particular discursive framework that marks them and makes them intelligible and coherent.

[44] The various types of notations also employ the term "subjectivation," which originates from the French tradition. Some scholars argue that *subjectivation* (following Foucault) leans more toward the active and ongoing process of self-formation in power structures, while *subjectification* (in English versions) emphasizes the outcome of that process or the mechanisms through which subjects are created. In this text, however, I use the Anglicized term *subjectification* to maintain clarity and avoid overloading the discussion.

Following the publication of *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler faced criticism for their then radical approach to the (de)construction of sex, gender and the body.[45] In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), they return to the theme of bodies and corporeality. In the book's *Preface*, Butler explains that “constructedness” does not imply nonexistence or some artificiality. Through constructions we can think the “thinkable” and also live it: “bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas” (Butler, 1993: xi). It is these schemas, these constitutive constructions, in which we must navigate ourselves, but at the same time they enable us such movement.

Yet, while Butler made clear in *Gender Trouble* the positions from which they see the “constructedness” of sex, gender, and the body, it was still necessary to address the ways in which “bodies are materialized as 'sexed,' and how are we to understand the 'matter' of sex, and of bodies more generally, as the repeated and violent circumscription of cultural intelligibility” (Butler, 1993: xii). Here, then, Butler defines the question appearing in the book's title: *which bodies matter*?

Butler shows that the materialization of the sexually differentiated body is assumed, but this assumption says nothing about the political concerns that anchor the body to its pre-discursive state. To posit the body as prior to its signification is still to reproduce an already existing bodily discourse. In order to unsettle the already existing structures that render certain identities invisible, then, it is necessary to understand the body more as an effect of language (symbolic order) that is constitutive of it.

If we know nothing about the pre-discursive body, because it is the language through which we think and signify, then the emergence of the body falls within the same moment of its signification.[46] But such a moment of “bodily inscription” through signification brings with it a question: How do we become *subjects* of the regulatory practices of discursive power, how does the moment of

[45] An interesting critique and discussion with feminist poststructuralism are provided by the feminist new materialism approach (see,e.g., Barad 2003; Ahmed 2008; Coole and Frost 2010; Porkertová 2013; Coleman, Page and Palmer 2019; Truman 2019). Porkertová (in Czech) provides a comprehensive overview of the points of convergence and divergence between feminist poststructuralism (focused on language and discursive formations) and feminist new materialism (focused on matter, its agency, and the material conditions of power).

[46] “To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body. In this sense, the linguistic capacity to refer to sexed bodies is not denied, but the very meaning of 'referentiality' is altered. In philosophical terms, the constative claim is always to some degree performative.” (Butler, 1993: 10-11).

signification occur in the entangled processual union of sexual corporeality and gender identity? This question is important not only because it plays a role in how "subjectivity" can be thought of and why in the context of this dissertation, but it also delineates the boundaries of the "possibilities of escape" (that is, the agency of the subject) from the discursive construction that the subject has, albeit not entirely freely, chosen.

Summary: In this chapter, I provided a general explanation of the intellectual traditions that shaped my approach in the context of the dissertation. I touched upon the influence of Michel Foucault on post-theories in general, especially through his conceptual triad of knowledge, discourse, and power. His work foreshadowed the "discursive turn" in various fields, which brought with it an attention to the productive effect of power and discourse and focused on language as an active agent in subject formation (subjectification). Then, I elaborated further on the work of Judith Butler, specifically considering their writing on "sex" and "gender." Even though "gender" is not a central category of analysis for the dissertation (however, I address it necessarily, as it is one of the core sites of the whole "being in the world"), I find it helpful to think *with* Butler because it allows for considering the category of "secular Jew" in processuality rather than in a sedimented, pre-discursive state of being. In the next chapter, I provide a discussion on Louis Althusser's concept of "ideological interpellation" and Butler's iteration as tools to think about the subject, subjectivity, and the process of the "becoming of subject," that is, subjectification. I bring to the discussion also the work of Saba Mahmood, who addresses both Foucault and Butler in order to formulate space for the agency of the religious subject. Mahmood's approach to the question of the agency of the religious subject is important for this dissertation because it prompts one to "look" for agency in unanticipated, counterintuitive places. Further, it also posits an interesting question, explored in greater detail later: is it necessary to think about a "secular" subject as oppositional to a "religious" subject? And to which category should we subsume "secular Jews"?

1.2. Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories

“[...] we all have friends who, when they knock on our door and we ask, through the door, the question 'Who's there?' answer (since 'it's obvious') 'It's me.' And we recognize that 'it is him,' or 'her'. We open the door, and 'it's true, it really was she who was there.”
(Althusser, 1970/2002: 175)

The opening quote from Louis Althusser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* is not accidental. Butler (1993) uses it to open a chapter of their book *Bodies That Matter* (chapter *Gender is Burning: Questions of appropriation and subversion*), in which they address the constitution of the subject through interpellation, examining the potential of resignification, rearticulation, and denaturalization of gender within their theory of performativity. Althusser (2002 [1970]) coined the concept of ideological interpellation to describe the process of subjectification: becoming a subject.

The entity that interpellates is ideology itself, embodied and operating through institutions (“apparatuses”). Althusser's concept of ideological interpellation involves the invocation (act of “hailing” or “calling out”) and addressing of a person which places the individual into the state of “being-a-subject” through their submission to this interpellation. Thus, the individual becomes the subject by turning around to interpellative hailing: “Hey, you!”, which signifies them as a subject (Althusser, 2002: 117). As Butler (1993: 122) notes, “the occupation of the name is that by which one is, quite without choice, situated within discourse.”

According to Althusser, ideology itself lacks history; it is omnipresent and only manifests in concrete historical ideologies, which reveal the transhistorical structure of general ideology (Althusser, 2002: 107–109), because “ideology is eternal” (Ibid.: 109). In this regard, one might draw parallels between Althusser's notion of transhistorical general ideology and Butler's concept of gender within the heterosexual matrix. While gender may appear as something natural in its concrete form, it is a transcending regulatory system for Butler.

According to Althusser, the individual is always already a subject “born” (“always-already”), both symbolically and factually, into a certain conceptual apparatus (Ibid.: 117). Similarly, in Butler's framework, the sexually differentiated

body is constituted alongside the inscription of gender and sexuality, leading to its corporealization, that is, it falls into one moment. Just as in Althusser's theory, the power of ideology relies on a double bind—ideology both constitutes the subject and depends on the subject's existence for its operation: “[...] there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects. Meaning, there is no ideology except for concrete subjects, and this destination for ideology is only made possible by the subject: meaning, *by the category of the subject* and its functioning” (Ibid.: 115).

Similarly, in Butler's theory, gendered corporeality operates as “feedback,” as a reversal, that is, one that is both constituting and being performatively constituted. In other words, the subject is born through the “birth contractions” of power. At the same time, it is the very power—the same ideology, the same discursive order—that is enabled, allowed, and emerging through this “born” subject. Josef Fulka, who translated *Bodies That Matter* into Czech, summarized the “feedback/reverse effect”[47] of ideology as follows: “Ideology [...] retrospectively creates an image of 'pre-existing' reality that is untouched by ideological interpellation, an image of reality as non-ideological and pre-ideological, while this construct is always already symbolic and linguistic. In other words, ideology obscures its action as ideology by presenting itself as something quite self-evident, obvious and natural.” (Fulka, 2016: 324).

As previously mentioned, Butler was criticized for what was then seen as radical deconstruction of gender, sex, body, and sexuality which appears to suggest the incapacitation of the subject and its predetermination in potential actions. That raised questions about the agency of the subject and, in connection with agency, the concept of subversion. Drawing on Althusser’s ideological interpellation, Butler observes that while the invocation/hailing of ideology aims to mold the subject into obedience within predefined boundaries, it is precisely through reversal/feedback/double bind that subjectification yields unintended consequences: “Interpellation thus loses its status as a simple performative, an act of discourse with the power to create that to which it refers, and creates more than it ever meant to, signifying in excess of any intended referent. It is this constitutive failure of the performative, this slippage between discursive command and its appropriated effect, which provides the linguistic occasion and

[47] Fulka connects this dual mechanism of ideological interpellation, which Butler builds on from Althusser's work, with Henri Bergson's concept from *La pensée et le mouvant* (1938), the “logic of backward glance” or the “backward movement of truth” (Fulka, 2016: 325).

index for a consequential disobedience.” (Butler, 1993: 122). What might this unintended consequence entail?

The individual is always constituted—it is always called into— a specific discursive practice to which they submit (the process of subjection), thereby becoming a subject (the process of subjectification). While this submission occurs, it is also within the realm of the discursive practice that the subject is “enabled,”[48] and conversely, it is the subject who enables the discursive power itself (Butler, 1993: 122–123). This power—this ideology operating through ideological apparatuses, this discursive practice—necessitates the subject's adherence and repetition of certain (e.g., gender) norms, but the subject does not always reproduce these norms *verbatim*, meaning, the subject does not cite them performatively accurately. Repetition within the performative process exposes certain sites, which Butler calls the sites of slippage, ambivalence, contradiction or entanglement. It is within these sites that the potential for disobedience arises for the subject: “[...] repetitions of hegemonic forms of power which fail to repeat loyally and, in that failure, open possibilities for resignifying the terms of violation against their violating aims” (Ibid.: 124).

The miscitation of norms where slippage occurs signals a moment or space where the failure of discursive power can be leveraged for resignification. The terms, both linguistic and corporeal, through which we are constructed and constituted as subjects, must be “repeated in directions that reverse and displace their originating aims.” (Ibid.: 123). In this way, Butler opened a space of agency for the subject, who not only submits to power but also transforms and enables it. In moments when power fails to entirely occupy the subject (we could say: in the moments of vulnerability of power), in moments of slippage, unintended consequences emerge: the subject resists, rearticulates and resignifies, and might create new forms of subjectivity.

So far, I have addressed the question of power, its interconnectedness with discourse, the constitution of the subject, and the formulation of its agency, all drawing on the approaches of Foucault, Althusser, and Butler, whose work and ideas inform the theoretical underpinnings of my work, which I summarize in the *Summary: The Implications* section. However, I would like to pause at this point to address what these authors do not necessarily discuss: that is the prescriptive

[48] Butler refers to Gayatri Spivak with the term “enabling violation” (Butler, 1993: 122).

normativity of the categories of domination and subordination (hence also what is considered as the agency of the subject and why), that is, in words in Saba Mahmood (2005: 15), “agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms.” This expansion of their ideas is important in the next chapter for thinking through the limits of the “secular” subject.

Both Foucault's and Butler's works were further developed and expanded by Saba Mahmood in her *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005).[49] She provides an ethnographic account of the urban women's mosque movement in Cairo, as a part of the larger Islamic Revival, and engages with women's participation in religious movements. Mahmood argues that secular-liberal politics and feminist theory fail to satisfactorily address the question of what form of agency religious women occupy and live.

The liberal notion of the humanist ideal presupposes the existence of a subordinate subject eager to “liberate” itself, to resist, and to engage in subversive practices. However, from a feminist perspective, a dilemma arises as this analysis grapples with the active participation of the subordinated subject (in this case, religious women), often perceived as docile from an external standpoint, in their own subordination (Mahmood, 2005: 5-6). Mahmood thus contests the notion of the universality of categories of acts, such as subversion and resistance, that could be explored “outside of the ethical and political conditions within which such acts acquire their particular meaning” (Ibid.: 9).

Although, like Foucault, Butler, and other scholars typically associated with post-theories, Mahmood criticizes “the rationalist, self-authorizing, transcendental subject presupposed by Enlightenment thought in general, and the liberal tradition in particular” (Ibid.: 13), she takes the critique further. While drawing on poststructuralist theories regarding the question of power, subjectivity,

[49] Anthropologist Lea Taragin-Zeller (2023: 30–31), while referring to Mahmood and her influential account of the agency of religious women, offers a counterclaim that anthropologists often analyse “religious entities,” seeking to render their internal logics comprehensible to outsiders: “In other words, anthropologists were socialized to tell a story about how things (surprisingly) work.” (Ibid.: 31). Influential works, such as those of Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, have explored the self-formative practices of religious subjects, presenting these processes as legible frameworks for broader critique. While Mahmood’s work has been particularly influential in challenging secular-liberal assumptions about religious agency, Taragin-Zeller argues that this approach has also led to an overly coherent, normative and harmonious portrayal of religious life. Building on critiques by Osela and Soares (2010) and Sehlikoglu (2021), she highlights the need to account for struggle, ambivalence, incoherence, and failure in the study of everyday religiosity.

freedom, and autonomy, she critiques their problematic attitude towards subjects whose actions do not adhere to the binary axis of the logic of subordination versus subversion (repression versus resistance). These subjects—along with their forms of agency, and thus their subjectivities, bodies, and knowledge—are often overlooked in certain strands of critical scholarship because they do not align with the liberatory politics in which such scholarship is ultimately embedded: "[...] the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being [...]" (Ibid.: 14).

Mahmood observes that the theory of subject's agency in Butler's work, although she herself admittedly draws on it for her theorizing, does not exhaust all potentialities. She suggests moving beyond a confined framework of subversion, reiteration, and resignification; instead, she advocates for recognizing agency also in the acts through which norms are performed, inhabited and experienced (Ibid.: 22). She speaks of the agency of the "religious" subject, which, through the lens of the emancipatory-liberation project of feminist theory, appears to participate in its own oppression and subjugation.[50] Mahmood, however, manages to locate the subject's agency within these seemingly oppressive practices that would otherwise appear to completely define and occupy the subject. The agency of the religious subject is enacted through its unique inhabitation of norms: one might imagine this process through a metaphor of a prison cell, which ostensibly defines "being a prisoner." Yet, the imprisoned subject inhabits, accommodates, and re-creates this space as "its own," transforming the cell into something akin to a living room or a home. In this way, the prison cell loses its primary defining power, as the subject redefines the space, loosening the boundaries of what is created and by whom.[51]

Mahmood's critique and observations are important for this dissertation because she challenges the frameworks that view agency primarily through the lens of resistance or subversion. In my research, this perspective allows for a

[50] As in the critique of the secularization thesis, see the section *Postsecular Search for the Secular Subject* and footnote n. 35 in the section on positionality in the *Introduction*. In a similar vein, though addressing a different kind of "the subaltern" (in the terminology of Gayatri Spivak), Czech sociologist and philosopher Hana Havelková also discusses this issue. As noted in the article dedicated to Havelková *in memoriam* by historian and anthropologist Věra Sokolová (see Sokolová 2020), Havelková was one of the first authors in the Czech Republic to explicitly address the problem of applying "Western" feminist theory to "Eastern" realities. She argued that "Western" feminist theory failed to consider the specific context of post-communist countries, framing "the post-communist subject," women respectively, in a way that denied them agency (Havelková 1996).

[51] This comparative metaphor is not Mahmood's, but my own, built through a reading of her work.

deeper understanding of the “secular, ethnicized subject,” whose agency may not always manifest as overt acts of defiance against norms but rather through inhabiting and reconfiguring those norms in ways that are context-specific. Mahmood’s insights broaden the analytical lens, enabling me to explore how subjects negotiate their identities within “secular,” “ethnic,” and “religious” discourses, without presuming a binary between domination and liberation (and, by extension, between “religion” and “secularity”).

Moreover, her focus on the “religious subject” provides a parallel to the “secular subject” in my research: both are shaped and constrained by normative frameworks but may still enact agency in unexpected, contradictory, or ambivalent ways. This theoretical expansion is essential for examining how the “being a secular Jew” is negotiated, narrated, gestured, and reproduced within a complex web of societal expectations, power dynamics, and self-positioning. Mahmood’s work thus enriches the dissertation’s theoretical foundations, since she offers an understanding of agency that aligns with the ethnographic material, and helps to challenge simplistic dichotomies in interpreting the subject’s actions.

So far, I have discussed subject, subjectivity, agency, and their relationship with power. However, when talking about subjectivity, one cannot avoid the term *identity*, which plays a crucial role in how subjects are interpellated, enacted, and politicized within intersecting discourses of difference. Identity, whether ethnic, secular, religious, gendered, or class-based, is central to how individuals define themselves and others, drawing boundaries between “We” and “Others.”

In the Althusser’s sense, the individual turns to the interpellative hailing and, through the process of subjectification, becomes a subject, receiving their signification (their name). In my approach, I assume that interpellation does not have to be singular or final, but that the individual can turn towards multiple hailings, potentially simultaneously. In these multiple turnings, the subject remains anchored in an ongoing process of subjectification, but the identities constructed through those turnings may vary. This suggests that subjectivity is not a singular, stable essence, but rather a dynamic and ever-evolving construct, fragmented into multiple identities that emerge in different social contexts.

As I have already noted, post-theories and their derivative approaches have critically destabilized essentialist and primordialist notions of stable concepts, which include “identity” as something permanent and settled, as a

substance from which everything emanates, and which is objectively describable and natural. Yet we have to deal with identity in some way, because, as Stuart Hall reminds us, the destabilization and deconstruction of the conceptual apparatus, whereby key concepts are put "under erasure" (Hall, 1996: 1), does not mean that they have somehow been superseded and replaced, and so we are left with no choice but to continue to think *through* them and *with* them, "albeit now in their detotalized or deconstructed forms" (Ibid.). Along with Hall, then, we might say that the post-approach to identity, or identities, could be characterized by seeing them as "never unified [...], fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions [...] constantly in the process of change and transformation" (Ibid.: 4). In such a way of thinking, "identity" is doomed to be always and forever in quotation marks, reflecting the tricky and ambiguous nature of a project that would consider it as its stable point of departure.[52]

Identity is not a matter for resolution, but for contemplation. Experiencing the "Self" serves as both a pathway and a tool for positioning the subject in relation to the world and to others. In other words, identity, from the perspective I follow, is the contemplation of "the multiple tethers of the subject to the world" (Berlant, 2011: 287). As I mentioned earlier regarding my positionality, the "Self" moves within a particular network of relationality. When one says "*I am secular,*" one is signalling something to someone. This signalling is more than a factual statement; it is an act of positioning that reveals layers of relational meaning. Saying *I am secular* not only situates the speaker within a particular ideological framework but also implies an audience—an imagined "Other" who interprets this identity claim through their own beliefs, assumptions, and understandings. In this sense, identity is not a static possession or a set of fixed characteristics; rather, it is an uneasy dialogical process in which the "Self" is shaped by, and in tension with, the contexts it inhabits.

This relational network troubles the notion of a singular identity, as the "Self," to invoke Butler, is enacted (yet not acted) and reiterated in ways that

[52] This is why, for the most part, I use quotation marks throughout the dissertation around words like "secularity," "religion," "Jew," "Jewishness," or "Arab" as a way to signal the fragmented and fractured character of such categories. Also, as Stöckelová and Abu Ghosh note, "it is always necessary to think of 'facts' in quotation marks. 'Putting in quotation marks' does not imply boundless relativization, but rather draws attention to how facts are produced through diverse ontological and epistemological processes, including research processes" (Stöckelová and Abu Ghosh, 2013: 8).

remain open to trajectories that have not yet reached their final destinations. Considering identity as a "network of relationality" is helpful for observing the multiplicity of ties, that, as Berlant notes, "tether" the subject to the world. Such a consideration is important in the ethnographic part, since "intimacy and desire" is not something which unfolds outside of these tethers.

Summary: This chapter was focused on the subject, the process of subjectification, subjectivity, identity and agency through thinking *with* Althusser's notion of ideological interpellation, Butler's exploration of performativity, and Mahmood's critique of liberal vocabulary regarding the formation of the religious subject. Importantly, such thinking *with* allows for revelation of spaces of ambivalence and incoherence, where the subject can resist and subvert the norms which came to fully occupy them, but also where the subject's formation is achieved through creative inhabitation of such norms. Further, I draw on Hall to explain how I contemplate "identity" in a "detotalized" way, which takes into account both instability of meanings and, at the same time, the "tethering" of the subject to the world through these very meanings. In the context of the dissertation, then, it troubles the coherent appearance or universality of the "secular" identity and allows for exploration of its entanglement with power, history, and cultural specificity. Such exploration, however, calls for a shift towards a postsecular perspective, which is the topic of the following chapter, introducing another post-approach.

1.3. Postsecular Search for Secular Subject

If the reader has not yet been exhausted by the prefix *post-*, allow me to introduce one more post-approach to the discussion: *postsecularism*. Rooted in the broader disciplinary turns that emerged particularly in the 1970s, postsecularism is one of the orientations that critically interrogate established paradigms. Like other post-approaches, it seeks to disrupt the contours of what we often regard as stable categories. The prefix *post-* signals a critical re-evaluation of secularism and suggests that it no longer provides a comprehensive framework for understanding society and its processes.

Postsecularism specifically critiques the secularization thesis and the categories and assumptions it sustains. The secularization thesis, broadly

speaking, posits that traditional "religion" declines as societies industrialize, with rationalization, scientific progress, and the separation of church and state diminishing religion's public and private influence. Religion, in this view, is not only assumed to recede but is also implicitly framed as outdated and regressive, while secularity is constructed as a universal ideal aligned with progress, reason, and liberation. This binary opposition anchors a hierarchy of values and often positions the "secular" as superior to the "religious."

Originally, the term secular referred to the public sphere and the state, emphasising governance that was free from ecclesiastical authority and religious interference. Over time, however, its usage has expanded significantly. Today, it is applied not only to describe public affairs, but it is also extended to individuals and their identities (as in *secular identity*) and, paradoxically, to constructs like *secular religion,*[53] further complicating the supposed divide between secularity and religion.

Critics of the secularization thesis argue that the theory is not only epistemologically and methodologically flawed but also rooted in assumptions that reflect the biases of its cultural and historical origins (e.g., MacIntyre 1981; Casanova 1994; Asad 2003; Taylor 2007; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008; Cavanaugh 2009; Mahmood 2016; Seth 2022; in the Israeli context, e.g., Shenhav 2008; Yadgar 2011, 2011a; Fischer 2013; Lahav 2015, 2017; Barak-Gorodetsky and Zalzberg 2023).[54]

This critique emerges from a recognition of the secularization thesis's false universalism, which assumes that processes of modernization inevitably lead to the decline of religion. The theory's reliance on dichotomous categories of secular/religious and modern/traditional overlooks the nuanced and intertwined realities of these terms across different contexts. Furthermore, it erases the cultural, historical, and lived specificities of those who are subjects of this

[53] In Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, for example, there are educational institutions known as Secular Yeshivot. A "normal" *yeshiva* is a religious educational institution where rabbinic and other religious literature is primarily taught. However, unlike traditional yeshivot, Secular Yeshivot focus on the same study but are established for "non-religious" Jews. In the context of the Czech Republic, where I come from, such a label would be, most probably, seen as an oxymoron. I explore this question further in the third part of the dissertation, in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter.

[54] The authors in question, of course, do not agree on everything and offer different conceptual approaches. However, they all engage critically with the secularization thesis in some way. For the discussion on the topic of secularization and Jews and Judaism, see, e.g. Joskowicz and Katz (Eds.) 2015.

narrative, invalidating their experiences in favor of a homogenized and hierarchical worldview (Jakobsen and Pellegrini, 2008: 1–35).

At the core of the secularization thesis is the assumption that secularity and religiosity are binary and oppositional categories, with secularity positioned as the natural endpoint of human progress. Secularity becomes synonymous with ideals such as reason, freedom, and modernity, while religiosity is framed as regressive, dogmatic, and inevitably obsolete. As critics argue, these categories are not merely descriptive but deeply generative because they produce the very meanings they claim to reflect and observe.[55] Secularity, far from being a neutral concept, carries with it a normative and political agenda that upholds modernity's hegemony, particularly within "Western" frameworks. As Jakobsen and Pellegrini (2008: 7) note, secularism[56] (as a form of ideology and as a form of project) operates in a Foucauldian sense as a discourse, materialised through material and linguistic practices and institutions such as the media, civil life and ceremonies, and the market.

The universalist assumptions underlying the secularization thesis are, for the critics, equally problematic. Secularity is presented as a "higher" form of society, rooted in reason and humanist ideals, while religion is assumed to conform to a Protestant Christian model: individualized, text-based, and institutionally governed. Jakobsen and Pellegrini also describe the process of an "assimilation," whereby highly diverse practices are subsumed under the reductive category of "religion" (Ibid.: 8). This framework erases the pluralistic and hybrid forms of religiosity that exist outside Western norms and marginalize non-Western traditions and practices.

Further, Jakobsen and Pellegrini highlight the mutually constitutive relationship between secularism (and secularity as a condition) and religion. Secularism, they argue, developed in relation to religion, while religion itself is reshaped by secular frameworks. New forms of religiosity emerge in response to secular hegemony, demonstrating how power relations are productive: "productive

[55] As in the Foucault-influenced approaches of poststructuralism.
[56] Secularism as an ideological project is discussed in relation to the politics of desire, sexuality, and gender relations in Joan Wallach Scott's *Sex and Secularism* (2018). She critiques the ways in which secularism, both historically and in its contemporary forms, perpetuates specific gendered and sexual norms (such as heteronormativity) that reinforce existing power structures, despite claiming otherwise. In the book, Scott, again, challenges the simplistic dichotomy that portrays secularism as inherently liberating and religion as inherently oppressive, especially for women and their bodies. For a related examination of how sex, secularism, sect structure, and state power in Lebanon intersect, see Mikdashi 2022.

of resistance, of reverse discourses, and of new combinations" (Ibid.: 13). This interdependence calls for a more nuanced understanding of their interplay and compels "to undo the religion-secularism binary itself" (Ibid.: 10).

This critique has broader implications for how we understand the relationship between religion and secularity though. Scholars such as the anthropologist Talal Asad (2003) further critique the secularization thesis by exposing its Eurocentric assumptions. Asad emphasises that the separation of religion and politics, central to the secularization thesis, is not universal but a historical construct shaped by "Western" modernity. Secularism emerged as a mechanism of power, deeply entwined with colonial and imperial projects, which sought to reshape non-Western religious traditions to fit Western binary models (also in Cavanaugh 2009). Postcolonial scholar Sanjay Seth (2022) expands on this by illustrating how state interventions shape the category of "religion," delineating its boundaries and marginalizing forms of religiosity that do not conform to "Western" expectations.

Postsecularism here converges with postcolonial thought because the secularization thesis imposes Protestant Christian understandings of religion as a universal, transhistorical and transcultural framework while erasing diverse practices and traditions that resist this categorization. This distortion is particularly evident in "non-Western" contexts, where local forms of spirituality or religiosity are rendered invisible or illegitimate. The result is a narrative of modernity that erases context-dependent expressions of belief and practice.

Therefore, the postsecular approach invites us to move beyond these binaries and reconsider the relationship as fluid, dynamic, contextually situated, and mutually constitutive. It opens a space for understanding how identities and practices are shaped by the interplay of these categories in ways that reflect local histories and lived realities. Such an invitation and explicit reflection is particularly important in the field of socio-cultural anthropology and ethnographic research, as it encourages researchers to also critically examine their own culturally specific presuppositions. Without such reflection, there is a risk of entering the "ethnographic field" with unexamined assumptions, and thereby reinforcing the sedimented categories that are taken for granted.[57]

[57] My own assumptions when I began this research, as well as the reassessments I was compelled to make along the way, are discussed in greater detail in the sections *On Positionality* and *Towards the Dissertation's Topic*, both in the *Introduction.* For the discussion on the topic of "secular condition of anthropology," see Furani and Robbins 2021.

The postsecular approach offers a productive lens for this dissertation, particularly in its ability to deconstruct the sedimented categories, and by doing so, it disrupts the binary frameworks that often categorize subjects as either religious or secular, locking them into preconceived roles and scripts. For instance, postsecular feminism[58] has demonstrated how the liberatory project of "Western" scholarship often frames religious women as victims complicit in their own oppression through "false consciousness" (in the Marxist sense) and what Pierre Bourdieu coined as "symbolic violence."

In the Czech context, Jakub Ort, in his essay *Beyond Secular Autonomy? The Concept of Emancipation According to Saba Mahmood and Judith Butler,* reflects on these themes and raises a crucial question: what kind of normative frameworks and assemblages might we imagine that move beyond the unproductive dichotomy of religion versus secularity? He suggests that "the postsecular element then consists above all in not allowing ourselves to be constrained in this assembling by certain secularist assumptions that dictate which pieces can and cannot belong together" (Ort 2023: 168).

Based on postsecular reading, it is evident that when conducting research connected to the concepts of "religion" and "secularity," one must interrogate the specific conditions in which these categories emerge and the consequences they entail. It is also evident that postsecular critique has particularly focused on subjects who have been marginalized, stigmatized, or denied agency due to their religious subjectivity, especially in certain forms of academic knowledge production.

But what possibilities does the postsecular approach offer to the self-proclaimed "secular" subject, which, once taken as the "asymptomatic" norm, now finds itself relegated to a residual position, almost devoid of content, or, if content is present, automatically filled with pre-existing notions, much like the treatment of the religious subject in the past?[59] And what does the postsecular approach mean in the context of this work, which even includes the word "secular" in its title?

[58] See also, e.g., Braidotti 2008; Nilsson and Tesfahuney 2019; Grenz 2023. The discussion is the same as that presented in Mahmood (2005) or in Mizrachi (2022), as mentioned earlier.
[59] For the overview of the development of the "postsecular" and the discussion on the "unfinished" project of postsecularism, see Fourani 2015. He critiques postsecularism because it "perpetuates the secular entrapments that it presumes to resolve" (Furani, 2015: 2).

When Mahmood allows us to consider the formation and agency of the religious subject, is she not, at the same time, in danger of essentializing the subject who self-identifies as "secular"? Does this imply that the secular subject is exempt from a formation process and therefore "free"? Such reasoning might ultimately entrap us in dichotomous thinking once again. When Ort argues that "postsecular element then consists above all in not allowing ourselves to be constrained in this assembling by certain secularist assumptions that dictate which pieces can and cannot belong together," I feel that there is still, albeit implicitly, a notion of a reversed orientation in "favour" of religious subjects, with postsecular lenses being employed to achieve this. That is, the postsecular approach is used to search for "religion" in places where European secularism renders it invisible, insignificant, or unworthy. What interests me, by contrast, is how the perspectives of postsecularism allows us to ask which pieces can, in fact, be assembled in the case of a subject who self-identifies as secular.

In my (postsecular) search for the secular subject, I adopt the terminology provided by the sociologist José Casanova (2009), who distinguishes between *the secular* (including *secularity* as both a condition and an experienced, embodied formation of the subject), *secularization*, and *secularism* (with a *secularist* as a proponent of secularism) as distinct, yet related concepts which should not be conflated.[60]

According to Casanova, "the secular has become a central modern category [...] to construct, codify, grasp, and experience a realm or reality differentiated from 'the religious'" (Casanova, 2009: 1049). For Casanova, *secularity* can be also approached in a phenomenological sense as a matter of "experiencing oneself." If we shift attention to the lived experience of different types of *secularities* and the conditions under which a particular secularity is constituted, we also investigate "how human subjectivity and corporeality are formed" (Ort, 2023: 147). Secularity then, following Mahmood,[61] might be

[60] These are also the categories which anthropologist Talal Asad uses in his previously mentioned important work *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003).

[61] Mahmood is not talking about secularity in the quoted passage. I am merely following the mode of inquiry and her argument regarding the various configurations of the Self/personhood. Inspired by Talal Asad's work, Mahmood turns to corporeality and bodily practice when her ethnography "treats the empirical character of bodily practices as the terrain upon which the topography of a subject comes to be mapped, and I elaborate the architecture of the self through the immanent form bodily practices take—an analytical move that productively reverses the usual routing from interiority to exteriority in which the unconscious manifests itself in somatic forms." (Mahmood, 2005: 121-122).

viewed as a specific "configuration of personhood" which is "a product of a particular discursive formation" (Mahmood, 2005: 120) and we can inquire how such a configuration is achieved and on what premises.

In contrast to *secularism*, which Casanova examines in two senses—both as an ideology and as a principle of statecraft—*secularity* is an experienced formation of the subject. In his conceptualization, *secularization* refers to the alleged or historical process of transformation by which societies transition from "primitive" to "modern" (from the religious to the secular), a perspective that underpins the secularization thesis.

It is the first of these terms—"the secular" and secularity (or, if we wish, secularities)—that interests me as an anthropologist: How can secularity be experienced, and what are its limits and contours? What, for specific subjects in Israel, does this possibility of self-identification signify? A postsecular understanding of the secular subject, as I offer it in this dissertation, means that the secular subject is not constituted *a priori* but emerges within the particular milieu to which the subject relates and is interpellated into. Furthermore, the subjects are not defined by what they are supposed to lack (transcendence, faith, practice, or observance as the components we often seek when looking for "religion") but by how they navigate the world of relationality in a constant recalibration of their own subjectivity.

To put it another way: in the context of post-theories, I am examining the ideological interpellation—the particular Althusserian ideological hailing—that calls the secular subject into being, and consequently, how the subjects engage with the norms that delineate them but fail to fully occupy them. I further discuss the particular conditions and formations as they can be traced in Israel in the third part of the dissertation, in the *Secular Subject in Postsecular Condition* chapter. In doing so, I offer a particular reading that, in the spirit of a postsecular approach, may help to decalcify the category of the "secular." This reading considers religious and secular subjects as constituted through a discursive matrix of relations, wherein these subjects are constitutive of each other, as their formations share the same mechanism of being called into existence.

Summary: In this chapter, I presented a postsecular critique of the assumptions and effects of the secularization thesis, which are based on false dichotomies and hierarchies and which "lock" the subjects and practices that do not conform to the implicit categories of what is considered "secular" and "religious." Furthermore, I addressed the question of how, in the context of the dissertation, a postsecular inquiry into secular subjects can take place without confining them to pre-given roles and contents. In this regard, I propose examining the specific conditions under which—and to which—such a subject is constituted. This, in turn, allows me to explore, with reference to Saba Mahmood, the particular configuration of the subject as a discursive formation, which enables an inquiry into how this mode of self-identification is achieved and experienced as lived reality, along with its consequences and limitations. These considerations are in the centre of the *Secular Subject in Postsecular Condition* chapter, in the third part of the dissertation. In the following chapter, I address the epistemological and methodological challenge of assuming we know "who the Jew is," in any given context and how I think about "Jewish ethnicity" in the context of this work.

1.4. Ethnic Jews: Beyond Ontological Jewishness[62]

"Jews have been delineated over the centuries as an ontological given, a race, a nation, a people bound together as much by their refusal of faith as by blood [...] Most historical, literary, sociological, and anthropological work on Jewish topics takes as its starting point the ontology of the Jews and Jewishness [...] with a certain look and way of being in the world. That look and way may differ somewhat from place to place and change over the centuries, but the primordial and ultimate certainty of it does not."
(Markowitz, 2006: 42–43, 51)

The opening quote is from an essay of an anthropologist Fran Markowitz, entitled *Blood, Soul, Race, and Suffering: Full-Bodied Ethnography and Expressions of Jewish Belonging* (2006). In it, she considers how static "truths"

[62] The title is a reference to the critique offered by Victor Anderson in *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (1995). Anderson examines the racial construction of "Blackness" as an essentialist category which confines people to fixed identities. He advocates for moving beyond this static understanding towards a postmodern understanding of "Blackness," which is an approach influenced by the writings of bell hooks.

about Jews as unchanging people can be destabilized through full-bodied ethnography. She juxtaposes two concepts: Jews as certain people (referring to Charles Silberman's book *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* (1985), that is, identifiable people about whom one can speak *en masse*, having a primordial quality), and Jews as uncertain people (referring to Zygmunt Bauman's 1989 book *Modernity and the Holocaust* and the 1998's book chapter *Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern*). In the latter category, or approach, the question "Who are Jews?" can be answered not by what they are, but by what they are not, and by what marks them as uncanny people (Markowitz, 2006: 51–52). Markowitz is acutely aware of the tensions inherent in the academic "search for Jews": if we reject ontological "Jewishness," how do we treat Jews as real people who live as Jews within a vast array of possibilities and expressions? And where do we find them?

While the term "Jewish anthropology"[63] is commonly used to describe anthropological work focused on the Jewish experience, I situate my work rather as an "anthropology of Jews." I view Jewish anthropology as scholarship that builds on Jewish content, its foundations, and the principles given by Judaism, whether we understand it as a "religion," as a teaching, as a practice, or, in all its complexity, as a total way of life. At the same time, as a non-Jewish person, I cannot claim that my work has a "Jewish" quality—not because of my ancestry, but mostly because my reasoning is not grounded in Judaism. By contrast, I see the anthropology of Jews as focused on the lives and experiences of people who exist through the category, and, as such, relate to it in some way: whether they submit to it, reframe it, critique the *halachic* definition, see it as oppressive, celebrate it, find pride in it, or, indeed, consciously abandon it.

To extricate myself from the pitfalls of treating Jews as an ahistorical, homogeneous group whose characteristics are taken as fixed and universally given, I must engage theoretically with the concept of ethnicity and, so to speak, clear my "theoretical desk." It is precisely this notion of ethnicity within the ethno-religious understanding of "being Jewish" that proves problematic, at least from a certain perspective regarding the situation in contemporary Israel. Hence, I attempt here to think through what ethnicity *is* and *is not* within the context of this work—or rather, how ethnicity is something that *both* is and is not.

[63] For comparison on terminology, see, e.g. Goldberg 1987; Boyarin 1991; Kranz 2024.

Students of ethnology and anthropology programs usually come across various theories of ethnicity, or perhaps across various theories of various ethnicities.[64] Just as Charles Taylor (2009) writes about the polysemy of the secular, and Henrietta Moore (2014) highlights the polysemic confusion surrounding intimacy, one might find a similarly diffuse, polysemic overload in the usage of ethnicity.[65] Both theoretical and empirical works in the fields of anthropology and ethnography abundantly point to the book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organization of Culture Difference* (1969), especially towards its influential *Introduction* written by anthropologist Fredrik Barth, who served as the volume's editor.

The publication of this book is often regarded as a qualitative leap or turning point in the field, as Barth shifted the focus from treating ethnicity as a given, fixed, and bounded entity with inherent substance to understanding it as a process of maintaining boundaries between ethnic groups.[66] This reconceptualization significantly reshaped the premises on which subsequent research and theorization were built, to the extent that the conceptualization of ethnicity and ethnic identity is often categorized into *pre-Barth* and *post-Barth* (whether they follow Barth or criticize him) approaches and iterations.

In Barth's approach, the focus should be less on the cultural content of the ethnic group and more on the boundary itself—how it is constructed, through which means, that is, boundary maintenance (Barth, 1969: 15-16), and how permeable and porous the boundary[67] is, while simultaneously being naturalized as something stable and persistent.[68] He sees ethnic groups as "categories of

[64] In the Czech context, an anthology of texts titled *Theories of Ethnicity* (Jakoubek [Ed.] 2016) is available. A summary of the different approaches to the conceptualization of ethnicity can also be found in, e.g., Šatava 2009; Horálek 2012.

[65] The term *ethnicity* has replaced the word *race* in many discourses, although speakers still use it to signal the same thing, and primordial racialized rhetoric continues to functionally stratify society (see also footnote n. 8 in the *Introduction*). The adjective *ethnic* can also be traced in pop culture and on social networks like Instagram, where users share videos with captions such as "When your mom cooks ethnic cuisine" or "When you have an ethnic mom." This suggests that only some subjects are ethnicized, depending on which country they come from, and whether they are part of the majority or a minority in that country (for the discussion on the topic of "vernacular" use of "ethnicity," or ethnicity as a category of common sense, see, e.g., Eriksen 1994: 3–7; Tonkin et al 1996: 18–24, Brubaker 2013).

[66] This does not mean that a similar approach cannot be traced in the works that preceded the publication. However, the publication of a book is prevalently regarded as a turning point.

[67] For a discussion on "boundary making and maintenance" in Modern Judaism, see, e.g., Diemling and Ray (Eds.) 2015.

[68] Cf. with Butler's iteration of Althusser, on the "reversal" effect of ideology (as discussed in *Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories*), and Butler's reference to Foucault when discussing the productive function of power (Butler 1990: 2–3). See also *Conclusion: Gestures in Multiple Directions* in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter.

ascription and identification by the actors themselves" (Ibid.: 10), which suggests an emic perspective of the subjects.[69] Such an understanding can be described as processual, as it depends on relationships, context, and, in particular, interaction with others. At the same time, Barth emphasizes that while actors themselves (as ethnic units) hold the power to determine which cultural differences and similarities are considered significant, these do not constitute a mere sum of objective differences (Ibid.: 14). As another influential anthropologist, Thomas H. Eriksen, writes referring to Barth: "Ethnicity occurs when cultural differences are made relevant through interaction. It thus concerns what is socially relevant, not which cultural differences are 'actually there,'" and hence, "ethnicity must […] be seen as an aspect of a relationship, not as a property of a person or a group" (Eriksen, 2023: 267).

To provide an overview of the various post-Barthian conceptions of ethnicity and the different types of criticism[70] his conceptualization has faced is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Moreover, others have already addressed these excellently.[71] Nevertheless, I would like to stay with the aforementioned Eriksen, who argues that both interaction and the social and political context of such encounters are crucial for understanding ethnicity (and its historical boundedness). Otherwise, we risk an ahistorical naturalization, as happened in Barth's work, where these aspects were not reflected upon (Eriksen 2019). His observations may be helpful in further thinking about the ethnic aspect in attempts to move beyond the ontology of Jews and Jewishness. Eriksen, referring to Jean and John Comaroff (1992), rightly asks whether all social identities must be seen as "ethnic," or if they might represent a different kind of consciousness (Eriksen, 2019: 31–32).

If we take a brief look at the definitions of Judaism, it is mostly described as an ethnic religion, just as Jews are portrayed as an ethno-religious group. Simply put, ethno-religious groups are meant to be defined by a unity of shared ancestry and religious beliefs, with the religious component determining who participates in this shared ancestry. From this, we might easily get the impression

[69] Although Barth's approach is often described as subjectivist (i.e., emic), later critics have pointed out his epistemological and methodological inconsistencies in applying this perspective.
[70] See, e.g., Richard Jenkins's *Rethinking Ethnicity* (1997), or Rogers Brubaker's *Ethnicity Without Groups* (2004), in which he critiques the overemphasis on treating the "group" as a unit of analysis and as an absolute, rather than as a context-dependent variable.
[71] See, e.g., Eriksen's *Ethnicity and Nationalism. Anthropological Perspectives* (1994). The Czech translation of the book was published in 2012 by Sociological Press (SLON).

that we already know what each individual component roughly means. However, as I have shown with the proponents of the postsecular approach, the understanding of what constitutes "religion" is heavily influenced by Christianity, Eurocentric assumptions, and the Enlightenment's legacy.

In the case of the different epistemological conceptualizations of ethnicity discussed in this section, post-theories (at least the post-Barth ones) would view ethnicity not as a property or something objectively existing and innate. Instead, they see ethnicity as a processual and interactional aspect of relationships that is socially, locally, historically, and politically contingent. Therefore, to simply say that Jews are an ethno-religious group does not help us think through much.

I attempt to apply one more line of argument to reformulate the above in different words: The *halachic* (rabbinical religious) definition of a Jew is a person who is born of a Jewish mother or who undergoes recognized conversion. At the same time, some strands of Judaism accept both the father and the mother in determining a person's Jewishness, or they have different rules for conversion than Orthodox (Rabbinic) Judaism. Even within Rabbinic Judaism[72] itself, there are schools of interpretation that differ on certain issues.

Some Jews—even those who meet the *halachic* definition—view Judaism primarily as a "culture." Then, there are Jews who do not consider themselves religious or observant in any way, but for them, it is the history and the "ethnic" component that is important. There are also Jews who practice Buddhism or combine spiritual-religious practices with other religions.[73] Judaism, both as a "culture" and as an "ethnicity," can have different expressions: Jews from European countries and Jews from the North Africa and Middle East region have different traditions in meals, liturgy, and songs. The historical experiences and memory of the *Shoah* and pogroms, as markers of collective identity, too, will not apply to all Jewish communities. Who, then, are these Jews—both ephemeral and yet so concretely existing in their flesh and bodies?

In *Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis* (2020), political scientist Yaacov Yadgar[74] examines the "crisis" of contemporary Jewish identity in Israel (which has broader implications for the Jewish Diaspora). According to Yadgar, the "crisis" is rooted in the Zionist project, which redefined Jewishness by shifting it from a

[72] *Stricto sensu*, every stream or strand of Judaism is rabbinic, since rabbis are also in Reform of Liberal Judaism. "Rabbinic Judaism," however, is a label used for the Jewish Orthodoxy.
[73] See, e.g., the work of Hagar Lahav.
[74] See also Yadgar 2017.

primarily religious normative framework to a nationalized and racialized discourse of "blood" and "biology."[75] He argues that Zionism, as Jewish nationalism, ideology and political project, recasted Jewishness as an inherent and biological identity, making it the foundation of political nationhood rather than a status shaped by religious law, tradition or communal belonging.[76]

This transformation, according to Yadgar, constitutes a rupture from historical and traditional understandings in which Judaism preceded and defined "the Jew."[77] Instead, in the Zionist paradigm, Jewishness is something that Jews themselves determine—shaped by national-political imperatives rather than

[75] The same argument is used in, e.g., Dalsheim 2019. For comparison, Czech political scientist Pavel Barša writes—describing the constructivist approach—in his article *Constructivism and Identity Politics* (2006: 27): "The fact of 'Jewish blood' has no power beyond the ways in which it is adopted—whether positive or negative—by a particular actor. What is true of inherited blood or skin color is also true of language, religion, culture, and collective identity inherited from family upbringing." However, this is not valid for the Jewish subject in Israel, where "being a Jew" is not merely a matter of adoption by a particular actor, but carries power, as it is tied to legal status (and hence, identity politics). For an important discussion on the "racial" roots of Zionism and the politics of regeneration, see Todd S. Presner's *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration* (2007). Presner revisits the ideas of Max Nordau, one of the founding figures of European Zionism, tracing the origins of "Muscle Zionism" to the late 19th century, a period in which the body politics of modernity were profoundly shaped by "regenerative" discourses on race science, physical fitness, hygiene, eugenics, colonialism, and militarism. He suggests that the ideal of the "New Jew"—the Zionist ideal Jew—emerged from this context, wherein Jewish bodies were expected to exemplify strength and vitality. During the First Zionist Congress in 1897, Nordau (1849-1923) argued that anti-Semitism and the oppression of Jews had led to weakened bodies and minds, resulting from humiliation and despair. The following year, he proposed *Muskeljudentum* (Muscle or Muscular Judaism) as a transformative solution, urging Jewish men to reclaim their dignity and strength through physical exercise inspired by the Greek concept of *kalokagathia*, the harmony of body and mind. He called for a new heroism, reminiscent of the Bar Kochba Revolt, in which the "New Jew" would meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity and escape the stigmas associated with the ghetto. This hyper-masculinized Jew, in Nordau's view, symbolized the redemption of the Jewish nation. The language of Jewish rejuvenation within Zionism is highly gendered, establishing a hierarchy in which those able to achieve the ideals of a healthy, athletic, strong body were elevated above those unable to do so. This normative emphasis implied that only the *Muskeljude*, the transformed or "new" Jew, could rightfully reclaim his ancestral homeland. Here, we see tightly interconnected concepts: hegemonic masculinity, and Zionism as a particular form of nationalism. However, these ideals are elusive; the archetypes of the "real" man, the "real" Israeli, and the "real" Jew set norms that few could fully achieve. The closest realizations of these ideals were the "heterosexual, able-bodied, Ashkenazi male figures" (Mor, 2005: 59).

[76] In his recent book, *To Be a Jewish State* (2024), Yadgar views the Zionist nation-building enterprise as a project emerging from the broader context of nation-state formation at the end of the 19th century in Europe. He argues that "Judaism itself has been read, interpreted, and remade to fit in the European, modern, sovereign-state-oriented (and, ultimately, Christian) notion of 'nation'" (Yadgar, 2024: 155). In this reading, he suggests that Zionism can be understood through the lens of supersessionism as a (political) theology of replacement in which Zionism, as an ideology, came to replace traditional Judaism while still, in a complex way, claiming Jewish history and identity (Ibid.: 40–75).

[77] Here, Yadgar quotes philosopher Leon Roth: "Judaism is not to be considered in terms of the Jews but the Jews in terms of Judaism. Judaism is not what some or all individual Jews happen as a fact to do. It is what Jews should be doing (but often are not doing) as members of a holy people. Judaism comes first. It is not a product but a programme and the Jews are the instruments of its fulfilment." (Roth, 1968:16 in Yadgar, 2020: 11).

religious or cultural continuity. The Zionist legacy, then, is that it transformed Jewishness into a politically “ethnicized” category. To summarize it, the “secular” understanding of being Jewish, which emphasizes the “ethnic” aspect of biological descent, paradoxically does not detach itself from the religious reasoning of “blood” lineage. Zionist identity politics, however, relying on Orthodox reasoning, reconstitutes “ethnos”—no longer in the traditional sense as a total way of life, where “blood” is inseparable from the content of life—but as a form of being, from which everything that emerges is considered Jewish *per se*, simply because it derives from an (ethnic) Jew.

In my understanding, what Yadgar demonstrates and traces in his book is the genealogy of a “different type of consciousness,” as raised in Eriksen's earlier question. If “ethnicity” is not an inherent property but an aspect of social relationships, then Zionism’s ideological nationalization, racialization and “ethnicization” of Jewishness can be understood as a historically specific reconfiguration of Jewish consciousness that shifts Jewish identity from a religious and communal framework to an ethno-national and political one.

If Jewish subjects are “ethnicized” in contemporary Israel, then this process carries with itself, in the language of post-theories, normative and disciplinary effects. The category of ethnicity itself functions as a normative and disciplinary device of inclusion and exclusion, particularly in a context where “Jewishness” is transformed into a political framework.

In the context of this dissertation, ethnicity exists as a form of consciousness, insofar as its normative, disciplinary, and productive effects extend, and insofar as it is part of the legal status based on a specific type of *ius sanguinis*.[78] When I spoke at the beginning of this chapter about how ethnicity is and is not at the same time, I was addressing this very aspect: If I am attempting to break free from the ontological and ahistorical givenness of Jews, it is necessary to focus on very concrete subjects who, although they perceive themselves as part of a certain continuum of existence, live their lives in specific historical, spatial, social, and political conditions—conditions that are inscribed in the form of consciousness. The right question, then, is not the question of “Who is a Jew?” but the question of “How is Jewishness achieved?” This will vary across

[78] I address the question of *ius sanguinis,* respectively the legal framework of the category of a “Jew,” more closely in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Landscape* chapter, in the third part of the dissertation. Also, I provide an overview of categories under which the Israelis are listed in the Population registry in the *Field and Subjects* section, in the second part of the dissertation.

different contexts, with different political implications for the subjects engaged in such "achieving."[79]

Summary: In this chapter, I addressed the assumption of a fixed and stable category of "Jewishness." The chapter explored the theoretical possibilities and limitations of rejecting Jewish ontological givenness, which is a foundational assumption in many studies. I discussed the category of "ethnicity," which tends to be used for the purposes of defining Judaism and Jews. Through a discussion of non-ontological, post-Barthian approaches to ethnicity, I highlighted the importance of grounding our understanding of "Jewishness" in specific historical, social, and political conditions. Drawing on Yaacov Yadgar's work, I illustrated how the emergence of Zionism as Jewish nationalism led to the "ethnicization" of Jewish identity. Hence, "Jewish ethnicity" in this dissertation functions as both something that *is* and *is not* at the same time. Such an understanding allows me, in the third, "ethnographic" part of this work, to trace the ways in which "being a Jew" is narrated and gestured, with which implications, to what or whom such narrations and gestures are directed, and in which conditions.

Summary: Implications and Reintroductions

In this theoretical part, I have presented the starting points that have, in various ways, inspired, influenced, and informed my initial position as a researcher in the context of this dissertation. I consider these starting points a kind of meta-framework for the research, as a basic orientation that I do not accept completely or dogmatically but rather engage with in a dialogical way. This engagement helps me to articulate my epistemological position.

The prefix *post-* signals various schools of thought that emerged in response to the realization that the world is far more complex than initially thought, that language is not merely descriptive but an active agent of creation, and that nothing is completely "neutral." Post-theories or post-approaches emerged across multiple disciplines, some of which developed in parallel and others with acknowledged interconnectedness. These approaches focus on the fluidity and instability of being—yet with sedimented, tangible implications. They

[79] The process of determining who is a subject of this dissertation is discussed in greater detail in the second part, in the *Field and Subjects* chapter.

are interested in the operation of power and its disciplinary effects, processuality, hybridity, subjective experience, discursive formations, the destabilization of ontological "truths," and the contextual embeddedness of lived categories, while also critically reflecting on the normative power in the production of scientific knowledge.

This approach, then, has implications of its own for the research, particularly when discussing categories such as subject, subjectivity, identity, religion, secularity, and ethnicity. Because the research focuses on, and was conducted with, secular Israeli Jews,[80] all these aspects come to the fore, and it was necessary for me to explain how I understand them in the spirit of the aforementioned meta-approach.

As I outlined above, Foucault's attention to the omnipresence of power and discursive formations, Althusser's concept of ideological interpellation, and Butler's theorization of performativity and agency have all provided ways to think about the making of subjectivity. The work of Saba Mahmood extends this by illuminating how subjects "inhabit" norms, thereby expanding the possibilities for identifying the agency of the subject.[81] Meanwhile, I also draw on postsecular perspectives, which challenge the assumed binary boundaries between religious and secular formations. Such an approach allows me to view "secular" subjects as engaged in continual processes of recalibration.

I suggest that in the Israeli context, "secularity" thus might not be simply read as an absence of "religiosity" or a manifestation of a secularist ideological orientation, but rather as a historically and politically conditioned formation of Jewish subjectivity, and one of its discursively available modes.[82] This research focuses on how secular Israeli Jews navigate intimacy and desire with, alongside, and against these very conditions of being. Intimate relationships, in this sense, become key *sites* where subjectivity is enacted, negotiated, and at times contested within the entangled legacies of Zionist identity discourse, Jewish continuity, and liberal ideals of personal autonomy.

---

[80] As noted in the previous footnote, I explain how people became the subjects of the research in the section *Field and Subjects*, in the second, methodological part. I use Althusser's concept of interpellation to overcome potentially arbitrary, and therefore misleading, categorization of subjects, particularly the imposition of categories based on external criteria.

[81] And again, we can ask, with Sara Ahmed (2006), not only how, but also *with whom* and *with whom not*, they inhabit these norms.

[82] See the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter, in the second part of the dissertation.

For example, secular Jews in Israel might refuse to marry through the religious Orthodox authorities under the Chief Rabbinate of Israel (*HaRabbanut HaRashit*, commonly referred as simply *Rabbanut*), viewing them as elitist, exclusivity-inducing, and coercive.[83] Yet they may still privately engage with "religion" in an affectionate way, while preferring to marry another Jew through a "secular rabbi" outside of the country.[84] For the whole ethnographic "mapping" of the conditions of "being secular" is important to consider also the legal regime, where "being a Jew" in Israel is not only a personal matter of one's belief, practice, and/or ancestry, but it is also a legal status and category.[85]

But how can one approach intimacy as such a site, field, space, or place, especially when we bear in mind that it is still a "provisional reference" (Wilson, 2016: 251)? In this regard, I think once again with Lauren Berlant's writing which was mentioned in the *Introduction* regarding the politics of intimacy and desire. Berlant's poetic vocabulary provides me inspiration for how to first think about intimacy as a site; second, as something which is ongoing, that is, something which is in a continual process of creation and "becoming"; and third, as something which both constrains but, at the same time, is created by the movement of its subjects in such a way that the resulting "embroidery" of a relational life is not given *a priori*. Such a thinking *with* allows one to attend to "intimacy and desire" in a way that remains grounded in the theoretical

---

[83] See the *Infrastructure of Intimacy: Thick Life, Thin Lines* chapter, specifically *Movement II: Possible Lovers, Impossible Others*, where interlocutors articulate their positions towards *Rabbanut*.

[84] I explain the regime of marriage in Israel further in the *Infrastructure of Intimacy* chapter, in the third part of the dissertation, specifically in the *Movement II: Possible Lovers, Impossible Others.* The term "secular rabbi" sounds counterintuitive at first, or even like an oxymoron. I encountered this term in one of the Israeli Facebook groups, where someone was looking for ways to have a "Jewish wedding" without the involvement of the *Rabbanut*. Among the recommendations offered by the members of the group was to find a "secular rabbi," either in Israel or abroad. The first option, however, presents a problem: a rabbi who is not approved by the *Rabbanut*, since it is the *Rabbanut* who holds a monopoly over marriage for the Jewish segment of the society and since civil marriage is unavailable in the country, cannot perform a wedding that is legally binding in Israel. Paradoxically, it would be binding "religiously." The second option might be more feasible because marriages performed abroad that are legally binding according to a respective legislation are registered in Israel and considered as valid. Even this option, though, comes with a complication. In the case of the Czech Republic, for example, only the Federation of Jewish Communities holds a special right to perform legally binding religious marriages. Therefore, only a rabbi affiliated with the Federation can perform such a wedding. Rabbis who are not part of the Federation cannot. What becomes apparent here is that "secular rabbi" is a contextual-specific term, unlike to be used outside of its setting. In the Israeli context, "secular" does not signal anything about "religion" per se, but rather expresses a critical position towards the Orthodox monopoly.

[85] As mentioned earlier, I discuss the legal framework of the category of a "Jew," more closely in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Landscape* chapter, in the third part of the dissertation.

meta-approach I just introduced—both theoretically (epistemologically) and practically (methodologically and in the mode of ethnographic writing and representation). Therefore, I decided to work with the term "infrastructure of intimacy,"[86] for which I draw direct inspiration from Berlant's notes on "infrastructure" in *The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times* (2016).

Berlant writes that infrastructure is not "is not identical to system or structure," since "infrastructure is defined by the movement or patterning of social form. It is the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure" (Berlant, 2016: 393). Infrastructure enables social continuity, yet it is also vulnerable to breakdown: a *glitch* in an infrastructure is an interruption, "an episode of hiccup" (Ibid.)—not merely an error or failure but a "troubled transmission" that disrupts the smooth operation and reproduction of the infrastructure, exposing the fragility of what we assume to be stable.

I understand the moments of glitch in Butler's terms as precisely those points of entanglement and slippage where the subject fails to cite the norms of their interpellation performatively correctly and thereby exposes the instability of the order into which they are interpellated (Butler 1993). While Butler's work focuses on the subject, Berlant's vocabulary allows me to think in terms of the collective: the glitch, the hiccup episode, can take place in the infrastructure itself—in the collective, in the network, in the movement, in our relationality—within "the multiple tethers binding the subject to the world" (Berlant 2011: 287).

Moving from abstract to concrete Israeli context, "the intimate" is intertwined with the legal architecture, Zionist identity politics, "religion", and Jewish continuity. Borrowing Berlant's vocabulary, I refer to this intertwined site as "the intimate infrastructure," which is not unidirectional but operates and moves—building on Foucault and the repercussions of his work in Butler—constantly in all directions, within "clouds of possibility" (Berlant 2012: 6). That possibility also encompasses glitches, ruptures, troubled transmissions, when subjects reconfigure themselves while facing the norms that were supposed to completely define them.

Even though Berlant's concept of glitches primarily addresses events of a larger scope, such as economic crises, I find it useful to apply this idea on a

[86] See the footnote no. 1 in *Introduction.*

smaller scale, in the everyday glitches of ordinary life: when a subject chooses to form a partnership with someone who, within the intimate infrastructure, appears to be an inappropriate object of desire, or when subjects create alternative forms of identification by not correctly reciting the assumed script of their own formation. Building on this, I use "infrastructure of intimacy" to explore the politics of intimacy and desire in the third chapter of the "ethnographic" part of the dissertation. There, intimacy is a site of constraints, where choices, hesitations, and acts are made within a matrix of historical, legal, and affective forces, but where there also lives potentiality and the possibility to give rise to something new.

Methodological Foundations

In this part of the dissertation, I address the methodological foundations guiding the research process, as well as the choices and decisions made during the ethnographic fieldwork. I closely elaborate on the process of "ethnographing," the methods, and the ethical and methodological dilemmas I encountered in the "field." This reflexive approach helps to reveal how my choices affected not only the research process itself, but also the interpretation of its outcomes.

I begin by discussing the process of "ethnographing" and what it means in my case, how I approach the question of representation in the final text, and the implications of identifying as a feminist doing research. Second, I reflect on the "field" of my research and the individuals who were involved as subjects. I then examine the methods of interviewing and participant observation.

The next part addresses the limitations and challenges I encountered, particularly those related to language, the "mundanity" of certain experiences, and the unintended consequences of the research, where my presence as a researcher created a space filled with "intimacy and desire." I also discuss ethical issues, focusing on anonymization and safety. The last section introduces the process of analysis and concludes with a reflection on the writing process, providing insight into my approach without prescribing a specific way of reading.

2.1. Ethnographic Ground

This inquiry[87] is distinctly qualitative and characterized by an ethnographic approach to knowledge creation and by an interpretative stance, with the chosen methods serving as instrumental tools. The work presented here embodies ethnography in multiple senses: as a method, and as the final product (that is,, a form of writing)[88] of an ethnographic approach to research (Abu Ghosh et al.

[87] In the dissertation, I use the terms "research" and "inquiry" as synonyms. However, I am aware of the voices that point to the positivist connotations of the word *research* and suggest replacing it with the word *inquiry*, which does not imply finality and authoritative conclusions, but instead offers openness and open-endedness of the exploration process.

[88] Abu Ghosh et al. describe the ethnography as being "[...] always at the same time a method and a genre, a method of inquiry as well as its representation" (2007:9). Gay y Blasco and Wardle problematize an approach to ethnography as mere description or representation: "[...] the ethnographic text tends to be treated as either a vehicle for the transmission of information or a mere literary production: it is rarely considered as an apparatus for the creation of knowledge" (2007: 2).

2007; Coffey, 2018: 2–3). Ethnographic inquiry[89] is usually rooted in the concept of "deep hanging-out"[90] (Geertz 1998). This usually consists of a prolonged and complex immersion into a specific setting, community, organization, movement, or other focal points of the research.

Ethnography, as previously mentioned, encompasses not only a set of techniques (such as interviews, participation in activities, documents collection, photography, or maintaining a field diary) and the final product in the form of an ethnographic report, account, book, or documentary, but also an approach itself. This approach is typically grounded in the principle of "letting oneself be engulfed by the environment and its life," or, to frame it in Malinowski's words, in the principle of "total immersion."

It is of course important to realize that ethnography (or the ethnographic approach) means something slightly different to each of the authors, and in recent years it has been used extensively outside the realm of its origin. These ethnographies differ in their form (and style of writing, or perhaps genre[91]), focus, degree of description, and in a degree of their interpretive character (Denzin 2017). That degree of interpretive character, after all, is the question of what "epistemological, methodological, and political commitments" (Wedeen, 2009: 80) fall under this rubric in the first place.

Thus, in stating that this work is interpretive in its character, I adhere to the characteristics that Wedeen provides to overcome the possible perceived over-elasticity of this term. She names the following four characteristics: "[...] *interpretivists view knowledge, including scientific knowledge, as historically situated and entangled in power relations.* [...] *Second, interpretivists are also constructivists in the sense that they see the world as socially made*, [...] *Third (and related), interpretivists tend to eschew the individualist assumptions that characterize much rational-choice and behaviorist literature*. [...] *Fourth, interpretivists are particularly interested in language and other symbolic systems, in what is sometimes termed "culture" in the literature"* (Ibid.: 80–81).[92]

[89] For the history and development of ethnology and ethnography in the Czech context, see, e.g., Janeček 2014.

[90] Renato Rosaldo is credited by James Clifford with coining the term "deep hanging out" (Clifford, 1996: 5). Clifford uses (Ibid.) the term "intensive dwelling".

[91] For a critical analysis of ethnography as a genre and style of writing, see, e.g., Clifford a Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988.

[92] Italics in original.

All four paradigmatic starting points are important for this dissertation, but I would particularly like to emphasize the third point which highlights a deep commitment to contextuality (which is always simultaneously connected to the other points), because “ideas, beliefs, values, preferences, and decisions are always embedded in a social world, which is constituted through humans' linguistic, institutional, and practical relations with others” (Wedeen 2002 in Wedeen, 2008: 81). My inquiry therefore focuses not only on the statements, opinions, narrations, gestures, desires and preferences of the subjects but also on the landscape (both social and spatial), the legal architecture, and the contours of “doing the state.”

The inquiry repertoire primarily employed techniques of ethnographic interviewing (in-depth interviews), characterized as “conversation with purpose” (Burgess, 1984: 102 in Coffey, 2018: 49), along with participant observation (whose contested nature I discuss below). These two techniques are then linked to the fieldnotes,[93] engaging with subjective impressions, fragments of conversations, poems, memories, as well as perceptions of space, “what is happening right now,” and atmosphere. All these aspects and techniques can be seen as a process of fieldwork where “the ethnographer is a human instrument [...] relying on all senses, thoughts and feelings” (Fetterman 2010: 33), or as Ortner (1995: 173) puts it: “an instrument of knowing.” In this sense, I always consider the ethnographic approach to be at least partly auto-ethnographic:[94] if we are an “instrument of knowing,” and if “the ethnographic stance [...] is as much an intellectual (and moral) positionality, a constructive and interpretive mode, as it is a bodily process in space and time,” (Ibid.) then this corporeality is always inscribed through that “I was there” (Coffey 2018).

[93] For a discussion on fieldnotes see, e.g. Emerson et al. 2011; Sanjek 2019.
[94] See also Reinharz 2011.

On Ethnographic Creation: Writing Someone Else

"We ethnographers cannot help but lie…"
(Fine, 1993: 290)

The sentence opening this subsection is also the last sentence of Gary Alan Fine's article *Ten Lies of Ethnography* (1993). He discusses the assumptions and imperatives to which we are exposed, whether as students or more advanced researchers, through professional training, literature, handbooks, and other requirements of our discipline. He takes a critical look at what he calls the "classic virtues" of ethnographers (namely sympathy, openness, and honour), technical skills, and the challenge of the "ethnographic Self." He replaces commonly used grandiose term such as "myths" or "dilemmas" of ethnographers with simple "lies": because of the requirements of the profession and the academic world, we often hide the underside of the ethnographic work in order to maintain the appearance (better said, the illusion) of pristine work, where a standardized process has arrived at a clear result as its final destination.

The "lies" also refer to another crucial aspect: the creation of an ethnographic portrait and what and whom such a portrait represents. In the Introduction to her book *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (1994), Kamala Visweswaran writes: "[...] ethnography, like fiction, constructs existing or possible worlds, all the while retaining the idea of an alternate 'made' world. Ethnography, like fiction, no matter its pretense to present a self-contained narrative or cultural whole, remains incomplete and detached from the realms to which its points" (Visweswaran, 1994: 1).[95] She later closes the Introduction with the sentence "Fiction, as we know, is political" (Viswerswaran, 1994: 15). In this context, she alludes to James Clifford (1983),[96] recognizing the issues and challenges posed by

[95] Her statement is also in line with the concerns of post-theories in general (see the *Post-theories: Discourse and Power* chapter, in the *Theoretical Terrain* part). In this sense, as Gannon and Davies (2012: 66) write, *"an account, from these perspectives, is always situated. It is an account from somewhere, and some time, and some one, written for some purpose and with a particular audience in mind. It is always therefore a partial and particular account, an account that has its own power to produce new ways of seeing and that should always be open to contestation"* (italics in original). In terms of writing, they continue with the following: "*Particular attention must be paid to the mode of writing, to the discursive strategies through which particular versions of the world are accomplished, especially in the present moment of writing."* (Ibid., italics in original)
[96] On the question of authority, voice, representation and narrative strategies of ethnographers and of ethnographic writing (and broader discussion on "reflexive turn" in anthropology) see the seminal works, e.g., Marcus and Cushman 1982; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Rabinow 1986; Geertz 1988; Rosaldo 1989; Denzin 1997.

the authority of the ethnographic text and its various modes.

Clifford highlighted the politics of representation, emphasizing that ethnographic texts are shaped by power dynamics, cultural biases, and historical contexts. In this light, moving away from the largely abandoned practice of purely descriptive ethnography—whose veiled neutrality often conceals its inherent subjectivity—raises an essential question about my voice in the text. As Coffey (2018:12) aptly puts it: "Ethnography is not only a way of seeing or hearing, but also a way of telling." This process of telling in writing is also a process of "trial and error" (Gay y Blasco and Wardle, 2007: 2).

The authors mentioned above, and many others, address the crisis of representation linked to the critical and reflexive turn in anthropology influenced by postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and feminist theories. This challenge or "crisis" is partially ongoing and manifested in various ways, including experimental forms of ethnographic work, a shift towards autoethnography, the use of more or less fictional writing styles (Fischer 2018), or the creation of "messy texts" (Marcus 1994).[97]

Awareness of issues such as voice, representation, the authority of the text, and the inscription of the ethnographic Self in published work can never be uniformly resolved. However, what can be done is to continually revisit these corrections, influenced by the disciplinary turns, as they inevitably challenge what we perceive as granted, self-evident, inevitable, and tangible. Therefore, as Coffey (2018:21) argues regarding the issue of data: "Data are not 'there', already in existence, simply to be collected up, organized and stored. Rather, ethnographic data are generated through various kinds of interaction with a social setting and/or social actors, crafted through our research practices. Indeed, ethnographic data are all, in some way or another, co-productions between researchers, people in the field and the field itself. Data are made not caught."[98]

In essence, an ethnographer is not a neutral, objective observer letting the data flow through her, which she records, analyses, and interprets (Pavlásek and Nosková 2014). The ethnographer is a co-creator of knowledge, an active participant in what is produced as a sedimented image, despite often presented as mere descriptions. In this respect, reflexivity is "not a choice but a necessity"

[97] On the topic of "poststructuralist ethnography," see, e.g., Britzman 1995, Tsolidis 2008.

[98] In the Czech context, the notion of data creation within qualitative research strategies in the social sciences is highlighted, for example, in the methodological handbook publication by Novotná et al. (2019).

(Stöckelová and Abu Ghosh, 2013: 19). And once again, just as Fine (1993) reminds us that "ethnographers cannot help but lie," we must also accept that the ethnographic text is never a fully transparent window into the world it seeks to represent.

In this regard, my dissertation aspires to acknowledge—albeit still in a limited way—the emotional investments, ethical bargains, missteps, and the aspects of this work that remain unknown. As I touched upon earlier in *On Positionality and Politics of Location*, it also means to explain how the claim "I align with the feminist principles," oriented the way I approached the research. One may wonder, what constitutes a feminist research or feminist researcher?

According to Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), feminist perspectives encompass a broad and intersectional scope, extending beyond research exclusively focused on women.[99] It is crucial to note that not all research on women is inherently feminist; sometimes, it may even be the opposite. Furthermore, claiming a specific method as characteristic of feminist research would be misleading, albeit qualitative methods tend to be more prevalent (Letherby 2003: 81, 96). The diversity within feminisms lies in their varied approaches to ontological and epistemological questions. While feminist researchers may share certain methodological concerns with other social science approaches, framing feminist research and its methodology involves grounding it in feminist theories, politics, and ethics. This includes, among other things, drawing from women's lived experiences, although not exclusively. Such research necessarily engages with the relationships between what is presented as immutable and natural "truth" or "reality," knowledge, power structures, and their interconnectedness (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 15–16).

Following Reinharz's argument (1992: 6), it is necessary to discuss feminism*s* rather than a singular, unified feminism. For instance, I personally distance myself from the feminism of difference, which I perceive as essentializing and, consequently, contradictory to my beliefs.

[99] For a discussion on what feminist ethnography (or ethnography done by feminists respectively) might mean, see e.g. Buch and Staller 2007. The authors provide the following typology that may distinguish feminist ethnographies: "Ethnography focused on women's lives, activities, and experiences; Ethnographic methods or writing styles informed by feminist theories and ethics; Ethnographic analysis that uses a feminist theoretical lens and/or pays particular attention to interplays between gender and other forms of power and difference" (Buch and Staller, 2007: 190).

Reinharz therefore decides to use the criterion of self-identification, which is in line with the "feminist spirit" (Reinharz, 1992: 7). That is, the criterion is whether the person conducting the research considers herself to be "a feminist doing research," and she follows by stating that "this approach rejects the notion of a transcendent authority that decides what constitutes 'feminist', consistent with the antihierarchical nature of many feminist organizations […]" (Reinharz, 1992: 7). In this sense, feminism is understood not as a method or distinct methodology but rather as a perspective or worldview which informs and guides the conducted research. At the same time, as Liz Stanley (1990: 14) describes, "feminism is not merely a perspective, a way of seeing; nor even this plus an epistemology, a way of knowing; it is also an ontology, a way of being in the world." To this I would add that once this perspective is integrated, once it becomes an inherent ontological attribute, it can no longer be "un-seen".

By identifying myself as a "feminist doing research," I would like to explicitly align with a feminist scholarship that played an important role in making visible the marginalized, unheard, and neglected voices of individuals, communities, and collectives. Hence, my aim is to continue its legacy not only by drawing on the theories and concepts but also by reflecting its values in my methodological choices. This means creating a space where the voices of the research subjects are central, while remaining conscious of my role in shaping the production of knowledge, that is, "being accountable for what and how we have the power to see" (Castor, 1991: 64 in Gannon and Davies, 2012: 66).

2. 2. Field and Subjects

If, in the introductory part of this part, I wrote about immersion and "deep hanging-out," it is necessary to connect this *hanging-out* as a combination of activity and inactivity to the notion of fieldwork and explain the meanings of both words in my approach, that is, both *field* and *work*. The term fieldwork can be understood as a process of staying-being (which can be both physical and virtual, depending on the nature of the subject of the research, for example in the case of netnography or digital ethnography) in a certain environment (research setting) within which data collection (and in my approach rather data *creation*) takes

place. Coffey (2018:19) then states that "[...] fieldwork here refers to the act of immersion in that setting, of 'doing' ethnography as an act of practice."

Work, in my case, meant living with heightened sensitivity and receptivity to one's surroundings, essentially involving being in a particular environment and subjectively recording it through fieldnotes. This was connected to ethnographic interviewing and participant observation.[100] All these components were interconnected and shaped in *the field*. But what constituted that field? What were its boundaries (if any), and whose movements and lives was I observing within it?

Gupta and Ferguson (1996) critique the silence surrounding the "mystical space" character of the field in anthropology and ethnographic modes of inquiry. They point out that, while the notion of field and fieldwork is almost synonymous with socio-cultural anthropology and ethnography, its assumptions and configurations are rarely subjected to scrutiny or acknowledged. What we consider or delineate as a field necessarily determines the limits of our knowledge; its identification—or, conversely, its elusiveness or expansiveness—entails a set of serious questions. One such question might be, for example, the entry to and exit from the field.

While some handbooks of qualitative research, particularly those on ethnography, speak of entering the field as a matter of routine,[101] Gupta and Ferguson challenged the construction of the field as distanced from being *here*, at *home*, in the *familiar*, simply because "the passage in and out of 'the field' rests on the idea that different cultures inhere in discrete and separate places. Therefore, to go into 'the field' is to travel to another place with its own distinctive culture, to live there is to enter another world, and to come back from 'the field' is to leave that world and arrive in this one—the one in which the academy is located" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1996: 35).

They argue that the traditional commitment to "the field" has significant implications, both in terms of the knowledge it produces and the disciplinary subject it creates which possesses its own political engagement (Ibid.: 38). For this reason, they suggest directing attention towards "shifting locations rather than

[100] For the discussion on the contested nature of the practice of participant observation see the *Participant Observation* section.

[101] This is not to say that these handbooks do not discuss how to gain access; they, indeed, address topics such as gatekeepers and the possibility of participation. Rather, as Gupta and Ferguson's text shows, the field—or more precisely, its construction, the reasons for its selection, and its focus—has long been either completely overlooked or only mentioned in passing. As such, it becomes an issue *per se*.

bounded fields." Thus, our inquiry and ethnographic movement, that is, what we might refer to with Stöckelová and Abu Ghosh (2013), as the "process of *ethnographing*," need not take shape in a microcosm of one place (or one group) with clearly defined boundaries, but it can materialize in a rhythm of interlocking and shifting positions and locations (both physical and symbolic). This also means that what we call "the field" exists only as far as its perimeter as constructed by us reaches. In this respect, the field is always also a *decision*.

What implications might arguments made by Gupta and Ferguson hold for this work? As is evident in section *Towards the Dissertation's Topic*, I was mentally in "the field" long before there was physical residence in the place, and the idea of this field was formed over many years of my previous trips to Israel and Palestine. The geographical locations for me were the cities of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv (described in the chapter *Topography of Locations: Shabbat Shalom, Ramadan Kareem*), where I lived from from mid-2022 to mid-2023. In an ideal world, the research would have taken much longer but was limited mainly by financial constraints and study obligations. At the same time, as Coffey (1999, 2018) suggests, we never truly leave the field: it becomes a part of our personal history and we revisit the field through emotional and intellectual attachments; rather, the fieldwork is simply terminated.

Beyond the geographical locations, the field was then defined by the subjects of the research. In this respect, my entry and access were reasonably simple and unproblematic: in both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, I already had personal connections and friends who either identified themselves as secular or, at least from an outside perspective, led lives that one could describe as "secular" (not attending synagogue, not observing religious regulations related to holidays, etc.). Hence, there were no gatekeepers through whom I had to negotiate my entry and access.[102]

[102] This unproblematic access does not extend to entry and exit from the State of Israel itself. The analysis of the politics of categorizing and determining the degree of "dangerousness" of a particular person would far exceed the scope of this dissertation. Considering my positionality, I limit myself to stating that I encountered no major issues, particularly upon entering the country due to my affiliation with Tel Aviv University as a visiting research fellow. Simultaneously, my Czech citizenship and other markers (such as appearance, behaviour, and the absence of stamps from "problematic countries" in my passport) allowed me to move in a privileged manner. Paradoxically, leaving the country was more challenging. As a female solo traveler who had spent a considerable amount of time in the country, with tattoos and no family present, I aroused more suspicion.

This simplicity, however, had a downside (which I discuss in greater detail in the *Challenge of a Mundane* section, in chapter *Limitations, Challenges, and Side Effects*): the field, especially in Tel Aviv, was very wide, one might say sprawling, and it was often challenging to be aware of the axes of what might be significant. In Jerusalem, the field was more confined though: in Tel Aviv, "secularity" was a kind of a default setting, whereas in Jerusalem people spoke of secular circles as of a "community" or "small village" where everyone knows everyone. The extent to which these descriptions reflect reality may be speculative and less relevant, but it is important that the recurrent statements were rooted in the subjects' own perceptions and consciousness: after all, this should not be merely a comparison of locations and their "localities," but rather an examination of their dialogical positioning (as presented in the *Dialogical Windows: Jerusalem-Tel Aviv Axis* section). In the *Topography of Locations: Shabbat Shalom, Ramadan Careem* chapter, I use this sprawling "secular" character of Tel Aviv as a diagnostic tool for locating invisible normativity.

I have already indicated which category of subjects defined the field of inquiry (and thus which subjects were made visible through it): secular Israeli Jews. However, the following question arises: When I discussed in the theoretical chapter *Postsecular Search for Secular Subject* the possibilities of the "secular" subject, it may seem paradoxical to insist on the claimed secularity of the people on whom this research focuses. In other words, why, despite the acknowledged incoherence and de-essentialization of the possible category of a "secular subject," do I make it the category on which to base the inquiry? To answer this question, I need to provide a brief overview of Israel's internal categorization of the subjects.

The first two requirements for a subject of the dissertation—being Jewish and Israeli—were not particularly problematic to identify, as the State of Israel itself establishes these categorizations.[103] Regarding the question of "who is a Jew," the state defers to Orthodox rabbinic authority and *halacha*: a Jew is defined as someone born to a Jewish mother (that is, a woman who was also born to a

[103] It is important to mention, though, that the categories used in registers, censuses, and sociological surveys often contribute to the creation of the identities they reference. Conversely, the absence of certain categories implies a state of non-recognition. This has significant and often very real implications, as identity politics is shaped by these classifications. Governments rely on these figures to understand the needs of specific communities (i.e., minority groups), determining funding and support accordingly. Additionally, there is often confusion between religion and ethnicity categories, and these categories are used erroneously. See e.g. Webber 1997; Tilly 1998; Eisenberg and Kymlicka 2011; Day and Lee 2014. For the discussion on ethnicity, categorization and groupism, see Brubaker et al. 2004.

Jewish mother, and so forth; all on the condition that such a person is not of another religion) or who has undergone a religious conversion[104] recognized by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and accepted by the Ministry of Interior.

Israeli citizens (that is the part of the categorization that is linked to citizenship) are listed in the Population registry (and formerly also in the compulsory identity card, *teudat zehut*[105]) under three distinct categories: citizenship[106] (*ezrahut*), nationality[107] (*le'om*), and religion (*dat*). Israeli Jews have "Jewish" (*yehudi*[108]) listed as their nationality,[109] and also "Jewish" (*yehudi*) under the religion section. Unlike in some other countries—including the Czech Republic—Israeli Jews seeking to officially declare themselves as without

[104] While I mentioned that the first two prerequisites for determining the subjects were not particularly problematic that does not mean they are without their own challenges. While defining the subjects of my work I was essentially mirroring the state's identity politics. Indeed, the state itself defines who its subjects are, as this determination is central to the question of what constitutes the "nation-state of the Jewish people" (Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People), or simply, the "Jewish state." However, the very question of "who is a Jew" and which conversion (under what authority) is recognized, stirs up great emotions and divisions. For instance, if an individual is already an Israeli citizen (or holds a permanent residency status) but is not considered *halachically* Jewish, state, i.e. Orthodox, conversion is usually the only path available to them (under the Conversion Authority as a part of the Prime Minister's Office. For more information, see the official website https://www.gov.il/en/pages/aboutconversion, last accessed 10. 6. 2025). In contrast, outside Israel, non-citizens can convert through reform, liberal and conservative streams of Judaism, which are subsequently recognized in Israel for citizenship purposes since 2021 (albeit with exemptions and challenges since the recognition of such conversions is not automatic). While such a conversion may meet the requirements for citizenship, it might not suffice for the Chief Rabbinate in matters such as marriage.

[105] In my experience, most people are unaware of the exact details listed on their identity cards. Similarly, people are uncertain about the information recorded about them in the population registry.

[106] On the Israeli politics of citizenship, see e.g. Peled 2008; Herzog 2018; Shapira 2018.

[107] The Hebrew word *le'om* is translated into English as nationality or nationhood, but it can also refer to peoplehood, ethnicity, ethnic group, or ethnic community, and it is often understood in these terms. Since 2005, the Israeli identity card no longer lists nationality; this information is now recorded only in the population registry, which is accessible to authorities. For individuals whose "Jewishness" according to *halacha* is in question (but sufficient for gaining citizenship), their country of origin is listed as their nationality.

[108] In Hebrew, *yehudi* is used both as a noun (Jew) and as an adjective (Jewish).

[109] Nationality and citizenship may or may not overlap. In the Czech Republic, citizenship reflects the relationship to the state, while nationality is a personal choice made by the citizen and is part of the declaratory section in the census. There is also an option not to declare any nationality. Additionally, in the Czech Republic, it is permissible to declare dual nationality. In contrast, in Israel, the situation differs significantly: nationality is not determined by the individual's free choice but is ascribed by the state authorities from the list of recognized nationalities. Individuals who are Jews *halachically* have "Jewish" listed in the nationality section. Those who do not qualify as *halachic* Jews but are Israeli citizens under the Law of Return and related legislation (including family unification) have their country of origin specified as their nationality (e.g., Czech, Russian, American). In 2013, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that it is not possible to list "Israeli" as nationality in the population registry (the main appellant was prof. Uzzi Ornan: Ornan v. Ministry of the Interior, CA 8573/08). Introducing Israeli nationality would carry significant implications as it would contradict a fundamental principle of Israel as a "Jewish" (Jewish nation) state. For the discussion on the Israeli legal system and identity, see, e.g., Kedar 2019. For more on the topic of nationality and citizenship in Israel, see, e.g., Handelman 1994.

religion must pursue this intention through the courts.[110]

Based on my own—and therefore limited—experience, many people have internalized the state-imposed categories to such an extent that only a few would identify as a Jew/Jewish unless they conform to the Orthodox interpretation of Jewish identity. It was common, for instance, to hear individuals specify: "*I have a Jewish ancestry.*" This indicated that they did not meet the *halachic* requirement of matrilineality or recognized conversion, yet they were Israeli citizens by virtue of the conditions outlined in the Law of Return[111] and Citizenship Law.

The State of Israel employs a religious, Orthodox interpretation to determine who is a Jew, with religious authorities integrated into state structures. This definition forms the core of state's identity politics. However, it operates on a double-track: being recognized as a *halachic* Jew is crucial in personal matters (who can marry whom and how, the status of children or burial requirements). Yet, being recognized as a *halachic* Jew is not a requirement for the right of return and gaining citizenship. Secularity, or "being secular," on the other hand, is neither a state category nor a religious one, though inherently linked to both.

I approach "being secular" in Israel as one of the available modes of self-identification and as a relation between the subject, other subjects, and the state and, by extension, "religion" through which the claimed "ethnic" component is determined. Being secular may or may not entail also being a secularist—thus taking an ideological stance in favor of secularism.[112]

Drawing on the theoretical premises outlined in the first part of the dissertation, we do not know what "secularity"[113] is, nor would it be productive to seek a concrete, pre-theoretical, or pre-discursive essence of it. Secularity does not exist as a fixed reality "out there in the world." However, once it is constructed discursively as a self-sufficient category and begins to permeate consciousness as an available framework for subject formation (an available configuration of subject interpellation), individuals become aware of it and live through this

[110] There is a well-known case of the writer Yoram Kaniuk from 2011, an Israeli Jew, who sought a court order to have the religion section of the Interior Ministry's registry state that he is without religion. In Israel, obtaining such a court ruling requires supporting evidence. This decision then serves as official proof for the Ministry of Interior. This case has paved the way for individuals who identify as Jewish solely based on "ethnicity" (nationality) rather than religious affiliation. At the same time, however, if one adopts another religion, they cease to be a Jew by nationality/ethnicity in Israel.

[111] Under this law, it is sufficient to have one grandparent who was recognized as a *halachic* Jew (and not to be of any other religion) to be granted citizenship (see, e.g., Gavison 2010).

[112] See the *Postsecular Search for Secular Subject* chapter in the theoretical part.

[113] In the sense of the dichotomy "this is secular, this is religious."

category. We can then investigate the conditions under which secularity is constructed in a particular context and examine its genealogy (Asad 2003; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008), how it is achieved, performed, experienced, or felt as a sensibility (Pellegrini 2009).

Therefore, what unites the subjects here is not the external aspect (for example, the secular subject in my work would be all those who do not observe *Shabbat* and do not fast on *Yom Kippur*), but the process of ideological interpellation and submission to it in Althusser's sense. I considered this approach as the only way to initiate the exploration of secular subjectivities or secularities for my inquiry. For the purpose of the interviews, the subjects, then, were those who responded to the hailing of *"Hey, you, secular Israeli Jew!"* turned around and said, *"Yes, that's me."*

Returning to the notion of "deep hanging-out in the field," one might—rightly so—ask *with whom I did not hang out* and conduct in-depth interviews. Many might initially think of the obvious contrasts: "Jew" versus "Arab," Israeli versus Palestinian, secular Jew versus Ultra-Orthodox Jew. These binaries, however, are insufficient: not all individuals see "Jew" and "Arab" as mutually exclusive,[114] and "Israeli" and "Palestinian" are not always oppositional. Even religious observance—ranging from ultra-Orthodox to secular—exists on a continuum and spectrum rather than as fixed categories. So, to answer the question of whom I did not hang out with, I instead want to trace how the topography of locations becomes a canvas for the local politics of identity.[115]

Considering the nature of my research questions and focus, I spent most of my time in places, businesses, and venues "my" interlocutors and friends visited. In Jerusalem, for example, this meant that these locations were mostly outside East Jerusalem neighborhoods and only rarely included the Old City, or highly religious areas such as *Mea Shearim*. These places were not part of their everyday movement, and when visited, it was with specific intent: to buy vine leaves and herbs from Palestinian women near Damascus Gate leading to the Muslim Quarter, to participate in Friday demonstrations in *Sheikh Jarrah*—where human rights groups, Jewish Israelis, and local Palestinians protest the eviction of Palestinian families from disputed properties—or to visit *Mea Shearim* to give

[114] See the footnote n. 25.
[115] See the *Topography of Locations: Shabbat Shalom, Ramadan Kareem* chapter in the third, "ethnographic" part.

me, as someone who had never been there before, a sense of its atmosphere. One of my friends told me that his usual running route used to include a Palestinian village connected to Jerusalem. Midway through his run, he would stop to buy *knafeh*[116] there, which he considered the best in the Jerusalem area. However, since May 2021, when a wave of violence erupted—particularly in cities known as mixed cities—he has been afraid to return.

The local politics of identity inscribe itself to districts and to the topography: depending on where one lives, people can quickly assess an approximate social and economic status, family background, level of religious observance, and even political orientation. For instance, whether someone is from a *kibbutz* (and from which type of *kibbutz)*, an urban neighborhood shaped by intra-ethnic divisions, or a settlement speaks volumes. These assumptions are further informed by visual cues—such as clothing style—and linguistic markers, including accents, even when speaking Hebrew. I was wondering if, in the case of people who were born in Israel and speak Hebrew fluently, it is possible to tell if Hebrew is not the first language spoken in their household (for example, if it is clearly audible that Arabic is the first language). I have been told that it is almost always recognizable, and the connotations associated with this fact then influence further interpersonal interactions. There can also be impression management present: at any given moment, one knows who to whom one is talking to, and on certain topics, one might avoid starting the conversation to prevent an awkward moment. After all, language is political in certain contexts, as illustrated in the following situation I wrote down to my field diary:

> Oren takes me to the Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center, a pontifical institute for Christian pilgrims that includes a hotel and a restaurant. It stands just outside the Old City, near the New Gate. Oren wants to show me the view from its rooftop—we can see much of the Old City and East Jerusalem. When he orders us prosecco and salad, Oren does so in English, despite being fluent in Hebrew and knowing the waiters speak Hebrew too. When I ask him why, he explains, "*You know, language is a political issue here, and I can tell that Hebrew is not their first language—Arabic is. I don't want to draw unnecessary attention to us. In*

[116] Traditional dessert made from pastry dough, cheese and syrup.

Jerusalem, you always have to think carefully about how you're going to speak and to whom."

In the same vein, the Czech interlocutor whom I interviewed for the dissertation, providing a perspective on life in Israel with a secular Jewish partner, told me:

"I have lived here for 10 years. But my Hebrew is still very basic. And I want it to stay that way because then I can pass as a foreigner to everyone and be treated as such. Then you can pass among different groups of people living here."

These cumulative perspectives show how language, identity, and perceptions are strategically managed and navigated in everyday social encounters to "smooth" any possible tension.

I did hang out with many people, but the subtle distinctions of "who is who"—so obvious to locals—were not always crystal clear to me as an outsider. And yes, while the social tapestry in Israel is undeniably diverse, there is something revealing in the findings of the previously mentioned Pew Research Center survey (2016): most secular Israeli Jews have their close friends within secular circles. Mirroring this reality, I did not visit "Arab" or ultra-Orthodox Jewish households, nor did I live in homes owned by "Arabs" or ultra-Orthodox Jews, although the interlocutors may have had colleagues or friends from these segments of the society at work or at university. This brings us to the question of "who was absent from the scene," a question that is both significant and telling. Sometimes, absence can be more "symptomatic" than presence. Whose presence or absence in the field was most noticeable, and how the topography shaped the possibilities and limits of establishing intimate relationships, are questions I explore in the third part of the dissertation.

Interlocutors, Friends, and Informants

Another aspect I would like to address regarding the subjects of this study is the used terminology. I use the term "subject" as a theoretical designation for the individuals involved in the dissertation, reflecting the process of subjectification, that is, the process of becoming a subject (explored in the chapter

Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories). The term "subject," in this sense, encompasses a broader scope than the term "interlocutor," which serves as a concrete manifestation of the subject.

I refer to individuals with whom I conducted in-depth interviews as interlocutors: individuals who were aware of my research and primarily engaged with me for research purposes. The term interlocutor has its etymological roots in Latin (*interloqui*), meaning "to speak between." Thus, it reflects the interactive and dialogic nature of the conversation and emphasizes the co-creation of meaning between the sides of the conversation. This dialogical co-creativity also refers to the nature of the data that is created at the moment of its expression. To illustrate it, here is part of one interview:

"*I wouldn't talk about these things with most Israelis; everyone has their own opinion. But because you're an outsider, I can think about these things, express these thoughts, and make some order for myself of who I am. I don't process it every day*."

However, I also considered alternative labels, including "agents." Despite its connotation of the subject's agency, symbolically empowering the individuals, I dismissed it due to its associations with other contexts and colloquial usages (e.g., agent of the state, secret agent, etc.). Regarding the focus on intimate partnerships, I see the label "communication partner" as confusing, as the term "partner" could carry multiple meanings. The commonly employed term "participant" might appear suitable; however, I recognize that the individuals I interviewed did not have a complete control over the co-creation of the meanings I ascribe to them in the analytical and discussion-interpretive sections. Consequently, by refraining from the term participant, I acknowledge my dominance in the process of meaning-making, understanding that the ideal scenario would involve a more collaborative approach. Lastly, the term "protagonist," often employed in narrative approaches to qualitative research and storytelling, did not align semantically and contextually in the final assessment.

Other terms I use in the course of the work are "informant" and "friend." The term "informant" refers to people who shared information, opinions, and snippets of stories with me. However, these were not individuals who consciously

and consensually participated in the research; our interactions were not explicitly framed by the research purpose, and they were often unaware of my position as a researcher and did not provide explicit consent for the research. At the same time, whenever I was asked, I always shared the purpose of my stay and the focus of the dissertation.

Indeed, the term “friend” means what it says: these were individuals with whom I did have a friendly, often very close, relationship. They were aware of the reason for my stay in Israel, even though our interaction was not primarily research-oriented but a friendly one. Explicit consent for research was also not obtained from them. At the same time, they were the ones who often overlapped with the research subjects as a category, even though the element of that interpellative turn that I described above was (sometimes) missing. Simultaneously, it was through them that I primarily experienced “secular Jewish” life in the field. Therefore, I also use their statements and views in the third part to provide as plastic a picture as possible.

However, it should be noted that even this plasticity has its limits: by being my friends, they constituted my “social bubble.” It is perhaps understandable that we are friends mainly with people with whom we may not agree in detail, but at the same time somehow reflect our worldview and value orientation.[117] Thus, people who, though secular Israeli Jews, have fundamentally different political views than I do necessarily fall out of this “bubble.” In this regard, it is essential to consider that among the voices of friends, for example, there may not be strongly right-wing views in the context of Israeli politics. The resulting picture could then give the impression that such views are not present among secular Israeli Jews, which would distort the actual situation on the ground in this sense.

I should also mention that, with two exceptions,[118] I did not conduct

---

[117] This might also provide an explanation for the prevalent in-group “secular” friendships, as mentioned earlier (Pew Research Center 2016)

[118] Regarding the exceptions mentioned: one involves an Israeli woman I met in the Czech Republic years ago. We have maintained a friendly, though sporadic, contact through social media. I had little knowledge of her personal attitudes, family history, or relationships, similar to her limited knowledge about mine. Thus, I included her in the research interviews. The second is a Czech friend from Prague, known for many years but only superficially. Therefore, I was unaware of her experiences living in Israel with a secular Jewish partner and children. This introduction of a level of familiarity and knowledge of their lives may seem like an attempt to create a veneer of objectivity and neutrality. As repeatedly noted throughout the dissertation, I draw on feminist-informed critiques of research and knowledge production that emphasize the illusion of detachment and objectivity (Oakley 1981, Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002). At the same time, my fieldwork has made me aware that the more familiar I become with certain individuals and more deeply I understand the topic, the greater was the risk of losing the necessary curiosity—the ability

research interviews with individuals who were initially my friends. However, after the interviews, some of my interlocutors became my friends—mostly because we were already moving around and meeting regularly at the same places, cultural events, and in the same venues, pubs, and cafes. Additionally, some were already friends of my friends, especially in Jerusalem. But altering the status of an interlocutor to that of a friend had methodological implications. The question arose: How should I label them in the final text given this reclassification? The decision was as follows: once they transitioned from strangers to friends, they are referred to as friends in the text. This approach serves the purpose of distinguishing when they entered the research space consciously and with consent (as interlocutors), and when the dynamics of our relationship were already under different conditions.

The final point I want to address regarding the influence of subjects and the field on the way the resulting text is presented is that all the conversations, experiences, statements, and situations were accessible to me *through* and *because of* my positionality and through the perspectives of specific people I interacted with. Had my positionality been different—whether influenced by my religious affiliation, country of origin, physical dis/ability, or any other potentially relevant factor—I would likely have had a different spatial and interpersonal experience. The alignment of specific subjects, spatial conditions, and my positionality worked in my favor in terms of accessibility.

Time Frame and Ruptures

To avoid an ahistorical approach, I want to present a timeline of the research: I conducted the research from mid-2022 to mid-2023. This period was marked by the formation of the new Israeli government with the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu. Following the government's formation, the Justice Minister Yariv Levin presented an ambitious agenda of a judicial overhaul in early January 2023. Critics of the judicial overhaul plan perceived it as an erosion of the country's system of "checks and balances." For many of the interlocutors, informants, and friends, this period of heightened tensions meant also

to question anew, to approach matters from different angles, and to remain open to surprise and counterintuitive readings. For this reason, I sought to conduct most of my interviews with people who were initially "strangers" to me.

re-evaluation of their positions, identities, and perspectives on "being Jewish" in the "Jewish state."

The response from civil society to the announced reform unfolded with impressive strength: the protests and demonstrations were widespread, concentrated in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, although they became regular in other cities as well. The judicial overhaul plan and its potential consequences highlighted the internal divisions within Israeli society, and followed multiple axes: religious, ethnic, intra-ethnic, economic, and, of course, political. People with whom I "hung out" often attended the protests and demonstrations, and the situation, along with the questions about the future of the state, started to dominate most of the conversations.

This shift was also visible in the conducted interviews. While I initially asked about life in Israel in general, or about what it means for them to be "Jewish" and/or "secular," interlocutors, since 2023, increasingly oriented the topics of the interview towards the government, protests, and "religious" coercion. For these interlocutors, the coercion was perceived as twofold: from the Religious-Zionist camp, which became part of the governmental coalition and represented stricter positions to "Arabs" and Palestinian territories, providing an increased support for the Israeli settlements in occupied territories, and from the ultra-religious camp, which they saw as an economic burden—one that does not serve in the army and does not contribute enough to the Israeli collective. This context is important for understanding the conditions of the interviews and the "ethnographic scenes" presented in the third part of this dissertation.

2. 3. In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews (Reinharz 1992; Rubin and Rubin 1995; Atkinson and Hammersley 1997; Atkinson 1998; Heyl 2001; Hesse-Biber 2007; Brinkmann and Kvale 2008, 2018; Johnson and Rowlands 2012) were a crucial method to the presented study. As I previously mentioned, interviews are usually seen as purposeful conversations, with that purpose typically determined by only one party (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). Primarily, this purpose revolves around gathering and collecting (creating) data. However, even here, I prefer to maintain the perspective in which data are not simply seen as "facts," but as messages,

discourses, meanings, symbols, and narratives that are contextual, never fully expressed, and open to interpretation, emerging through the dialogue between two and more parties. At the same time, the communication partners themselves (whether we call them interlocutors, respondents, or interviewees) are recognized as having a narrative agency through which they participate in the enterprise of interview's meaning-making and are not seen merely as repositories of information that the researcher wants to discover. Rather, the interlocutor is "in a phrase, 'always already' a storyteller." (Gubrium and Holstein, 2012: 33).

In-depth interviews represent open-ended conversations wherein the aim is not solely "extraction" but rather a dynamic process between the researcher and the interlocutor. This process serves to gain insights into the interlocutor's experiences, self-narratives, and perspectives. In this sense, "interview can no longer be viewed as a discrete event, the straightforward result of asking questions and receiving answers [...] [*since*] the resulting 'data' [*are*] being as much a product of interview participants' collaborative efforts as of the experiences under consideration" (Borer and Fontana, 2012: 57). Borer and Fontana further quote Paul Rabinow's description of the informant-researcher relationship in ethnography as presented in his *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977) and apply this description to the relationship between a researcher and an interlocutor during interviews: "The common understanding they construct is fragile and thin, but it is upon this shaky ground that anthropological inquiry proceeds" (Rabinow, 1977: 39 in Borer and Fontana, 2012: 58). This "shaky ground" suggests the delicacy and fragility of the relationship between the parties, evoking a certain "magic" in the interview's momentum when something unintended and previously unacknowledged is communicated. It shows how such revelations may occur uniquely within the particular interview setting and unlikely to emerge elsewhere, to someone else, or under different circumstances.

Process, Locations and Language

I approached potential interlocutors primarily through Facebook, especially through the *Secret Jerusalem* and *Secret Tel Aviv* groups.[119] The public

[119] In fact, these "secret groups" are among the most widely used communication channels for the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv on Facebook: Secret Jerusalem has nearly 150,000 members as of this writing (2024), and Secret Tel Aviv has nearly 513,000 members.

posts, which varied slightly, essentially communicated: "*I'm a Ph.D. student from the Czech Republic, looking for secular Israeli Jews willing to discuss their lives, intimate relationships, and dating experiences in Israel with me*." However, not all initiated contacts resulted in interviews; some ceased responding, scheduling was difficult, and occasionally, the motivation behind the interest to be interviewed seemed "shady." Here, I would like to pause once more and discuss the narrative agency of interlocutors and the question of a "conversation with a purpose."

It is clear that the initiative for the interview comes from the researcher, but whom this initiative reaches and why is another question. The narrative agency of interlocutors extends beyond shaping their own narration and actively participating in the interview; it also involves their motivations for accepting the label and "interpellation" (becoming the subject of the interview) and engaging in this creative joint endeavor. When I speak of genuine research interest, I refer to the evident curiosity displayed by some interlocutors—those who explicitly expressed interest in experiencing the interview process firsthand. Others were motivated by a desire to help a student-researcher, while some saw it as an opportunity to "speak out" and advocate, sharing their experiences in a world that often perceives Israel only through the lens of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I frequently encountered this motivation outside of interviews as well—people seeking to convey a life beyond the black-and-white portrayal in the media.

Some interlocutors approached the interview as a social "experiment" of their own and were also interested in me personally. This highlights that the interview is not driven solely by the researcher's interest; the agency of the interlocutor is expressed through their own purpose and motivation. Nevertheless, I refrained from interviews that intuitively made me feel uncomfortable or that would require me to strongly defend my personal boundaries of safety and ethics.

Another way of establishing rapport developed organically through casual conversations in cafés or pubs: strangers often asked about my background and purpose in Israel once I started to speak in English. After learning about my research, those who identified with the criteria usually volunteered to participate or suggested friends and colleagues. This is a practice known in qualitative research as the "snowball method" or technique. Among the interlocutors were four individuals I had previously known to varying degrees (as explained in the

Composition of Interlocutors section), including acquaintances and friends of friends. Whenever someone was recommended to me as a potential interlocutor, I consistently clarified that my study focused specifically on "secular Israeli Jews." The decision to identify as fitting this description, however, was ultimately left to them (as discussed previously).

Most interviews lasted around 1 hour, with the maximum duration reaching 3.5 hours. Firstly, I communicated to the interlocutors that the interview would be recorded, transcribed, and anonymized to the utmost extent for the purpose of writing the dissertation and any subsequent publications (with all names altered). The non-anonymized version of the transcript would be accessible only to myself and my supervisor. I also emphasized that they are under no obligation to answer any question that made them uncomfortable and I provided an option to skip it.

Additionally, I assured them of the option to retrospectively withdraw consent. Everyone I interviewed had been in contact with me, either through Facebook, WhatsApp, or email. The option to withdraw consent was thus readily available. Informed consent was primarily obtained verbally, with the exception of one case where written consent was necessary due to the interlocutor's concerns about potential de-anonymization and military-related complications. In this case, I was the one giving the written "stipulation" to him about the use of the recording.

I have opted for verbal consent because I believe that requiring a formalized written document at the outset of the researcher-interlocutor interaction establishes a hierarchical and formal dynamic, which is potentially disrupting for the development of an intimate and trustworthy conversational bond (Marzano, 2012: 446). Marzano challenges the notion of informed consent as merely a "facade of ethics," arguing against "the claim that all ethical issues have been definitively resolved simply by the introduction of a printed form" (Ibid.: 445). Throughout the inquiry, we encounter much broader ethical dilemmas, such as ensuring the safety of participants, and also the ethics of representation through the text of the resulting ethnography.

The interviews did not have a pre-prepared script and questions; I only had an outline of the themes I wished to cover (personal meaning of "Jewishness," "Israeliness," and "secularity" and relationships in a broad meaning) but I left a

wide room in the interview for the interlocutors' narrations, which is an advantage of an unstructured in-depth interview (Janeček, 2014: 86). The interlocutors themselves then partly influenced which direction the interview took and what topics emerged as important to them. Indeed, a pre-structured or semi-structured interview script has its advantages too: themes and narratives can then be more easily compared or quantified. Unstructured in-depth interviews, however, bring heuristic moments that could not have been anticipated and can shed new light or direction on the conducted research in important ways.

An example of this is an interview that very soon after it began became essentially a monologic lecture on Hebrew as a symbolic and metaphorical language of the Bible,[120] on respect for tradition and culture, on the concept of God, and so forth. As I explained in *Introduction,* it would often seem that *being secular* inherently contains a rejection of these things. This may or may not be the case: it may involve a rejection of externally imposed (by the state and/or environment) reinterpretations of concepts that are dear to the subject, but it is precisely these power-laden reinterpretations that then merit ideological rejection.[121]

The lack of strict structure and the heightened narrative agency of the interlocutors unsurprisingly place greater demands on the researcher's sensitivity and require a harmonization of sometimes conflicting needs. These included my own specific research interests and the necessity of covering certain topics, the interlocutors' willingness—or reluctance—to engage, their need for space and sufficient time to express themselves, and the practical constraints of fatigue, which made it increasingly difficult for one party to continue the conversation. In such cases, I gradually guided the discussion to a close.

My final question always asked whether there was anything else the interlocutor wanted to mention or discuss—something I might not have brought up or given sufficient space for during the conversation. Only a few took advantage of this opportunity, but when they did, their responses often provided valuable insights. These moments were particularly revealing, as they highlighted

[120] I use "Bible" here because that is the term the interlocutor used instead of simply *Torah*. My impression was that he used the term "Bible" to make it more understandable for me as coming from a perceived Christian background. See the *Secularity as Personal Autonomy* section in the *Tropology: Being a "Secular Jew"* subchapter in the third part.

[121] See the chapter *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter in the third part of the dissertation.

the issues that personally troubled them, held significance for them, or where they felt my engagement had been insufficient.

I provided most of my interlocutors with the option to choose the meeting location[122] and presented the following alternatives: at their home, at my place, or at a quiet café conducive to recording. Many chose either their homes or a café as the interview location. Just as the interview and its dynamics are not neutral, neither is its setting. A majority chose their homes, thereby opening the door to two dimensions of privacy: the inner privacy revealed during the interview and the outer, spatial privacy of their homes. I preferred this quiet and safe space over a café because it facilitated discussions about personal and intimate matters without the risk of being overheard. Simultaneously, it provided the flexibility to conclude the conversation and leave when I sensed that the topics had been sufficiently covered or when the discussion naturally reached its conclusion. Other reasons to leave arose too, which is a point I will return to shortly.

Nevertheless, I was afraid that my arrival might add to the interlocutors' worries, such as concerns about cleaning or providing refreshments. However, those concerns proved mostly unfounded. In fact, during one interview, I ended the conversation prematurely due to an overwhelming mess, and I felt horrible because of that. The self-blame arose from the feeling that, for the sake of the interview, I should not have been overly sensitive to the mess and that I should have "survived it." There was another interview which I ended prematurely. The interlocutor was speaking incoherently, stammering and tapping his foot anxiously. Simultaneously, frustration, impatience, and eventually anger bubbled up inside me. *It's going to be a nightmare trying to rewrite this chaos!* It illustrates the fact that the process of an interview can encounter numerous pitfalls, including practical challenges and more nuanced ones such as mutual assumptions, perceptions, expectations, prejudices, and interpersonal "chemistry."

There were instances where I encountered interlocutors whom I had not known beforehand—individuals with no connection to any of my friends or acquaintances, such as those who reached back to me via Facebook. In these cases, prioritizing safety, I avoided suggesting private meeting places. The gendered dimension of fieldwork[123] came into play here.

[122] For broader discussion on the interview location, its social meaning and implications, see Herzog 2012. For broader discussion on interviewing as a "craft," see e.g. Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti and McKinney 2012. For feminist interview research see e.g. Reinharz 1992.
[123] For gender reflections of the fieldwork, see, e.g., Bell, Kaplan and Karim 1993.

A female researcher frequently encounters distinct challenges, or more aptly put, specific obstacles compared to her male counterparts (and, of course, researchers who do not conform to the heteronormative framework of the male/female binary also contend with unique and highly specific challenges and risks). This encompasses considerations related to personal safety and the potential of gendered or sexual violence. To address these concerns, I initiated each interview by reiterating the research-oriented purpose of the meeting and the interview. This reiteration served to preempt potential internal speculations among the interlocutors regarding whether the interview was not, in fact, motivated by a romantic interest or the possibility of a romantic encounter (the effectiveness of this strategy is further explored in the *Researching Desire, Creating Desire* section).

While I tried to foster a non-hierarchical dynamic and create a friendly, relaxed, and safe atmosphere during the interviews, the very act of outlining the research's purpose inevitably reinforced my role as a researcher, along with the associated connotations and imaginations. This initial communication and framing of the encounter were not without consequences; even in striving for a non-hierarchical setting, I was, by default, reaffirming my position.

The decisions we navigate during fieldwork carry undeniable impacts, and these nuances should not be overlooked: the individuals I interviewed, even though they consented to the eventual use of the transcript, might have hesitated to expose some of their most personal beliefs. They could have responded in varied terms and with different expressions than they would have used if I had not entered the situation in the role of a researcher. Simultaneously, considering the hierarchical dynamic I previously mentioned, there is a possibility that they may have, albeit unconsciously, aimed to align their responses in a manner that might be perceived favorably by me (Reinharz 1992).

It is also important to note that while I have a basic knowledge of modern Hebrew (both spoken and written), my proficiency has not reached a level where I could conduct an entire interview, think creatively during it, react quickly to what was said, or fully grasp the nuances of what was expressed. Consequently, all interviews were conducted in English. This fact is significant and has both limiting and liberating aspects. Regarding the limitations: I used English terms in my questions (sometimes with a clarifying Hebrew term, e.g., "seculars,"

hilonim), and both the interlocutors and I simply assumed we meant the same thing. However, this issue arises even when both speakers share the same native language, as terms and their meanings never align perfectly. To get as close as possible to the interlocutors' intended meaning, I asked them to explain what the word meant to them, how it felt, or how they related to it, and how they recognized themselves in such a label (e.g., *What does being secular mean to you?*).

The issue of mutual understanding and the risk of distorted information posed perhaps the greatest challenge in terms of language. It also meant that only individuals proficient in English and confident enough to engage in the interview responded to my "research call," adding to the constraints. It should be added, though, that for the most part, I had no difficulty in engaging in even incidental conversations in English, and generally, the level of English was fairly high. Moreover, as one of the interlocutors[124] pointed out, conducting the interview in English was freeing for him because he could express his thoughts in simpler sentence structures, resulting in a "purer" expression. Another interlocutor mentioned that despite feeling exhausted after the interview in English, he found it "interesting" because hearing things discussed in English "suddenly made more sense." However, he also noted that he struggled to express some symbolic nuances as he wished:

"You know, my Hebrew is perfect. My English is second-hand. But in English it is maybe more accurate because the things we discussed... that's not something I would discuss in Hebrew with other Israelis. Just because you are from outside, I can think about those things and express those ideas and make some order for myself about who I am."

Furthermore, the fact that English is not my first language, leading to occasional mistakes and requiring heightened concentration, further dismantled the potential formal hierarchy of the researcher-interlocutor relationship. This was particularly evident when the interlocutors were individuals whose mother tongue was English (for example, when one of the interlocutor's parents was an

[124] This is also where the creative nature of the research and the creation of the data come into play: ethnographic interviews often serve as the first "space" where certain ideas are formulated, ideas that might not have been created otherwise.

American). During one interview with an American-Israeli, I was focusing more on my English and the mistakes I was making rather than on what I wanted to ask and what my conversation partner was saying. I was very tired that day and ended up making completely unnecessary mistakes, which made me feel a bit ashamed. Despite my deliberate attempts to break down the hierarchical positions between a researcher and interlocutor, I realized that this aspiration does not always translate into an emotional experience. When I recognized this during the interview, I was able to calm down a bit. My counterpart overlooked the mistakes, which perhaps inadvertently allowed him to be in a position of "power." After all, he was not the one who tried to keep his face. I further address linguistic issues in the section *Limitations, Challenges and Side Effects.*

In addition to the in-depth interviews, I also engaged in countless informal conversations, both with friends and strangers. These spontaneous exchanges offered me an insight to how "secular Jews" are perceived by those who identify differently, and where the points of encounter might rise. They also deepened my understanding of how my own presence in these conversations shaped the situation. I wrote down the impressions and fragments of these conversations that stood out into my field diary, including the following excerpt from an unplanned gathering in Jerusalem café:

> On a quiet Shabbat afternoon, I came to a downtown café with my two Israeli Jewish roommates. Soon, the table expanded to include a Jerusalemite from an old Armenian family, an older man from East Jerusalem with Israeli citizenship, an artist with roots in both East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and later, a middle-aged Israeli Jewish couple—one an artist, the other a writer, whom I will call Gal. The atmosphere was laid-back, with cigarettes, a joint, and beer shared around as we debated the two most important things in life. The elderly man from East Jerusalem, a Muslim, argued passionately that freedom and access to water were the essentials, backing it up with a story from King Solomon's time, which many of us hadn't heard before. At one point, Gal, whose family comes from Iraq, turned to me, asking about my research. I explained simply and quite broadly that I was focusing on the lives of secular Israeli Jews. His response was a mix of curiosity and angriness:

> "*Secular Israelis are so proud of their secularity, but what does that really mean? Some even take down their mezuzahs!*[125] *I tell them, 'I can't visit if there's no mezuzah—I like to kiss it sometimes!' They strive for consistency, but they never manage.*"

As Gal puffed on a joint, alternating between sips of beer and coffee, he described himself as distinct from secular Israelis—sometimes wanting to kiss the *mezuzah*, but not always. He saw secular Jews as somewhat inauthentic. Gal also expressed discomfort with the idea of not having a *mezuzah* in the home—yet, in many ways, his own practices were just as selective. This reflection—Gal's critique of secular Israelis alongside his own selective religious observance—also sheds a bit of light on the fluidity and complexity of "being Jewish" in Israel. I see the contradictions that Gal navigates not as individual oddities but as indicative of broader tensions, where the categories of "being secular" and "being religious" constantly intersect, interact, overlap, and are in conflict. When we closely "listen" to these categories, they immediately lose their normative simplicity.

A few days later, at the same place, I witnessed another indicative conversation, once again initiated by my presence and research focus. This time, the reaction to the term "secular Jews" was met with swift criticism. Itay, who identifies as *Masorti*, addressed his friends around the table: *"Secular Jews, pffff… You're just lazy Jews to me! Nothing more."* Roi did not take it well—as a secular Jew, he felt offended and immediately responded with a lengthy theological argument explaining why such a position goes against the "essence of Judaism," as he put it. The conversations reminded me how labels and inner categorization trigger debates over authenticity, over belonging, and, most importantly, about "Jewishness" and "Judaism" themselves, with a heightened emotional load.

Composition of Interlocutors

In total, I conducted 23 in-depth interviews, one of which diverged from the conventional selection (see the section *Field and Subjects*). This particular interview was conducted with a Czech woman, a non-Jew, living in Jerusalem for

[125] Small parchment scroll inscribed with verses from the *Torah* placed inside a case and affixed to the doorposts of Jewish homes.

multiple years. Despite her non-Jewish background, her partner is a secular Israeli Jew, and together, they have two children. The inclusion of this interlocutor was not intended to initiate systematic comparison. Instead, the goal was to broaden the understanding and experiences emanating from the "other side." In this context, the "other side" signifies an individual deeply engaged in the day-to-day negotiations of relationships and identity among secular Israeli Jews, and living through these experiences firsthand.

Besides this interlocutor, I interviewed 22 people with Israeli citizenship (secular Israeli Jews). Of the total group (Czech interlocutor included), 10 identified as female and 13 as male; none of the interlocutors discussed non-binary or trans* life experiences. Two interlocutors shared their experiences of being in a gay relationship, while the rest primarily articulated heterosexual relationships. None of the interlocutors shared an experience with non-monogamous forms of relationships, whether consensual or non-consensual.

Regarding the family background of the interlocutors (intra-ethnic division), 10 of them come from a family with *Ashkenazi* background (mainly from Russia, Germany, Austria, Poland, Ukraine, and Romania), 2 from a *Mizrahi* family background (mainly from Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and Iraq), and 6 from a mixed background (part of the family is of an *Ashkenazi* origin and part of an *Mizrahi* one). One interlocutor is a descendant of *Sephardic* Jews from Spain who relocated to Central America and later to Israel, one is a convert to Judaism originally from Mexico, one's family originally comes from India,[126] and two are from a family background tracing its roots explicitly to the Old Yishuv,[127] without further specification. The youngest interlocutor was 23 years old, the oldest was 61, but the majority fell within the age range of the mid-20's to their 40's.

I considered for a long time whether and especially *how* to write about the composition of the interlocutors: after all, I was not primarily concerned with creating a representative sample of the secular Jewish part of society in the sense of quantitative sociological survey methodology and inquiries. However, sharing the presence of different intersections of "being" is important, as I realized from

[126] With this interlocutor, we did not explore her family's history before *aliyah* to Israel. There are several groups of Jews in/coming from India, e.g., Bene Menashe, Bene Israel, Bene Ephraim, Cochin Jews, and the Baghdadi Jews. For more on the topic of Jews from the regions of India see, e.g., Strizower 1966; Katz 2000; Egorova 2011; Hodes 2014.

[127] Old Yishuv refers to the Jewish population inhabiting the region of the former Ottoman Empire, encompassing what is now Israel and Palestine, prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and before the waves of Zionist-oriented immigration in the late 19th century.

two quite contradictory comments I received from senior colleagues when discussing my dissertation. The first one told me that a "secular Israeli Jew" is not a category that exists, it is not a category which can be explored analytically in any way, because it is not a group with clearly defined boundaries as they do not have a common denominator (that is, inhabiting one concrete location, or defining themselves through endogamy). He also found problematic that the asserted secularity does not entirely circumscribe or define the subject.

The second comment was based on a position that did not question the category of the secular Israeli Jew, but rather considered it as clear, valid and self-evident: "*I would say, with a bit of exaggeration, that you are examining almost extinct species as the power relations in the country change.*"[128] A further elaboration of the comment clarified that he was primarily referring to secular Jews from *Ashkenazi* families, who constitute what is known as the "secular-liberal elite" in the Israeli context.

Both comments highlight how the boundaries of possibility and impossibility are distinctly shaped by our *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). The first comment came from the Czech environment, the second from the Israeli one. The former pointed out the absurdity of such a category and almost its rejection. The latter, on the contrary, the obviousness with which this category penetrates Israeli consciousness. This self-evidence is then linked to the clear content and specific representatives of such a category: *Ashkenaz*, liberal, yet still Zionist and elite ("ruling ethno-class").

Sharing the composition of interlocutors is an attempt to compromise the simultaneous presence of obviousness and non-obviousness implied by the comments: it may well be that we have no other ways of asking for specific matters, and therefore the use of such a category is justifiable. To borrow a sentence from Saba Mahmood, then "[...] what other analytical tools might be available to ask a different set of questions [...]" (Mahmood, 2005: 2). However, at the same time, the ease with which the category is sometimes accepted demands a deeper and more thorough elaboration, which presents the core of the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter in the third part of the dissertation.

[128] It is noteworthy to mention that this remark was made in a very informal atmosphere and with clear anecdotal reference to the history of anthropology exploring something "exotic" through the colonial gaze.

The final decision to share the composition of the interlocutors was also guided by the lens of intersectionality[129]: the experience of a secular man and a secular woman may differ in their motivations for self-identifying as secular individuals. As it came up during the interviews, for some women, "being secular" signifies an aversion to religious requirements of modesty, which often impose stricter standards on the female body. Conversely, for some men, "being secular" is to emphasize rational decision-making (*"I only believe what I can logically explain."*), or self-reliance. In this sense, these differences[130] do not arise from inherent disparities between individuals framed as male or female but rather stem from their positioning and socialization within the binary framework of masculinity and femininity. By articulating the potential axes through which identity/subjectivity "vibrates," and how its strands interact and intersect, it may become apparent that the seemingly homogeneous image associated with a particular category impacts individuals differently.

2. 4. Participant Observation

One of the typical and classic tools of ethnographic inquiry is participant observation, which goes hand in hand with the ideal of total immersion. However, at the heart of the very term is a semantic contradiction, as pointed out by Clifford (1983). According to Clifford, "participant-observation serves as a short-hand for continuous tacking between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of events [...] Understood literally, participant-observation is a paradoxical, misleading formula." (Clifford, 1983: 127). He further suggests its reformulation in hermeneutic terms "as dialectic of experience and interpretation" and in such dialectical quality "it may be taken seriously" (Ibid.). When I speak of participant

[129] Intersectionality is a concept, approach and analytical framework coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American legal scholar in 1989 in her influential paper *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*. Crenshaw argued that conventional feminist (the second wave of feminism respectively) and civil rights movements often fail to address the specific experiences of black women and other individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups. She highlighted how discrimination based on race and gender intersect and create distinct forms of oppression that could not be fully understood by examining these categories separately. Single-axis analysis distorts reality and reinforces the systems of oppression. See also, e.g., Lykke 2010.

[130] Also, it might appear that for a Jewish woman who identifies herself as "secular," the Jewish ancestry of a partner may not be a significant factor, given the preservation of "Jewishness" through matrilineality. However, the conducted interviews did not support this notion either.

observation, I do so with an awareness of the contradiction that the term carries, and with an acknowledgement of the criticisms that question its nature.

Coffey (1999) points out that we can no longer rely on the previously assumed and sedimented positions and roles of observer and observed, stranger and member, outsider and insider.[131] These categories and designations are too rigid and take place in a much more complex bundle of that "deep hanging-out," as she states: "The path between familiarity and strangeness; knowledge and ignorance; intimacy and distance is far from straightforward. Simply adopting the stance of 'stranger' or 'unknower' denies, rather than removes, the situatedness and connectedness of the fieldworker self, alongside other selves." (Coffey 1999: 22).

Despite these criticisms, it seems one cannot avoid mentioning and making a reference to a participant observation while creating an ethnographic inquiry. Therefore, I would like to revisit here the term "deep hanging-out," which, as I understand it, encompasses more than just participant observation. It implies participating in a way of life, which involves mirroring and replicating everyday tasks (which might be as banal as doing groceries, having a beer, cheering on a football match, or hosting a poker game) and movement through space. Observation in this context then signifies the reflexivity of the researcher: seeing, perceiving, experiencing, and interpreting through their own positionality and available modes of knowledge. In this respect, "hanging-out" carries the meaning of *being-living*, spending time with *someone* and *somewhere*, while constantly being aware that I am doing this *being-living* with *someone* and *somewhere* and asking *what it might mean*.

While being in "the field," I was fortunate not to experience the stress of precarity, thanks to factors such as my passport, "unproblematic" family origin, availability of funding, and the presence of supportive friends at the research locations. Additionally, the lack of visible identity markers, such as wearing a veil or a wig, further eased my interactions in "the field." In many ways, I did not have to adapt or learn new things to fit in. Mostly, I wore what I would wear in Prague, with slight adjustments in modesty in Jerusalem, when I planned to go to the Old City, to the Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods, or to East Jerusalem. On the other hand, in Tel Aviv, I occasionally felt I am not dressed "edgy" enough.

---

[131] See also, e.g., Narayan 1993; Reinharz 2011.

This sense of ease I felt may also have reflected the privilege of the subjects of this inquiry themselves. The being-living process in “the field” was not particularly challenging for me, as it bore some resemblance to my life in Prague in certain aspects. It was rather precisely this smooth transition between the regimes, which blurred the line between living and observing, which made it difficult to distinguish between the two, as both activities and inactivities overlapped. This, of course, led me to the question of how to deal with and navigate proximity and familiarity. It was, unfortunately, only later in the course of the research that I realized the most productive approach was not to try to eliminate proximity and familiarity and not to cling to a latently expected objectivity and distance, as if the “reflexive turn” had not actually happened.

When I use the term participant observation, I refer to a form of living that demanded reflexivity and often placed me in situations I would not have chosen otherwise. Whether in cafes, pubs, concerts, or parties, I found myself merely listening to conversations in which I would typically participate with my own opinions otherwise. I allowed people to speak until I was completely exhausted, recognizing that every interaction could be potentially important for the study. However, as I mentioned earlier with reference to Coffey (1999), the distinctions between the observer and the observed, and what is being observed, are not always clear-cut and tend to be rather dynamic and shifting: I was the one being observed too; people perceived and reacted to me in various ways, forming their own judgments and reflections, even if these were implicit (Letherby 2003).

Since my research focused on desire, relationships and intimacy, it is important to relate the presumptions of participant observation and/or deep hanging-out to this aspect as well. As I discuss in the *Researching Desire, Creating Desire* section, during the fieldwork I was surrounded by a bubble of “being taken” because I was in a long-distance relationship. By not having a visible and present partner next to me and being a foreigner conducting research abroad without a partner, my childlessness was also presumed, which also means that I was not spared or completely immune to flirting. It seemed that my status as a foreigner, coupled with the understanding that my stay in the country would be somewhat temporary yet extended, sparked significant interest in forging connections soon after the initiation of many conversations. I received invitations for dates very often, requests for phone number or Instagram, inquiries as to

whether I had a boyfriend or husband, even from completely random passers-by on the street. While I hesitate to generalize all these encounters, I perceived myself as an "object of desire" at least in part precisely because I was non-Israeli and non-Jewish (and also non-Arab, non-Muslim),[132] as one of my informants shared:

"*Israeli women* [Israeli Jewish women] *are too complicated, too intense, they let themselves be conquered for a long time and everything gets serious right away. It's easier and more fun with foreigners*."

Also, as a tattooed woman, there was an assumption that I led some "alternative" life, whether it means non-monogamous relationships, a desire for experimentation, or a free-spirited approach, and in general going with whatever the "energy of the party" brings. Leaving aside the debate over what is normal for whom, and what is considered alternative, I can say that in this regard, I was merely an observer of the interactions. Though I actively participated with my being and personality, I did not "consume" these situations or entertain the suggestions to materialize.[133]

Despite all the methodological reproaches and internal contradictions of participant observation, and despite the illusory possibility of being both *here* and *there* at the same time (where "there" refers to the analytical space of detachment and "here" to the present moment of the situation, interaction, or story creation), participant observation remained important because it was irreplaceable. Had I conducted "just" interviews, the spatial dimension—important not only for context but also for the possibilities and opportunities of where to meet—would have disappeared completely. I would not have the means to answer the following questions: Where are the points of contact? Whose presence is "asymptomatic" and default, and whose is not? What is self-evident, and what is not? How do people "read" each other?

[132] This was an important realization and is further reflected in the *Movement II: Possible Lovers, Impossible Others* section in the *Infrastructure of Intimacy: Thick Life, Thin Lines* chapter, third part of the dissertation.
[133] For a discussion of sexual activity and fieldwork and epistemological productiveness of fieldwork relationships, see the chapter *The Sex(ual) Field* in Amanda Coffey's *The Ethnographic Self* (1999).

2. 5. Limitations, Challenges, and Side Effects

As the title suggests, this chapter addresses some of the limitations, challenges, and side effects of the conducted research. These limitations and challenges were manifold and often manifested themselves in small interactions of everyday life, where decisions needed to be made. For instance, to what extent should I intervene in a casual conversation to offer my personal opinions? Or should I rather simply listen and try to remember the exact wording of the conversation for its potential significance to the research? That was one of the recurring dilemmas. Such decisions lack straightforward and clear guidance, particularly in situations where the researcher interacts with individuals she considers friends. Further elaboration on these ethical issues is provided in the *Ethical Considerations* chapter.

Language and Meanings

The question of language is important for many reasons and has been one of the challenges and limits of my work. As I already mentioned in the section *Locations, Process, and Language*, where I address the issue of mutual understanding, I conducted interviews in English. However, the language barrier also affected my movement and comprehension within "the field." While I comprehend more spoken Hebrew than I can speak fluently, I often needed translations to English, at least partially, to fully understand conversations. Consequently, I am aware that certain nuances of situational context remained undetectable and unreadable to me. My presence prompted people around me to switch to English, which influenced both the content and tone of conversations. While I positioned myself as a researcher only during the interviews, my status as a student-fieldworker was recognized even outside of the interviews' setting, particularly among my friends, and the adoption of an "anthropological gaze" somehow became second nature of mine anyway. Although most people I encountered spoke English at a fairly high level, including some native speakers who had relocated to Israel either during childhood or later, the potential of altered dynamics in interactions due to the influence of English and its available linguistic structures should be openly acknowledged.

There is much more that could be discussed regarding the language and writing; however, for brevity, I will focus on two interconnected points: the language of my writing and academic writing as politics. This dissertation is written in English, which is not my first language, for two primary reasons. Firstly, I wanted to avoid the need for double translations (as both I and my counterparts were already "translating" ourselves in some ways[134]) of interviews, statements, and descriptions of interactions, which can further dilute the original and intended—though never fully stable—meaning even further. The second reason is that English has become the universal language (*lingua franca*) of the academic world, which students and researchers essentially have to adopt uncritically if they seek some recognition outside of their domestic contexts. However, this preference for English privileges native speakers, while granting them advantages in self-expression, argumentation, and fluidity of writing.[135] At the same time, this system does not cultivate local knowledge or the development of (in this case, Czech) terminology relevant to the subject matter. Consequently, I acknowledge the present limitations of English, in both fieldwork and the writing process, as certain subtleties and nuances may have escaped my attention.

Challenge of a Mundane

Above, I detailed how I established contact with the interlocutors and introduced participant observation as a prominent, albeit contested, method in ethnographic research. In this section, I return to the concept of participant observation in light of the pervasive mundanity and ordinariness that characterized my fieldwork.

My personal history reveals that the environment I navigated during fieldwork was not entirely unfamiliar terrain. I brought with me my own preconceptions and biases.[136] My pre-understanding functioned as a double-edged sword. On one hand, people appreciated that I was familiar with aspects of what

[134] On the topic of "ethnography as a process of translation" see, e.g., Pratt 1986; Eriksen 1995/2023: 38–39, 239–257; Churchill 2005; Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2006; Grgurinović 2012.
[135] For English academic discourse and hegemony of "Western" (i.e. Anglo-culture) academic writing, see, e.g., Altbach 2007; on the cost of being a non-native English speaker in English, see, e.g., Amano et al. 2023; on the precarity of non-Western migrant academics, see, e.g., Burlyuk and Rahbari 2023.
[136] See the *Towards the Dissertation's Topic* and *On Positionality and Politics of Location* sections in the *Introduction.*

they referred to as their “tradition” or “culture”; they felt flattered and seen. My basic knowledge of Hebrew opened doors and helped ease certain barriers during interviews. On the other hand, it was challenging to step outside my internalized concepts of “what it means,” because so much felt familiar—almost ordinary.

Once I settled into everyday life in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, I began to question how exactly the lives of the people I encountered differed from my own. How distinct were their experiences, and where did our lives intersect? In many ways, their daily routines mirrored mine (or vice versa). I did not observe “exotic” rituals in a distant land, nor did I navigate a setting accessible only through gatekeepers (as would be the case in *haredi* communities, for example). In many situations, I blended in seamlessly. A telling moment came from a Jerusalem friend with and Indian (and Jewish) ancestry:

“*Timy, it's fascinating how much more Jewish you appear in Israel than I do. You could easily pass as Sara Rubinstein,*[137] *and everyone would believe it. People automatically speak to you in Hebrew, or if not in Hebrew, at least in Russian.*[138] *Whereas, when I walk down the street in Jerusalem, people automatically start speaking to me in English, assuming I'm either a tourist or a foreigner from somewhere in Asia*[139] *who works here*.”

These linguistic and visual aspects of the observation were indeed accurate. Until I began speaking English, people primarily communicated with me in Hebrew, and secondarily in Russian. Contextually, my lighter hair led to the assumption that I might be an Israeli citizen from a country of the former Soviet Union. I became aware of this in a very tangible way during a day in Jerusalem, when I was already able to walk the streets outside the city centre without needing to check the map on my phone. Coincidentally, that day, four people independently approached me in Hebrew and asked for directions. Typically, you ask someone

[137] Used as an example of a typical Ashkenazi Jewish name.
[138] The prevalence of the Russian language in Israel is notably significant, especially considering the substantial influx of citizens from the former USSR, primarily during the 1990s, under the Law of Return and related legislation. Approximately one million Israeli citizens have roots in the former Soviet Union. For more see, e.g., Friedgut 2004; Kimmerling (2005: 136-149).
[139] A significant number of individuals from Thailand, Philippines, and India work in Israel. For the topic of foreign workers in Israeli agriculture, see e.g. Kaminer 2024. It is important to note that there is a difference between these individuals and my friend's situation: they encompass both legal and illegal labour migrants (in any case, their situation remains precarious). The parents of the aforementioned friend have Jewish roots, belonging to the Jewish minority in India, and they arrived in Israel through *aliyah*: the process of Jewish immigration and the acquisition of citizenship under Israel's Law of Return.

for directions only if you assume they are a local, not a tourist, and familiar with the area.

The mundanity and ordinariness of the fieldwork initially confused me. I felt as though I must be doing something wrong, as I had expected the transition between the ways of life *here* and *there* to be more radical. I imagined that people's lives would appear starkly different. However, I gradually realized that this mundanity was neither a mistake nor something to fear. Instead, it was itself indicative, "symptomatic," and telling. It pointed to a certain taken-for-grantedness in the existence of the "secular subject," which, while not devoid of content, is less marked or "symptomatic" than other modes of being. As one of the interlocutors told me: "*If you are secular, it's invisible*." I further engage with the invisibility of the norm in the *Topography of Locations: Shabbat Shalom, Ramadan Kareem* chapter, in the third part of the dissertation. This realization about taken-for-grantedness led me to question the extent to which secularity can be performed, and to what degree it can be enacted, achieved, and reproduced.

Researching Desire, Creating Desire

During the process of interviewing—especially during the interviews which are guided by a conscious effort to move beyond the usual researcher-participant hierarchy—a unique form of closeness might emerge. It is understandable that the researcher's ability to be sensitive is tested when the interview covers painful topics—violence, abuse, discrimination, poverty, or rape. In those moments, creating a safe space and truly listening to voices that are often overlooked should be a non-negotiable imperative of responsible research. However, what unfolds during interviews that do not necessarily focus on traumatic or stressful topics but are nonetheless deeply personal—those about identity, intimacy, desires, and sexuality?

I always framed the interviews by the context of my research. As I previously mentioned, I always introduced myself as a researcher, specifically as a doctoral student, setting the stage for our conversations. However, to encourage interlocutors to open up and provide more than one-word answers, it was necessary to step back from a "purely" academic position. When I sensed their

interest in personal stories or details about my life, I shared them, although with a constant effort to carefully balance how much to reveal. This approach aimed to minimize my influence on their responses.[140] Yet, I recognized that no action is "innocent" and each decision carries its consequences. For instance, my occasional use of Hebrew when words and phrases that naturally came to my mind after spending time in Israel, although unintended, seemed to break down barriers between me and the interlocutors. This linguistic shift often casted me in multiple roles and blended the position of a researcher, friend, and sometimes, a therapist. Consequently, the interlocutors frequently perceived me as a friend or someone familiar, someone who understands them or at least shares some affinity with their "people" (that is, Jews and/or Jewish Israelis). However, some of these positive feelings of closeness went even further.

I never knew ahead of time with whom my interlocutors were in a relationship, or with whom they wanted to be intimate, and if at all. I only found out their preferences from conversations about girlfriends and boyfriends, or from their self-identification as gay or queer individuals. Similarly, while they were unaware of my personal characteristics and relationships, it was evident that I was primarily passing as a heterosexual woman in their eyes.[141] In several cases, this led to invitations for dates after the interview. Additionally, as soon as I stopped recording, there were questions like, "*Now, we should talk about you. Are you Jewish? Could you imagine having a Jewish partner? Is that something you would want? Are you single? Do you want kids?*" I often wondered what was *actually* going on during the interviews about life, intimacy, and relationships.

At times, it appeared that people completely forgot the purpose of our meeting. On one occasion, I met one of my interlocutors in a café, and he first apologized for ordering a beer, as if it was something inappropriate. The moment I ended the interview later, he told me: "*I'm so sorry I was talking about myself the whole time. I'd like to know more about you too. Could I buy you a drink next time?*" The interlocutor said that as if this was a date where he was drawing all the attention to himself and wanted to make it up to me on the next one. I mentioned these feelings at a conference to more senior female colleagues and one said that

[140] No matter how many pages I have read about the illusory and unrealistic nature of minimizing one's influence on interlocutors' responses, I still could not shake the feeling. These emotions, and the attempt to neutralize them (and us) from both the research process and the resulting text, are explored, e.g., by Susan Krieger in *Social Science and the Self* (1991).
[141] See the *On Positionality and Politics of Location* section in *Introduction.*

her strategy was to always wear a fake wedding ring when interviewing men. I found it almost comical, but there was something to it nonetheless.[142]

At the same time, what do I mean by saying that no decision or action is innocent? Interviews do not take place in robotic sterility, behind drapes, or with an altered voice. Despite its academic nature, interviewing remains an intensely human activity. During these encounters, I occasionally felt desire, attraction, and chemistry—whether one-sided or mutual. At times, I also sensed that certain answers or statements were restrained, perhaps to keep the door open for a potential future date (which I always politely declined). After some interviews, I found myself in a "post-date" emotional state: either exhaustedly bored or pleasantly energized.

When we delve into trauma during interviews, there is a risk of retraumatization; and when we explore desire and intimacy, we are actively involved in creating such desire. Through the interview, a new reality emerges, one that is not and can never be "objective." It is a reality that would not have been realized, that would not have come into being, without conducting the interview.[143] An interview that is not confined in the boundaries of structure can cover topics that might take months to reveal in typical dating scenarios. In one hour, people speak about their families, divorce of parents, first loves, envisioned future, politics, both emotional and physical wounds, war and peace, social conflicts, family aspirations, breakups, and sexual experiences. In essence, such an interview mirrors the process of dating, where we gradually learn about the other person and how they became the person they are today.

In that regard, the interview is a version of a condensed affectionate bonding, yet it has a clear endpoint: the recording is turned off, and we walk away from the intimacy we just have built. While not every interview follows this exact pattern, it occurred frequently enough to be noteworthy. From this perspective, it is understandable that some interlocutors expressed a wish to continue the conversation, either in the form of a date or through friendly reciprocity. As

[142] Similar testimonies of female researchers' strategies of adaptation to the situational level of fieldwork (i.e., it was mainly either an adaptation to the increased patriarchal conditions of a given society, or an attempt to break out of the position of a sexual object) can be found, e.g., in Jackson and Kelly 2019.

[143] On the topic of desire and sexual subjectivity in the context of conducting fieldwork, see, e.g., Kulick and Wilson 1995; Coffey 1999; Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999; Newton 2000; Weiss 2011; Fatková 2013. For gendered nature of the fieldwork, see. e.g. Bell, Caplan and Karim 1993. On the reflection on the role of intimacy in the field, see Smith 2016.

mentioned earlier, I consistently declined date invitations, but with certain individuals, our relationship evolved into a friendly one, and we loosely extended our conversation beyond the initial interview. Incidentally, life itself always unfolds in dialogue.

Cupples (2002) refers to Morton (1995) and Altork (1995) when she writes that "in the field we are sexualized subjects, we might be viewed as wives, mothers, desirable foreign women, potential sexual partners and these views impinge on the research process in ways that cannot always be predicted […] the field itself can have a seductive quality." (Cupples, 2002: 383). The seductive character of the field was palpable not only during the interviews, although it was in these encounters that its allure manifested most strongly.

I had been in a monogamous, exclusive, and long-distance relationship when I started the fieldwork, which had various implications. The existence of this relationship afforded me the ability to decline invitations to meetings without the need for elaborate excuses. "Being in a relationship" created a protective bubble around me and signalled that I was already "taken." Simultaneously, it defined the boundaries of my interactions, whether with interlocutors, friends, informants, or chance encounters. If my personal relational situation had been different, I believe my experience in "the field" would have evolved quite differently too. I was grateful that I did not have to negotiate many of the ethical issues, both internally and externally. This does not mean, of course, that there were no other ethical issues to be considered.

2. 6. Ethical Considerations

"*The ethics and the politics of ethnography are not clearly separable.*"
(Murphy and Dingwall, 2007: 339)

Ethnographic inquiry, like any other research, must adhere to certain ethical standards (Janeček, 2014: 37–39). However, I am convinced that the nature of ethnographic inquiry places even greater demands on researchers due to how strongly our positionality is inscribed in it, and how closely we connect our own lives and work with the people among whom we conduct the fieldwork. The quotation from Murphy and Dingwall above highlights this very point. I would

add that not only ethics and politics, but perhaps even more importantly, “life” itself is not clearly separable.

In my work, I followed the Code of Ethics of the Charles University,[144] the Charles University Research Data Policy,[145] the Code of Ethics of the Czech Association for Social Anthropology,[146] and the Code of Ethics of the AAA.[147] Due to their general nature, it broadly leaves the responsibility for negotiating the standard of work to the researcher herself. However, it was necessary to examine more closely the ethical dilemmas because their “resolution” affected the outcomes of the conducted fieldwork.

Atkinson and Hammersley (2007: 209–229) distinguish five main topics for ethical consideration: informed consent, privacy, harm, exploitation, and consequences for future research. I already addressed the issue of informed consent in the *In-Depth Interviews* chapter. The topics of privacy and harm are elaborated under the section *Anonymization and Safety.* The issue of exploitation is touched upon in the *Rapport, Responsibility and Betrayal* section. In regard to the consequences for future research, Atkinson and Hammersley (Ibid.: 218–219) mention the possibility of “closing the doors” of field accessibility for future researchers based on our research findings, publications, or behavior during fieldwork. However, I do not find this topic directly applicable to my work, as the primary concern lies rather in the potential ramifications for my interpersonal connections and relationships established within “the field.”

As the last point here, I would like to provide a statement about the use of AI during the writing process, which I consider as an important ethical question. As a non-native English speaker, I used OpenAI's ChatGPT-4 for proofreading with the following prompt: “Please proofread the grammar, syntax, punctuation, and use of the words without changing the content of the text.” I also used ChatGPT for light editorial suggestions: for example, to help me identify where the transitions between sections might feel too abrupt. I made sure that my use of it remained within the generally accepted bounds of ethical academic practice. At the time of writing this dissertation, the Faculty of Arts had not yet adopted

[144] Available at https://cuni.cz/UK-9490.html (in Czech). Last accessed 9. 6. 2025.
[145] Available at https://cuni.cz/UKEN-1958.html. Last accessed 9. 6. 2025.
[146] Available at https://www.casaonline.cz/o-casa/eticky-kodex/ (in Czech). Last accessed 9. 6. 2025.
[147] Available at https://americananthro.org/wp-content/uploads/AAA-Ethics-Code-2009-1.pdf. Last accessed 9. 6. 2025.

formal rules regarding the use of AI tools, since it is still an evolving and developing area. Importantly, I used the ChatGPT in ways that did not exceed my personal knowledge, and in ways comparable to consulting with a human proofreader, language editor, or a study partner for brainstorming.

Anonymization and Safety

All the interviews have been anonymized, with names altered. This includes not only interlocutors but also informants and friends. Since many of these individuals also shared their critical perspectives on the functioning of their country, particularly regarding politics and the military, this aspect was especially sensitive. Moreover, considering Israel's wartime status at the time of writing this work (2023 to 2025), I proceeded with even greater caution in anonymizing interlocutors and other involved individuals. Furthermore, I intentionally refrain from naming specific locations, especially in Jerusalem, where most interactions with interlocutors, friends, and informants took place.

None of the characters portrayed are fictional, and their statements remain authentic. However, I partially decontextualized the portrayals of specific interlocutors, especially in Jerusalem, where secular circles and meeting places are often described as a close-knit “village” in which everyone knows one another. I also deliberately omitted certain parts of the interviews, even though they would be potentially beneficial for the conducted research. For instance, certain part of the interviews with individuals critical of the military while currently serving on active duty during wartime (*miluim*) or those who had chosen to avoid military service illegally and subsequently left the country. This choice, indeed, introduced another set of challenges, as it may reduce the richness of the research. Nevertheless, I chose to bear this responsibility, with the understanding that my primary concern was to ensure the safety of the interlocutors, informants, and friends, as well as the safety of the environments with which I engaged.

Rapport, Responsibility and Betrayal

Another important consideration connected to anonymization and safety is trust and rapport. My experience of “the field” and of conducting fieldwork was largely mediated through the friendships I formed with people I met outside my

role as a student-researcher. Their communities and circles often coincided with and overlapped the focus of my research. I was deeply reliant on these friendships and I hold them in high regard, with immense gratitude for the ways they facilitated both my experience and my work. However, this also means that some of the dissertation's conclusions may, in certain ways, risk eroding the trust that was established between us.

This concern extends to the interlocutors who, albeit with permission, shared their intimate choices, perspectives, desires, and life stories with me. At certain stages of the research, I felt I was betraying them. Sherry Ortner (2017) addresses this dilemma with striking accuracy in an interview with Andrew Shryock: "Ethnography as a practice involves establishing some kind of sympathetic rapport with the people one studies, some kind of commitment to–again–trying to take their point of view. To critique them may involve a kind of betrayal of this rapport. But not to critique them involves complicity with their power. There are no good answers here, only a need for a lot of careful ethical and methodological thinking."

In this regard, I have reached no definitive resolution, except to emphasize that my critique and interpretive intentions are not directed at the subjects themselves or their ways of life, but rather at the structures and configurations of power. This reflection circles back to what was written in the *Introduction*, echoing Mayanthi Fernando and Saba Mahmood: *to critique is to care*. In doing so, one might also encounter the "Self" in a deeply intimate confrontation with one's own limits.

2. 7. Process of Analysis and Notes on Writing

At this point, I would like to reflect on the process and mode of analysis and writing of this dissertation. As is evident from the theoretical part, and in line with the meta-approach that frames this work, I draw significant inspiration from poststructuralist orientations towards "discourse" and towards language understood as an active and productive agent. In this regard, I am influenced by the tools of discourse analysis as a method, which, broadly speaking, "is concerned with what is said, how it is said, and with what consequences [...]"

(Zábrodská, 2009: 88), specifically from the perspective of poststructuralist discourse analysis.[148]

At the same time, I view discourse analysis as more suited to the examination of already-produced materials such as written texts, news media, documents, or videos. As I was—through my presence, participation, and positionality—a co-creator of data, whether during in-depth interviews or through social interactions, I do not find discourse analysis to be fully applicable to this work. A more suitable method may thus appear to be narrative analysis and its tools, which is a method closely related to discourse analysis, yet still distinct from it. Put simply, discourse analysis is primarily concerned with the workings of power through discourse(s), the hierarchies it creates, and the meanings and effects of discursive constructions, whereas narrative analysis is rather focused on the processes of meaning-making by subjects through narration, that is, through storytelling.[149]

The process of the analysis was as follows: first, I transcribed all the recorded interviews and subsequently read and listened to them repeatedly. Based on this repeated activity, I created codes and categories using an inductive approach and looked for their interrelations. In addition to focusing on "sameness" and "repetition," I also paid attention to differences in the narrations, to contradictions within the interlocutors' accounts, and to the strategies used to overcome these contradictions in order to achieve a coherent image. An integral part of the process was also being attentive, during listening, to hesitation and to moments when my questions seemed counterintuitive, incomprehensible, funny, or absurd. I did not use any software for the analysis.

Subsequently, I compared the analysed interview transcripts and connected them with my field notes, which provided important contextual background: they reminded me of the context in which the interviews took place, what I brought

---

[148] Discourse analysis is a general term encompassing a broad range of approaches rooted in both constructivist and critical orientations. Prominent figures in the field include Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak. For distinctions between critical and poststructuralist discourse analysis, see, e.g., Zábrodská 2009, Baxter 2002, 2008. According to Baxter, the common features of critical and (feminist) poststructuralist discourse analysis are as follows: discourse is a social practice, speaker identities are performative rather than essentially given, identities are diverse and multilayered, the meaning of what is said or asserted must be understood contextually, and the analysis is concerned with deconstructing hierarchical and hierarchizing binaries and with an interdiscursive approach, that is, the interconnectedness of individual discourses (Baxter 2008: 1–2 in Crofony, 2020: 51).

[149] In the Czech context, see, e.g., Nosková 2000; Chrz and Čermák 2011; Čermák et al. 2013; Preisslová Krejčí 2013.

into them, and how I felt afterwards; fragments of significant conversations with informants and friends; descriptions of events I participated in that might have been relevant for the research; how the atmosphere in society shifted during fieldwork; and which topics tended to dominate informal conversations.

Further, with regard to the content of the interviews—analysed in the above-mentioned way and grounded in their contextual settings—as well as the field diary, I then outlined for myself what broader background I needed to provide to the reader based on scholarly discussion, and what implications this would have for the writing of the final ethnographic text presented in the third part of the dissertation.

The resulting ethnographic text of the third part, titled *The Intimate State of Israel*, is a synthesis of narrative and discursive analytic approaches, with a poststructuralist "twist": rather than relying on clearly separated, self-contained categories, it aims for a cumulative and multivocal representation that actively resists offering a singular, unified image. It is also the result of an authorial decision regarding the mode of representation, drawing on what could be described as narrative ethnography (Gubrium and Holstein 2008): in this sense, the process of "writing" and "analysis" collapse into one, and become recursive. It also allows the figure of the researcher to be "written into" the story and reveal the ways in which her subjectivity forms part of the storytelling and meaning-making that unfolds through her presence, her analysis, and her writing.

In the spirit of Roland Barthes's notion of "the death of the author" (1967), and recognizing that we, as authors, do not have full control and ownership over the resulting text and its interpretation,[150] I nevertheless want to make a few remarks about the way of writing in order to make the ethnographic part of the text more accessible. Although I approach writing from a position that seeks to "write out" of dichotomous positions and binary understandings of the world, language—and writing as its textual materialization—is always a construction of a symbolic discursive order that delineates the boundaries of the

[150] On the multiplicity of ways of reading ethnographic texts, Clifford states: "Recent literary theory suggests that the ability of a text to make sense in a coherent way depends less on the willed intentions of an originating author than on the creative activity of a reader. In Barthes' words, if a text is 'a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture,' then 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination'. The writing of ethnography, an unruly, multisubjective activity, is given coherence in particular acts of reading. But there is always a variety of possible readings (beyond merely individual appropriations), readings beyond the control of any single authority" (Clifford, 1983: 141). See also, e.g., Trower 2023.

thinkable and the expressible (as in the works of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan). In this way, language is always already normative. As the Czech philosopher Miroslav Petříček notes: “The language I speak is not my language, but I have no other” (Petříček, 2003: 13). Since language sets limits to what can be said and to what we can think, I also employ metaphors and imaginaries in the final text as strategies to loosen the constraints language imposes upon me as an author.

I also want to note that I use the ethnographic present, a narrative strategy sometimes criticised for appearing ahistorical—as Eriksen (2023: 44) puts it, “synchronic ‘snapshots’”—and thus may be read as if describing something valid across time without genealogy. However, as Eriksen goes on to argue, the present and the past are not mutually exclusive (Ibid.), as each contains elements of the other. Therefore, the parts written in the present are not intended to evoke timelessness but rather to emphasise the present as the culmination of historical continuity within the writing.

In some sections of the ethnography, I construct composite dialogues or layered narratives by weaving together fragments from different interviews and situations. While some scenes are fictionalized, none of the voices are. This approach follows a tradition in anthropological writing that seeks to evoke the social and emotional dimensions of lived experience, rather than merely presenting disconnected testimonies. Furthermore, it allows for the juxtaposition of competing views.

Although the structure of this dissertation follows the conventional format of student qualification theses in the Czech context—divided into an introduction, theoretical, methodological, and empirical-analytical (in this case, ethnographic) part, and a concluding discussion—epistemological and methodological reflections also appear in the ethnographic section. Likewise, the methodological part includes elements of the theoretical framework, while the theoretical part delineates methodological challenges as well.

The Intimate State of Israel

"[Linear] *causality […] seems like the only correct approach, but it is actually just one way to tell a story*."
(Grof, 2020: 34)

No one's fated or doomed to love anyone.
The accidents happen, we're not heroines,
they happen in our lives like car crashes,
books that change us, neighborhoods
we move into and come to love.
…
this we were, this is how we tried to love,
and these are the forces they had ranged against us,
and these are the forces we had ranged within us,
within us and against us, against us and within us.

— Adrienne Rich[151]

Feminist philosopher and poet Adrienne Rich writes in her poem that *"No one's fated or doomed to love anyone."* Yet not all loves receive the nourishment they need to flourish. Not all people are seen as worthy of love or as fit to be loved and desired. Some people are simply easier to love, while others are viewed as unworthy, unwanted, or too complicated to even bother. But why? And then there are the ways in which love is experienced—or is not. Some loves could, theoretically, arise if circumstances were different. But what if they are not?

Perhaps in another universe, in some parallel reality, we would have the chance to meet each other in the first place. Sometimes we do not even consider opening our hearts to certain people because it would be too complicated, too exhausting; we might even risk losing someone else because of it. What are we willing to sacrifice for love, and what would be already too much? And what are we willing to risk for a "one-night stand"? Are we willing to risk social status, the loss of family, or the loss of community? Does desiring and loving someone who

[151] Adrienne Rich's poem *XVII* from her *Twenty-One Love Poems* collection.

is not like us mean losing part of ourselves? To whom or to what we remain loyal?

The following text engages precisely with the forces Rich writes about in the second paragraph of her poem: the forces that, while we are trying to love and relate to others, range not only against us (externally) but also within us (internally), in an interconnected cycle of negotiating our own being with others through certain forms of intimacy. The "intimate state of Israel," therefore, can be understood not only in terms of physical and emotional proximity between individuals but also in the ways the state shapes the possibilities and limitations of such encounters. Hence, there are multiple ways to read the title of this part.

As *The Intimate State of Israel* is a title, all letters are capitalized. It is also an indication that I am talking about a particular state with a capital "S," as a recognizable materialization of popular sovereignty[152] with official political structures, army, and representation situated inside of particular (albeit contested) geographical boundaries. "Intimacy" is then a reference to the intimacy in which concrete human lives, including their intimate relationships, are shaped and molded precisely *in* and *through* the interaction with the State, with its legislative possibilities, ideology (that is, through governmentality in the Foucault's sense), and hegemonic nation-building narratives.[153]

However, there is another way of writing it: "The intimate state of Israel." This version would refer both to thinking of the state with a lowercase "s," as an intertwining of diffuse power relations and everyday practices, where Israel would then represent not a particular territorial claim and its current manifestations, but the Jewish *ethnos* as a continuum subsumed under the label Israel as Israelites. Finally, in a third way of reading this title, "state" is a condition or way of being that exists at a particular time. The title should ideally represent and encompass all these meanings and modes of reading.

What, then, does it mean to love and form relationships within the boundaries of a state and a nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983)?

---

[152] For a discussion on the relationship between popular sovereignty and the ways in which the state disciplines and maintains the nation, that is, the people as vehicles of nation-state sovereignty, see Dalsheim 2021. For a discussion on Jewish sovereignty and the instrumentalization of religion for political, nation-state goals, see Yadgar 2017.

[153] In the context of this dissertation, I understand the hegemonic narrative as based on two components: drawing on Gramsci's notion of *cultural hegemony* (1971), which operates not through violence and coercion, but through shared consent and internalized agreement, wherein the subordinate classes unknowingly accept the dominant class's worldview; and Lyotard's (1979) *metanarratives*, which are organizing and unifying stories that legitimize authority and suppress alternative perspectives.

In what ways does "the intimate" reflect the permissible contours, and in what ways does one negotiate new horizons? This part of the dissertation explores how the intimate relationships and desires of secular Israeli Jews are creating an "infrastructure of intimacy," in which no one's fated or doomed to love anyone, yet "car crashes," or, in Lauren Berlant's terms, "glitches," happen, and the discursive order fails to fully encompass the creativity of its subjects. Yet, to be able to attend this infrastructure of intimacy, I first need to address a different set of questions. In this way, I follow a note of a psychiatrist Stanislav Grof who claims that linear causality (linearity) is "just a one way to tell a story" (Grof, 2020: 34).

This part of the dissertation represents the core ethnographic work and is divided into three interconnected chapters. These chapters communicate with one another and build a cumulative knowledge. At the same time, they can be partially read as stand-alone pieces, each focused on a distinct layer of the inquiry: *Who? Where? With whom and with whom not?* That is: "identity," "space," and "relationships." Respectively, I ask: Who are the subjects of the research? What does it mean that they self-identify as "secular Jews"? How do they understand and articulate this identity? Where was the research conducted, and how do people describe and make sense of their environments? With whom do they share space? What role do their narrations of identity play in their intimate relationships? And what do these relationships reveal about the state and society of which they are a part?

The chapters are as follows: *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition*, *Topography of Locations: Shabbat Shalom, Ramadan Kareem*, and *Infrastructure of Intimacy: Thick Life, Thin Lines*. Each of the chapters, besides scholarly discussions on the topic,[154] and my subjective "ethnographic" reflections from the "field," include within themselves particular tools I developed for both the analysis and the resulting mode of representation through writing. For the first chapter, it is what I call "tropology," for the second one the "dialogical windows of mirror images," and for the last one it is the metaphorical movements of subjects through the "infrastructure of intimacy."

[154] The second chapter is less based on the scholarly discussion and is mostly grounded in the subjective reflections of the "field," since it works heavily with the entries of my field diary, poems, and impressions.

3. 1. Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition

"You know why we, the seculars, are going to lose this [political] *battle in the end? Because we have religion in us. We can't live without it."*
— Yaacov, friend

This chapter is focused on the complexities of a "secular" subjectivity of Israeli Jews in what we might call a postsecular landscape. First, I begin by offering an overview of the identity framework governing the Jewish population as part of the broader Israeli identity discourse within the Zionist nation-building project. Rather than focusing on the secular-religious cleavage in Israel or the state's character and identity, my primary interest lies in how the "secular" subject is formed and how "secularity" becomes an embodied and lived experience for Jewish subjects in Israel as one of the discursively available modes of Jewish subjectivity. To set the stage for the inquiry into the politics of intimacy and desire, I then introduce what I term *tropology* based on the conducted in-depth interviews. Through tropology, I trace the tropes through which "being a secular Jew" is narrated and gestured—both physically and symbolically—revealing how claimed secular Jewishness emerges as a performative dialogue. By situating the secular majority as a dynamic and complex unit of analysis, this chapter challenges the tendency to treat it either as a fixed category with obvious content, or as an "asymptomatic" default. I approach "secularity" in Israel as a dialogical process— as a multivocal conversation *with*, *against*, and *alongside* its particular contextual anchoring. This contextual introduction is essential for a deeper exploration of the politics of intimacy and desire among specific subjects, while ensuring that their identities are not confined to a predetermined script that rigidifies them.

It is spring 2023, and Israel has been flooded with demonstrations since the beginning of the year. The streets pulse with chants and banners in opposition to the newly formed government, which has returned the longest-serving Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to the political leadership. He connected himself with a coalition government composed of far-right and religious parties. Soon after its formation, the government pushed forward an ambitious—and for some of the interlocutors, friends and informants also deeply controversial—judicial

overhaul plan. For many, especially within the "secular" sector of society, the plan represents anti-democratic, far-right, "religious" coercion. I watch the news coverage with my flatmate, Yaacov, as we sit in our breezy Jerusalem apartment. The images on the screen flicker between police lines, streets packed with demonstrators and their banners, and fiery speeches condemning the government's actions. Yaacov exhales sharply:

"You know why we, the seculars, are going to lose this [political] *battle in the end?"* he asks, and his voice is full of sadness. *"Because we have religion in us. We can't live without it."*

I do not answer him immediately. There is something in his statement that lingers beyond the immediate context of the protests. Something, I feel, that touches on a deeper paradox. What does it mean for secular Jews in Israel to carry religion within them, even as they resist it? Can one ever fully disentangle the "secular" from the "religious" in a state where both are so deeply enmeshed in what is perceived as national identity? For days afterward, I am returning to Yaacov's remark.

As the proponents of the postsecular approach[155] remind us, secularity, and "being secular" does not emerge in a vacuum; it is always constituted in relation to what it seeks to differentiate itself from, and vice versa. It would be too simplifying to claim that secular Jews in Israel lack "religion" or distance themselves from "religion." They engage with it, even though sometimes reluctantly, in ways that reveal the fluid and contingent nature of secular formations in their embodied experiences. I approach secularity as a discursively available mode of a Jewish subjectivity within particular (socially, spatially and historically conditioned) discourse.

Through repetition (as in Butler[156]) it becomes a "reality," because such subjectification "involves the simultaneous imposition and active take-up of the [...] conditions of existence" (Butler 1997 in Davies and Gannon, 2005: 314).[157]

[155] See the *Postsecular Search for Secular Subject* chapter.

[156] See the *Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories* chapter.

[157] "[...] the subject is itself a site of this ambivalence in which the subject emerges both as the *effect* of a prior power and as the *condition of possibility* for a radically conditioned form of agency. A theory of the subject should take into account the full ambivalence of the conditions of its operation." (Butler, 1997: 14–15). Even though Butler discusses gender in the quote, their approach of performative repetition is useful for thinking through other types of subjectification as well (as seen in, e.g., Aly 2015).

But what constitutes these conditions of existence? To what kind of discursive order is the subject interpellated? I approach these questions in the order in which they were asked: first, I address the conditions of existence, and later, the discursive order of “Jewish identity” and the genealogy of the term *hiloni*.

Several sociological studies[158] have been published on the multifaceted reality of “being Jewish” in Israel. These studies primarily aim to characterize and “measure” the level of “Jewishness” of Israelis: how they self-identify in terms of religiosity and observance, the extent to which their identities as Jews and Israelis overlap, and their attitudes, values, political orientations, and practices. Although surveys consistently indicate that the majority of Israel’s Jewish population self-identifies as secular, the ways in which individuals categorize and experience their claimed secularity remain deeply complex. As Arian and Keissar-Sugarmen (2009: 12) suggest, the secular and the religious often emerge as “a package deal that combines distinct and distinguishing characteristics and attitudes,” rather than as opposing categories.

Religious “belief” and practice do not always align in predictable ways. As the surveys mentioned earlier, and work of other scholars (Yadgar and Liebman 2009; Yadgar 2010, 2011) demonstrate, individuals may express belief in God—or not—while selectively engaging in specific “religious” practices. These practices may also be understood by its subjects as a form of “culture,” as part of a “repertoire of the Jewish cultural heritage” (Levy, Levinsohn, and Katz, 2002: 271), or as elements of a broader framework akin to what Ann Swidler (1986) terms a “cultural toolkit.”[159] Others, as Lahav (2017) notes, self-identify as Jewish *secular-believers* while articulating a sense of connection to “something” that

[158] Levy, Levinsohn and Katz 1993, 2002; Arian and Keissar-Sugarmen 2009; Pew Research Centre 2016; Rosner and Fuchs 2019. For the discussion on the conclusions of Levy, Levinsohn and Katz 1993, see also Liebman and Katz 1997. For the theoretical discussion on “secular Judaism,” see, e.g., Liebman 1998.

[159] As Liebman and Yadgar (2009: 31) suggest, “the differences between secular and religious ritual might in many cases be the interpretation given to the ritual rather than the ritual itself.”

transcends what we understand as Jewish "faith"[160] or identity.[161] A postsecular perspective invites us not to see these tensions necessarily as contradictions, but rather to see them as integral to the ways people navigate intersections of the "religious" and the "secular" in contemporary Israel. As Lahav (2017: 66) argues, "the current post-secular paradigm sees such hybridity as a deep manifestation of the complex relations between the secular and the religious in postmodern culture." In this light, the secularization thesis struggles to account for cases where "faith" and "practice" do not fit neatly together and where the ways of negotiating "being Jewish" seem paradoxical for an outsider.

It is essential to assert that "being a Jew" is both a normative and, in fact, default category in modern Israel—one that is almost inescapable for those born into the category.[162] Israel is the only state where the "Jew" is the norm which goes against the experience of the thousands years history of diasporic being and existence. Israel self-identifies itself as the nation-state[163] of the Jewish people—what Samy Smooha (1997, 2002) terms an *ethnic democracy* or Oren Yiftachel (2006) as *ethnocracy*—based on "a complex intertwining of […] secular-modern ethno-nationalism and orthodox-dominated religious traditionalism" (Halperin-Kaddari and Yadgar, 2010: 906). While in the Czech Republic, for example, "being Jewish" is primarily a matter of subjects' self-identification from the state's perspective, which delegates responsibility for determining such status to the to the Federation of Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization for individual Jewish communities—in Israel, it is a legal question and political tool used to stratify society (Yadgar 2017, 2020).

---

[160] As Lahav (2017) states, in the case of Judaism, it is essential to remember that, unlike Christianity, where "faith" is central, Judaism is primarily based on practice (Lahav 2017; Lancaster 1993). Lahav cites Fisher (2012), who argues that "[...] one may claim that, for Jews, self-identification as religious or secular relates to observance rather than faith. This, of course, does not mean that Judaism makes no claims about God, the world, and people. Judaism extends beyond robotic adherence to law, but presents theology through the 'reading, reflective, and experiential practices that constitute the Jewish religious life'" (Fisher 2012: 2 in Lahav, 2017: 69). Similarly, Katz (1986) suggests the term "Orthoprax" as a more precise descriptor, arguing that in rabbinical Judaism, it is "the correct observance of religious prescriptions, rather than correct belief" that is considered essential" (Katz, 1986: 3–17 in Irshai, 2010: 58–59). Furthermore, epistemology of Judaism is all-encompassing, and thus "translating the Christian notion of 'religion' into the Jewish-Hebrew semantic field is problematic, above all because, according to Jewish epistemology, religious existence and experience is all-inclusive and cannot distinguish between the spiritual and the temporal, or the sacred and the secular, as far as human activity is concerned. Judaism lacks a 'secular' law and as such it does not recognize sacred as opposed to profane areas of occupation." (Fischer, 2013: 111).

[161] For a topic of Jewish Israeli atheists, see Friedman, Guzmen-Carmeli and Werczberger 2024.

[162] For more on the system of categories, see the *Field and Subjects* section.

[163] See the Israeli quasi-constitutional Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People (also known as Nation-State Bill or Nationality Bill).

Indeed, "being Jewish" is central to determining citizenship (for rights and obligations derived from the citizenship status, such as the right of return and military service obligations) as well as personal status matters, such as marriage and divorce, which fall under the jurisdiction of Orthodox rabbinical courts for all Jews.[164] In the Diaspora, including the Czech Republic, if one wants to "do religion" or "do identity," one must actively engage with and performatively grasp such identity and tradition; otherwise, they "risk" assimilation. In Israel, however, through laws such as the Law of Return,[165] the Citizenship Law, and the Rabbinical Courts Jurisdiction Law (Halperin-Kaddari and Yadgar, 2010: 906), Jewish identity is ascribed at birth, carrying significant legal and civic consequences, as it reflects the understanding of national and religious unity within the category of a "Jew." This framework resembles *ius sanguinis*, but with an ethno-religious definition that extends into the realm of citizenship.

In the words of Louis Althusser, one is interpellated into a certain discursive order and, in this case, becomes the subject of a "Jewish discursive order" or, of an "Israeli identity discourse" (Beit-Hallahmi, 2007: 161), which we might perceive interchangeably as a "Zionist identity discourse." In such a discourse, "being a Jew" is a "master identity" —not in the sense of master versus slave, but in the sense of "the category through which all other social identities are to be mediated" (du Gay, Evans, and Redman, 2000: 1). It is only through this master category that the other layers and sections—simultaneous authenticities of what we call "identity"—are made visible.

By assigning questions of personal status to the jurisdiction of rabbinical courts, the state significantly limits individuals' ability to dissociate from the category of "Jew." As already mentioned, unlike in the Diaspora, where Jewish identity necessitates active engagement, in Israel, one is instead compelled to actively navigate life in ways that would allow for complete disengagement. This structure, in turn, theoretically enables those categorized as "Jews" to maintain their Jewish identity without constructing any substantive content around their identity claim (although, based on my research, such a void of content is rarely the

[164] Israel has adopted a modified version of the Ottoman *Millet* system, in which matters of personal status, including marriage, are governed by state-recognized religious denominations and their respective authorities. This means, among other things, that Orthodox Jewish authorities are vested with the power to define the boundaries of "being Jewish" in Israel. As a result, all "Jewish" individuals are subject to this normative influence, regardless of their self-identification or affiliation with non-Orthodox streams of Judaism.
[165] See the *Field and Subjects* section.

case). This is not only due to the legal effects of the category of a "Jew" and its default status but also because the state itself cultivates and reinforces its Jewish character: "the Jewish character is preserved, protected, and strengthened by the state, its market, and its culture […]" (Lahav, 2015: 357).

However, the religion-bound markers of the state, such as state symbols, ceremonies, and public holidays, are frequently politicized and wielded as tools to sustain the *status quo* (Liebman and Don-Yehiya 1983; Don-Yehia 1999; Beit-Hallahmi 2007; Levy 2011; Fischer 2013; Yadgar 2020), which is predominantly understood as an almost untouchable "agreement" between the "religious" and the "secular"—the religious authorities and the state—regarding the conditions of interconnectedness in four main areas: *Shabbat* observance, *Kashrut* laws in public institutions, family matters under religious jurisdiction, and the autonomy of Jewish religious education.[166] Additionally, the persistent Zionist nation-building meta-narrative maintains a "primordial bond connecting the democratic and secular Jewish state with Jewish (religious) tradition […]" (Halperin-Kaddari and Yadgar, 2010: 907).

In this sense, "secularity" in Israel also carries a political significance: people are not necessarily rejecting their "Jewishness" but may seek to break free from constraints of the Orthodox establishment. Their self-ascribed secularity might be unrelated to their relationship with Judaism or with the "Jewishness" that serves as a foundational principle of the nation-state.[167] Most Israeli Jews believe

[166] Ben-Porat (2013) argues that, through the process of secularization of Israeli society, the authority of the Orthodox rabbinical establishment over daily life is gradually undermined. He explains that his shift involves a decline in religious authority, particularly within the public domain. While formally, then, the status quo remains, in practice, its effectiveness is weakened. Yadgar, in contrast, challenges the prevailing understanding of the *status quo* as a concession by the secular founders of the State of Israel, particularly David Ben-Gurion, to Orthodox Jews, which is often interpreted as "religious" coercion. Yadgar interprets the *status quo* as a prerequisite for Israel's self-designation as a "Jewish state," because without these minimal points, Israel could not identify itself as a "Jewish state," but only as a "state of the Jews" based on biological grounds. As mentioned earlier in the *Ethnic Jews: Beyond Ontological Jewishness* section, Yadgar (2024) further develops his argument and suggests that we might perceive and analyse Zionism through the lens of supersessionism as a (political) theology of replacement. In this view, "traditional" Jewish symbols are first "secularized" to serve the aims of the nation-state and later imbued with politically "theological" meanings, which represent "New Judaism." This understanding fits within the postsecular paradigm and aligns with proponents of the postsecular approach, as this scholarly tradition often highlights the "blindness" of the "secular" state in its tendency to formulate itself in quasi-religious terms.

[167] Such Jews, Liebman and Yadgar (2009) consider as "secular by default." Furthermore, they distinguish between "secular-Judaists," who engage with certain practices and traditions but do not see themselves as religious, and "secular-universalists," for whom being born Jewish, as well as Judaism and Jewishness, are irrelevant. For another type of classification and approach, see Liebman's previous work (1998), where he articulates different modes of an Israeli version of "secular Judaism." Liebman suggests distinguishing between Jewish religion, Jewish culture and

the state should maintain a Jewish character (Levy, Levinsohn, and Katz 2002), even though what that means—beyond ensuring a demographic majority—remains uncertain (Yadgar 2017, 2020).

Since, as I mentioned, the category of "Jew" in Israel is not merely a matter of self-identification but also a legal issue, the ethno-religious framework thus operates not only as a symbolic marker but as a lived structure that governs access to rights and obligations, and shapes both individuals' "lived" trajectories and the broader fabric of the state.

To map the potential "postsecular condition" in Israel, I borrow Casanova's (2009) terminology, as discussed in the *Postsecular Search for Secular Subject* chapter. My primary focus is not on the discussion of the secular-religious cleavage in the state or the character of the state (though these conditions are important for contextualization), but on the formation of the "secular" subject and "secularity" as an embodied and lived experience of the Jewish subject in Israel. In this context, I briefly outline my approach to other categories presented by Casanova and summarize the key points discussed above. Self-identified secular Jews might or might not also be *secularists*—advocates of *secularism* as a principle of statecraft and ideology, where "religion" is seen as a coercive authority that should remain separate from the state's secular matters and not interfere with the private lives of non-religious individuals who reject such authority.

The complexity of the situation in Israel arises from the fact that, despite the self-proclaimed secular nature of the state, it continues to rely on Orthodox rabbinical authorities to determine the legal question of "who is a Jew," thus endowing them with normative power. At the same time, the ethno-nationalism that underpins the Zionist project—a specific manifestation of European nationalism—must engage with "religion," as it requires religious symbols, rituals, and understandings to transform "Jewishness" into an ethnicized,

Jewish ethnicity (as components of Judaism) to sketch the contours of secular Judaism. He then consequently discusses three definitions or modes of secular Judaism based on the varying degrees of interconnectedness of these components. I perceive such theoretical categorization as highly instructive and informative; however, my intention in this dissertation is not to place subjects into closely defined boxes. Rather, my approach is inspired by schools of thought where the subjects trouble such notions of coherence.

nationalized and secularized discourse of "biology" and "essence," while maintaining continuity with Jewish history.[168]

This turn, represents a reconfiguration of Jewish consciousness specific to the historical conditions of Zionism.[169] The repercussions of such a reframing of Jewish identity as "ethnicized" category are at the core of the Zionist[170] identity politics and discourse, to which subjects are interpellated: as mentioned in the *Field and Subjects* section, the state categorizes all its citizens (and non-citizen residents) according to their religious affiliation based on the list of recognized religions by the state. Additionally, it distinguishes between nationality (*le'om*) and citizenship (*ezrahut*), with the court ruling that nationality cannot be *Israeli*—hence, the "Jewishness" as a nationality is created by the state's legislation. These identity categories are crucial not only because they delineate the symbolic boundaries of national belonging but also because they structure the subjects' possibilities for living their lives. These categories are state-imposed—in conjunction with religious authorities endowed with such power—rather than chosen as an articulation of one's feelings, desires, affections, or self-understanding.[171]

---

[168] For the discussion on Israeli Jewish nationalism, see also, e.g. Sternhell 1998; Ben-Israel 2003; Kimmerling 2005; Friesel 2006; Ram 2011; Rabkin 2016; Penslar 2023. For an argument on the re-religionization of Israeli society, see, e.g., Peled and Peled 2018. For a discussion on secularization in Israel, see, e.g. Ben-Porat 2013.

[169] Zionism, as a secular, ethno-nationalist ideology articulating the idea of sovereign Jews (Yadgar 2017), emerged at the end of the 19th century at the crossroads of European nationalisms, the masculinization of society, and, most importantly, as an attempt to address the worsening situation of European Jews. It was built upon the racialized discourses and theories that dominated that era. One of the ideological "founding fathers" of Zionism, Max Nordau—whom I already mentioned in the *Introduction*—engaged with concepts of racial hygiene, eugenics, and the politics of regeneration. He understood himself to be Jewish not by religion but by "race" (Stanislawski, 2001: 67). Another key figure (alongside the more widely known Theodor Herzl) was Arthur Ruppin, a vocal proponent of race theory, who argued that fulfilling the Zionist ideal required preserving Jewish racial purity.

[170] Providing a typology of the various streams and interpretations of Zionism—such as cultural Zionism (with key figures like Ahad Ha'am), political Zionism, or religious Zionism—is beyond the scope and focus of this dissertation. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these different streams, while distinct in their ideological foundations and objectives, have all contributed to the complex and often paradoxical entanglement of Jewish identity, nationalism, and secularity in Israel. Rather than offering a comprehensive typology, this dissertation examines how secular subjectivity is shaped within the Zionist project, particularly through the tensions between Jewish identity as a religious category, rooted in tradition, and Jewish identity as an ethnicized and nationalized construct shaped by ethno-nationalist imaginaries. By tracing how *hilonim* navigate these competing frameworks, I lay the groundwork for an ethnographic exploration of the politics of intimacy and desire in the latter part of this work.

[171] This is further important for the politics of intimacy and desire, as it structures the possibilities of whom one can marry, how one can divorce, and how the status of potential children is determined. I address these topics in the last chapter, *Infrastructure of Intimacy.*

The state is then deeply invested in demography, as the maintenance of Jewish dominance in population numbers is perceived as crucial for its survival as a "Jewish state."[172] This intertwining of religious, national, and ethnic formations of Jewishness sets the stage for understanding the genealogy of the *hiloni*. Given this context, how did this discursive mode of Jewish subjectivity come to the forefront?

The term *hiloni* (secular) as a category of Jewish subjectivity in Israel is a relatively recent linguistic and socio-political construct that has significantly transformed over time. Its genealogy is deeply entangled with processes of Zionist nation-building, religious-secular contestations, and shifts in the Hebrew lexicon that accommodated modern ideological divisions. The historical and linguistic analysis reveals that this term was neither always available as a clear-cut identity marker nor always signified the same socio-political positioning. Instead, its emergence and stabilization as an available category were conditioned by the needs of the Zionist project and the reconfiguration of Jewish identity in a secular-nationalist framework (Liebman and Yadgar 2009; Fischer 2013).

Fischer (2013) examines the complex and evolving concepts of religion (*dat*)[173] and secularism (*hiloniut*)[174] in the Hebrew language and their socio-political implications in Israel. According to Fischer, the development of *hiloni* as a self-referential category coincided with broader ideological and linguistic transformations, particularly those associated with Zionism and the redefinition of Jewish nationhood. Unlike in Christian traditions, where the sacred and the secular emerged as distinct realms, Jewish epistemology historically did not recognize such a division. The very process of constructing *hiloni* as an

[172] This demographic focus is not merely a matter of numbers but is closely tied to the politics of reproduction, often referred to as the "womb wars" (Kahn 2000; Taragin-Zeller 2023). From the very outset of statehood, Israeli reproductive governance has been directed at producing the "right" population through a variety of mechanisms, encouraging some groups to procreate while disempowering others. Such a process is understood as a *stratified reproduction* (Colen 1986; Ginsburg and Rapp 1995), where certain populations are seen as more "desirable" to multiply than others. Beyond concerns about the Arab population's growth, demographic anxieties have also been directed at internal divisions, including those between *Ashkenazim* and *Mizrahim*, or Ethiopian Jews, and the religious-secular divide. Similar processes and mechanisms can also be observed in other countries, including the Czech Republic. For instance, in socialist Czechoslovakia, Romani women were subjected to forced sterilization.

[173] *Dat* in Hebrew means also "law." In this sense, the term can be read through a prism that reflects the centrality of practice in Judaism, where the set of rules (law) is itself the religion, as discussed earlier.

[174] As I mentioned earlier, secularism, as an ideology and state-craft principle, and as a construct of modernity, does not necessarily have to be also a political orientation and stance of the "seculars"—subjects who self-identify as secular, even though it might often be the case.

identity was thus deeply entangled with attempts to normalize Jewish identity within modern statehood.

The transformation of *hiloni* into an identity marker began in the late 19th century, paralleling the rise of Zionism and the redefinition of Jewish collectivity in non-religious terms. The term was reinvigorated by Hebrew revivalists and Zionist thinkers as part of Zionism's broader ideological project: the construction of a *New Jew*,[175] liberated from diasporic passivity, who was firmly rooted in national, territorial, and linguistic renewal. Thus, in early Zionism, the word *ivri* (Hebrew) was rather used as an equivalent of such a New Jew (Liebman and Yadgar, 2009: 4–5).

The emergence of *hiloni* as an available linguistic mode and term can be traced to the foundational years of the State of Israel, where political and cultural forces sought to differentiate between religious and secular publics. By the 1950s and 1960s, Israeli political discourse had institutionalized *hiloni* as a formal socio-political category (Fischer, 2013: 115). Previously, many non-religious Jews identified as *hofshi* (free), which is a term conveying personal autonomy rather than ideological secularism (Liebman and Yadgar, 2009: 4–5). The decline of *hofshi* in favor of *hiloni* coincided with state-led efforts to classify Jewish society into distinct religious and secular sectors, reinforcing ideological boundaries through legal and educational frameworks, where the religious-secular divide is understood as a defining societal cleavage (Fischer, 2013: 113–114).

Yet, *hiloni* has never been a fixed or uncontested category. It has oscillated between negative and positive connotations, which were shaped by political struggles rather than clear distinctions. By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the rigid dichotomy between *hiloni* (secular) and *dati* (religious) has been increasingly challenged by hybrid forms of identities. Fischer identifies a shift toward a postsecular approach to these modes, wherein *hiloni* identity cannot be defined solely by detachment from religious observance and practice but is reconfigured through cultural and nationalistic engagements with Jewish tradition. This evolution underscores the inherently relational nature of *hiloni* subjectivity that is continuously shaped by its dialectical positioning and recalibration.

My inquiry thus begins with what appears to be a simple question: What does it mean to be “secular” for those who, when asked, responded, “Yes, that’s

[175] See the footnotes n. 75 and 242.

me"—those who recognized themselves in the category I invoked when I sought "secular Israeli Jews" for in-depth interviews? Rather than assuming secularity as a stable or self-evident "quality," this initial inquiry traces how it is narrated and gestured in a landscape that we might understand as postsecular. The first step is not merely classificatory but it is an attempt to unsettle ontological assumptions about Jews, as outlined in the *Theoretical terrain* part of the dissertation. From here, I move beyond questions of identification to examine the politics of intimacy and desire among those "secular Israeli Jews" in later chapters.

3. 1. 1. Tropology: Being a "Secular Jew"

It is early April 2023, and the Jewish holiday of *Pesach* (Passover), which commemorates the Exodus of the Jews from Egyptian slavery, is approaching. During the holiday, people gather for a *Seder*—a ritualized dinner, whose name literally means "order" or "procedure" due to its structured sequence of steps. During the *Seder*, the *Haggada*, a standardized narrative of the Exodus, is read aloud. This reading is accompanied by a symbolic meal, with items arranged on a special *Seder* plate: unleavened *matzah* bread; *maror* (bitter herbs), recalling the suffering of slavery; *charoset* (a paste of apples, nuts, and wine), representing the mortar used by the enslaved Jews; *hazeret* (another bitter herb, often lettuce); *zeroa* (a roasted shank bone), symbolizing the lamb sacrificed before the Exodus; *karpas* (usually parsley), dipped in salt water or vinegar to evoke both the hope of renewal and the bitterness of tears; and *beitzah* (a boiled egg), symbolizing both sacrifice and the cycle of life. Also, four cups of wine are drunk at specific moments during the reading.

By that time, I have been living in Jerusalem for a few months. The city already feels familiar, yet a certain loneliness lingers when the streets empty for Jewish holidays. My new friends notice. Many of them, in their own way, take me under their wing—checking in, making sure I have a place to be on Friday nights, worrying that I might feel alone when they retreat to their families for *Shabbat* dinner. Perhaps that is why I receive several invitations to *Seder* dinner at once. Ultimately, I chose the first one that arrived. It comes from Ariel, a well-traveled man in his forties whose large family all lives in Jerusalem. During one of our occasional coffee meetups, he extends the invitation: "*Come join us for the Seder. And don't worry, it's not about religion, it's about family and tradition. It's*

magical and beautiful." I am not worried about religion, though. But Ariel insists on making the distinction: this is not about religion. For him, family and tradition stand apart from religious practice. "*I'm secular*," he tells me more than once, as if the very act of naming it carves out the necessary distance as a narrative buffer between what counts as "religion" and what remains just "tradition."

On the evening of the *Seder* dinner, I make my way to Ariel's parents' home in one of Jerusalem's quiet neighborhoods. The streets are calm and I can hear only distant voices of gatherings behind closed doors of other houses. The living room is full: old parents, siblings, kids and a dog. A long table stretches across the room, covered in a white tablecloth, with a Seder plate in the centre together with the book of *Haggada*. Ariel's mother welcomes me with open arms: "*First time at a family Seder*?" Before I can even answer, his father is already urging everyone to begin because there are many steps to follow, and the kids are impatient and hungry. He gestures toward the *Haggadah* in front of us and easily flips through the pages. He knows what he is doing. Ariel tells me: "*We don't take it too seriously though*."

And yet, as the reading begins, Ariel is the one leading the table through the verses, reading the words with fluency as he knows them almost by heart. He reminds his youngest niece when to ask the Four Questions.[176] When someone mispronounces or is out of the melody of *Dayenu*, the room bursts into laughter. When we sing *Echad Mi Yodea*, a song whose words I know well enough to finally join in, the room comes fiercely alive. Our hands move in exaggerated gestures, the bodies lean into the rhythm, and each verse is unfolding not just in words but also through movement. That serves as an embodied retelling of the song's counting refrain.

After the fourth cup of wine, I feel tipsy and not just from the wine, but from the atmosphere, which wraps around me like a soft blanket. Between bites of *maror* and sips of wine, I watch Ariel. He inhabits the evening with the ease of someone who has done this more than forty times, insisting all the while that it is definitely not about religion. He shrugs off its weight but somehow holds onto its gestures, its language, and also its choreography. He moves without an effort and

[176] The Four Questions (*Mah Nishtanah)* are part of the whole *Seder.* Usually, it is the role of the youngest person at the table to ask them. It starts with the question "*How is this night different from all other nights?*".

oscillates between irreverence and respect, between dismissal and deep familiarity.

Later, Ariel drives me home. I remember only snippets of our conversation, but one word resonates: *makom*. As we talk, he explains to me certain motifs, sayings, and meanings from the *Seder*. *Makom*, literally "place," is also one of God's names, he tells me, signifying His omnipresence—God is also a place. At home, my roommate Yaacov—whose claim that "*we seculars have religion inside us*" opened this chapter—welcomes me. He has just returned from the *Seder* at his mother's house. Without knowing about my conversation with Ariel, he too starts speaking about *makom*. *Makom, makom, makom.* I whisper this word as I fall asleep.

To narrate oneself as secular here is to perform a delicate balancing act, oscillating between negation and continuity, rupture and inheritance. It is to say, *this is not about religion* while instinctively reaching for its language, its rhythms, and its familiarity. I think to myself that the flipping of pages, the raising of a glass, the leaning of bodies into song, are gestures that seem unremarkable in the moment but they accumulate over time and sediment somehow into muscle memory of the bodies. Perhaps to narrate oneself as secular is to inhabit *makom*—to dwell in a space where categories may blur beyond their political and demographic meanings, where religion is not simply something one has or lacks, but something that seeps into voice, taste, and movement, disappearing for a moment only to grandiosely return to the scene once again.

In what follows, I trace the tropes through which "being a secular Jew" is narrated and gestured, both physically and symbolically, and through which claimed "secular Jewishness" emerges. I do so through portraits of specific interlocutors, whose narrations and gestures form a certain typology, or *tropology*[177]—one that, as will be seen, moves along a spectrum whose final form

[177] Tropology is commonly used in two contexts: first, as the study and analysis of figurative language in speech and writing, focusing on how tropes (such as metaphors and similes) convey meanings beyond the literal. Second, in Christian theological exegesis, it refers to the interpretation of biblical texts with an emphasis on the moral or figurative meanings and their lessons, often in contrast to or alongside the literal meaning. In the context of this dissertation, in what I refer to as *tropology*, I draw inspiration from the theoretical approaches outlined in the *Theoretical Terrain* section and from the methodology of narrative ethnography (see *Process of Analysis and Notes on Writing* in the methodological part). Specifically, for this part, I am also inspired by Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) theorizing "identity talks," who conceptualizes identity as a narrative—both verbal and non-verbal, expressed through performative aspects. For her, these narratives are not only reflective but also performative, as identity is continuously shaped through interaction, embodiment, and positionality. What I call *tropology* is the tracing of meaning-making through narrations and gestures that compose the figurative tropes of secularity.

is never truly fixed. As I move through these tropes, it becomes evident that not all of them are represented by voices of multiple interlocutors. However, this does not mean that such tropes appeared only once during the interviews: the tropology is cumulative, building upon previously covered tropes, with each new narration adding to and reshaping the previous ones.

By categorizing these narrations and gestures into tropes and speakers I do not not suggest their rigid distinctiveness or fixed boundaries between them; rather, they remain deeply entangled, and sometimes, they occur simultaneously. Self-narration and gestures unfold through dynamic, intersecting trajectories, and they reflect the shifting contours of the conditions upon which they are based. I approach these tropes as multiple ways of "reading" secular Jewishness in Israel, as interpretative frames that remain open as provisional sites for re-narration and reception.

Secularity as Personal Autonomy

The first of the recurring narrative tropes is the understanding of one's "being secular" as an articulation and assertion of autonomy. To narrate oneself as "secular" in this context is often to emphasize one's independence and freedom—the critical aspect, however, is from what that independence and freedom are claimed. Secularity, in this sense, is often a response, a counterpoint to multiple expectations which subjects perceive as either constraining or limiting. The ways in which secularity is narrated as autonomy differ in the extent to which subjects dialogically engage with their "Jewishness."

Tomer: ***I am my own religion***

The golden hour of the day is coming to shine over Florentine, one of the "hipster" parts of Tel Aviv. Tomer, in his late twenties, leans forward in his chair in the tiny tattoo studio, as he applies the ink to my skin. The air smells faintly like dust of late spring mixed with weed. It is easy to talk to each other from the very beginning. Tomer is very professional yet relaxed, and me being a foreigner piques his curiosity. "*So, what brings you here*?" he coughs through a too-big puff. I mention my already classic phrase "*research... secular Israeli Jews*," and his eyes light up. "*I'm secular too*," he says, and his tone shifts from casual to

interested. "*Can I be interviewed?*" Of course you can, I smile. During the interview I ask him what it means for him to be secular. He takes a moment to respond. After a while, he is sure:

"*I believe in myself. I am my own religion. I am my own guy*."

The words feel almost like a mantra, like a life motto, and as he says them, I sense that this is not just a statement; it is also a conclusion. A thought he has carried with him for years, now given voice in this moment.

"*I choose my own life… I believe there is religion and there is God for everyone who believes, but not for me. I'm living in my own bubble. I need to work hard for the things I really want to do. And even if I prayed, it would not help me. I just need to work hard for my things and for everything. For a relationship, for bringing money home, to do things I want to do. Life is just about hard work.*"

His view of life is pragmatic, clear, and deeply individualistic—one in which "religion" has no place, not because it is irrelevant, but because his own efforts are the tools he trusts most. For Tomer, being Jewish does not hold a significant place in his life:

"*I'm Jewish because I was born as such. But I'm not very Jewish, I guess*."

I wonder what would make him feel "more" Jewish. At first, he is unsure and he offers a few half-hearted guesses:

"*Maybe the connection to the holidays, to religion, to the synagogue, to culture... but I don't have a connection to any of it.*"

His uncertainty shifts to clarity as he starts to speak about the family:

"*I celebrate some holidays, but only because it's for the family. Not for me. I don't really care if it's Pesach, Hanukkah, or Yom Kippur. For me, holidays just mean I'm gonna see my parents, eat good food, and rest a bit.*"

His plans for next year add another layer:

"*Next year, I plan to live abroad, and I'll celebrate any holidays people celebrate there, so not the Jewish ones. Because you don't want to be alone during holidays*."

Tomer's narration of secularity appears to rest on a foundation of personal responsibility and self-determination, where his "Jewishness" carries little to no significance. Instead, the core of his secularity lies in the autonomy he asserts in defining and shaping his own life, which I would describe as a liberal notion of secularity. Tomer understands himself as free, his own guy—*hofshi*, a term I mentioned previously as preceding *hiloni*. While he does not use this word as we speak in English, it is perhaps the most fitting for describing his perspective. Tomer is "Jewish" only insofar as the state recognizes him as such, which is a distinction he does not explicitly engage with in his narration.

Lea: *I create my own destiny*

This same assertion of autonomy as self-sufficiency also shapes the narration of Lea, a woman in her mid-thirties who, during our meeting at a noisy coffee shop, stirs her cappuccino with a kind of restless energy. As she does so, she proclaims confidently, almost enthusiastically the following sentence and her words fall into the same cadence as the movement of her spoon:

"*I'm not at all religious, I'm secular 100%!*"

However, when asked to elaborate on what this secularity means to her, she takes a moment to gather her thoughts. After a pause, she explains:

"*First of all, this is just me, right? Everyone defines it differently, but for me— for example— I don't believe in God. I believe that I create my own destiny, and that it's not written from above*."

What distinguishes Lea's narration from Tomer's one is the fact that she still, to a certain extent, relates somehow to her Jewishness and to "religion," even though reluctantly. Later in the conversation, Lea adds that she does not see herself as an atheist, however, as she puts it, she is "*not far from being one.*" I find myself momentarily caught off guard—what, then, does being an atheist mean for Lea?

"*I don't see myself as a complete atheist, because I do have some connection or relation to religion. First of all, I do enjoy celebrating the holidays… But as a tradition, not from the religious point of view. I'm not sure that someone who's atheist celebrates holidays. And also, I must say that my grandmother survived the Holocaust. And that's something that I cannot ignore. It's part of who I am. I grew up with her stories, I know her family's history. So even though I don't fully believe in God, I do have some part of me that is proud to be Jewish, that doesn't want to ignore this part. Because it's such a big part of who she is.*"

Lea's relatedness towards her Jewishness builds also on one more aspect:

"*I think I'm mainly related to religion as like… this is who I am. I did not choose it. That's who I am but it doesn't have a lot of meaning in my life. I mean, it doesn't define me. It doesn't restrict me from doing anything. Like I'm a free person to do whatever I want. And I don't think that I should be considering someone else's will before I'm eating something or doing something.*"

Lea's narration of her secular Jewishness reveals a layered, perhaps even paradoxical, relationship with both "religion" and "Jewishness." At first, her words carry the cadence of certainty: *"I'm secular, 100%!"* Yet, as she continues, the boundaries of what this secularity means to her begin to blur. What emerges is not a rejection of Jewishness but an articulation of autonomy that remains tethered to history, "tradition," and which is still affectively tied to the legacy of her grandmother's survival. Lea is "not far" from being an atheist, yet she hesitates to fully embrace the label. This hesitation is not about theological belief but about a sense of potential betrayal—an intergenerational entanglement that binds her Jewishness to her grandmother's survival. The past lingers not as a conscious

commitment but as an unavoidable presence, which is something that cannot simply be discarded.

Like Ariel's celebration of *Pesach*, holidays become spaces for familial reconnection—practices that one chooses to engage with on one's own terms. Yet, the moment "tradition" is perceived as an external imposition rather than a personal choice, Lea resists, as this would interfere with her sense of autonomy. Her secularity, then, is not about the absence of any practice, but about controlling its terms and choosing to which extent to engage with it. And yet, this assertion of autonomy remains largely unmarked. Lea, like Tomer, does not explicitly reflect on the ways in which her Jewishness remains the default within the discursive and legal order of the state. Her ability to claim secularity as self-determination, to "do whatever I want," is itself shaped by the privileges afforded to her within Jewish-Israeli society. This suggests that secularity is itself, to a certain extent, embedded in the very structures that Lea imagines herself as moving beyond.

Nir: *I'm not a Jew, I'm a Hebrew*

There is another way of narrating secularity as autonomy, as seen in the case of Nir, a man in his late forties. A friend introduces him to me as a potential interlocutor. I reach out to him, explaining that I am interviewing "secular Israeli Jews." He agrees to meet and suggests meeting at his apartment which is situated between the ultra-Orthodox Jewish quarter of *Mea Shearim* and the East Jerusalem Central Bus Station, just across from Damascus Gate. On the way to his place, I pass Orthodox Jewish women walking quickly, long skirts swaying as they shepherd small children and push strollers. A few meters away, Muslim women do the same and their *hijabs* catch in Jerusalem's wind as they navigate the trampled pavement. The only one who looks out of place is me.

When I arrive, his apartment is overflowing with books and LPs from different genres. "*You want a coffee? Shachor? Black*?" he asks, already reaching for the kettle. Before I can even answer, he is pouring two cups. "*So, you're writing about secular Jews*," he says. It does not sound like a question, though. "*Funny term, isn't it? First of all... I don't see myself as a Jew, and I don't call myself secular*." The first sip of coffee catches in my throat. My brain stumbles for a moment: *Then why did you agree to this interview? Is this just a waste of my*

time? These are my first, unfiltered thoughts. Yet, I let myself to be surprised. Nir, continues:

"*I don't like the secular Jews. And by secular, I mean those empty, materialistic, money-oriented people. But I don't like ultra-religious people either. Some secular Jews are very nationalistic—they just replaced religion with nationalism. And honestly, that's the case for most secular people here… Of course, not our group of friends in Jerusalem, but we are a tiny minority."*

I start to sense this conversation will be interesting, and I only regret that we have just an hour before Nir has to leave for work.

"For me, what matters is the feeling—the connection to my language, the physicality of Jerusalem, the land itself. I am, externally, an Ashkenazi Jew. But as I said, I don't see myself as Jewish. I didn't ask to be born, to be part of this family, this nation—or non-nation. What interests me is what you choose to do, the decisions you make. I am a native Israeli, but the state doesn't interest me… The Israeli government tries to maintain Jewish superiority. If you're Jewish, you can come here, get citizenship, everything. It's like being Jewish by the Nuremberg Laws. It's terrible. We came here, we kicked out a million Arabs, we did all kinds of things… not me, but we as this country. So, I see myself as a Hebrew, an Ivri in our language. But I don't belong to any movement. Though I could tell you about those people from the 1920s and 1930s who called themselves Hebrews as well.
I am a Hebrew because I speak Hebrew. It's my mother tongue, my first language… Hebrew is special because inside Hebrew, you have the Bible. Inside the Bible, you have religion, philosophy, and the new Hebrew we created. The Bible is a Hebrew book. Three religions came out of it, but it's a Hebrew book. If you don't know Hebrew, it's just stories about people who went into the desert and ate some pita bread."

As Nir delves deeper into Hebrew and the Bible, his words spill out in rapid sequences and his body is pulsating with an unsettled energy, as if the subject matter is too vast, too electrifying to be contained. He lights a cigarette—one of many during our conversation—taking quick drags between

thoughts. He speaks of Jonah, of Abraham, of the contrast between Judaism's abstract God and Christianity's objectified one. Circumcision, he tells me, is not just physical but symbolic, *"a circumcision of the heart and flesh."* Then, with a sharp exhale of smoke, he adds, "*The Bible says nothing about circumcising a dick*."

He goes on to describe his love for the Bible: "*I love the Bible. It's our book. It's my culture. It's my language. It's the wisdom of the world but in my language*. *It also contains the names of God*," he says. And so, I ask a question. Looking back, I realize how ridiculous it must have sounded to Nir, how clearly it revealed the different environments that had shaped us up until this very moment. I ask if he believes in God. Nir smirks.

"*If you believe in something, you can lose your faith. Or gain it. I believe in having a code. I decided not to cheat on my girlfriend, for example. That has nothing to do with belief—like, 'If I don't believe in God, I can do it,' or 'I can't do it because He'll punish me.' He doesn't care. And if I think He does care, I make Him very, very small. You're not allowed to do that, you know?... And also, I'm not allowed to talk about God in any positivist way. In the Bible, it's a metaphor. To talk about God as if He's something—that's idolatry. In Hebrew, God is a zachar—a masculine form—but He's not male or female. It's like rain is masculine, and soil is feminine, but that doesn't mean the soil is a woman. It's just a metaphor… There are rules to nature, and I try to balance with them. And then there are values. But values are the opposite of nature. Nature tells you to eat something, to cheat on your girlfriend. But you say no, according to your own code. I'm really into writing myself in this sense. I have my own codes for how to live my life. That's the foundation. Like, 'Love your neighbour,' for example. Or I decided not to eat meat. It's important to me. But it's not a belief… I want to be as free as possible but I'm not looking for freedom, I find it inside the code… You know, it's really a funny question! Among my friends, nobody would ever ask me if I believe in God. It's more about values and actions than beliefs, as I told you."*

I can tell Nir still cannot wrap his head around the fact that I really asked this question. He checks the clock—it's time to leave for work. He almost misses it. As he walks me swiftly to the door, he has one last thought:

"Maybe if I'd grown up outside of Israel, I'd feel more Jewish and keep some holidays. When you live around Jews, you feel the holidays, you feel Shabbat, you feel it outside on the streets. You are part of it."

I intentionally leave Nir's words in their full, long form to reflect his insistence on "writing" himself, as he described during our conversation. At first glance, Nir may seem only marginally relevant to this dissertation: he explicitly distances himself from both secular and Jewish categories, identifying instead as a "native Israeli" or, more precisely, as an *Ivri*—a Hebrew. Yet, unlike Lea and Tomer, he acknowledges the privileges conferred upon him by the state's classification of him as a Jew, even as he resists that very label. In this sense, the category of "Jew" remains inescapable for him—an identity he disavows yet cannot fully shed, an "Ashkenazi Jew externally."

At second glance, however, Nir's agreement to be interviewed as a "secular Israeli Jew" reveals his own awareness: he knows he *is* the guy. He recognizes the discursive order into which he is interpellated as a subject, even as he seeks to narrate himself out of it. While he rejects Jewish identity as a given, he actively engages with its textual and conceptual legacy on his own terms. His tender and affectionate gestures towards language, landscape, the Bible, and even God, suggest an alternative mode of dwelling—one that does not hinge on state-centric "Jewishness" nor on the religious establishment, but one that relies on a deeply rooted sense of place and language. This is where his narration diverges from those of previously mentioned interlocutors: where they engage with the category of a "Jew" and "secularity" through various forms of negotiation, Nir circumvents the conversation entirely and crafts a framework of Selfhood that is at once autonomous and embedded.

His response to my question about belief in God further illuminates this positioning. He does not reject the "faith" outright, rather, he reframes the question of faith as misleading. Belief, for him, is an irrelevant category.[178] Instead, he constructs his world through personal codes, derived not from divine command but from a self-imposed moral architecture which still has some

[178] In this sense, his reasoning, for some paradoxically, resembles the one of Orthodox Judaism, or of "Orthoprax," as discussed at the beginning of this chapter with a reference to Katz 1986; Fisher 2012; Fischer 2013; and Lahav 2017.

"Biblical flavours." This stance echoes broader themes in the narrations of the interlocutors, where one's ethical life is framed as independent of "religion," yet remains entangled with its symbolic and conceptual structures.

Nir's case adds a crucial dimension to this dissertation's exploration of secularity among Israeli Jews. His refusal of both "Jewishness" and "secularity" does not place him outside the framework of this study but instead exposes the limits of these very categories. By refusing to conform to their persuasive pull, Nir narrates himself into a liminal space, where Hebrew as a mother tongue becomes the connective tissue between past and present. His final words, spoken hurriedly before rushing to work, suggest his keen awareness that the state allows him to exist as a "Jew" without requiring him to actively perform Jewishness—to "do Jewishness."

Secularity as Counter-Position

Secularity, narrated as personal autonomy, is deeply intertwined with the trope of secularity as a counter-position. To narrate one's self as secular is to construct a deliberate distinction between "Us"—the secular subject—and those conditions or identities perceived as external, foreign, or "Other." Such a narrative gesture is an active, performative counter-claim—a negotiation of selfhood defined through opposition, a declaration of "Self" that is always already framed within larger discursive formations.

Alona: *I have antagonism towards religion*

In one of the alleyways off Jerusalem's Jaffa Road, two cafés sit side next to each other and their outdoor chairs clustered beneath the midday May sun. The warmth seems to invite not just the locals but also the city's cats, who stretch lazily in the light, while people in tank tops soak in the soft heat. The shaded corners, however, have yet to shake off the chill of the night. I meet Alona here, a woman in her mid-twenties. Originally from a place up north of Tel Aviv, Alona moved to Jerusalem to study at the university. Alona reacted to my post in one of Jerusalem's Facebook groups, so after a brief introduction, I ask her what it means for her to be a secular Jew. What does it mean for her to recognize herself as

such? Alona is at first taken aback. She hesitates over the answer and repeats the word "secular" out loud to herself. After a moment, she finds her words:

"*To be secular… I think it's more like what I am not. I take Judaism more as my history, my family—it's a family thing. It's my story. But I have a bit of antagonism because of the ultra-religious. I have antagonism towards religion. I see religious people as less liberal, more against things I believe in: human rights, how the world should be, in my opinion. It affects my life; I see it as something bad… But it's not really Judaism; it's what some people have made of Judaism. I think there's a good reason why my grandparents knew so much about the Bible. They knew whole chapters—there's a reason why they were interested in history… Religious people, especially here, are always in the news: 'Religious people want this, religious people want more money...' so it makes me want to leave. I know this country is mostly about demographics. This country will become more religious unless something happens, but I don't think that will change. In my opinion, this country will be worse for women, worse for gays… Worse, and less free, less liberal. If I want to have a family, then I don't want to bring kids into this country that I don't believe in."*

She pauses for a moment, reflecting, while the tattooed waitress brings another freshly squeezed orange juice:

"And this city, Jerusalem, makes me think about religion even more. Being next to a neighborhood, or walking through a neighborhood that's more religious, they have signs telling you that you're walking in a private area and have to cover yourself. I hate it. I'm not saying my society is better or perfect. I guess there are also good things about them… But I know there's a patriarchy—men are controlling—and all those things are because of men. And I hate to think about the women, or the children, or the little girls, or the little boys who are gay, living there. It's really bothersome to me."

Alona's narration of secularity emerges as a disagreement with the landscape she inhabits. For Alona, being secular is a statement of negation—"what I am not"—and active opposition, a distancing formation towards a form of Judaism

that, in her view, has become co-opted by political and religious forces she cannot align with. There are two forms of Judaism in her narrative, an intimate one, where Judaism is “her story, her family, her history,” and an appropriated, foreign one, represented by ultra-religious people and religious Zionism, a politicized version of Judaism, even though she does not label it as such.

Her secularity is shaped by a distaste for the ways in which “religion,” particularly in the context of current Israel, intrudes upon daily life and public space. The “antagonism” she feels towards “religion” is rooted in her belief in human rights, in her liberal worldview. For Alona, the repressive and politicized version of “religion” represents an obstacle to these values, and more than that, it represents a distortion of Judaism itself. The Judaism she connects with is historical and familial, as a lineage passed down through generations. Her grandparents’ deep knowledge of the Bible is something to follow and find meaning in.

In addition to history, however, Alona also refers to the future: her anxiety over the country’s demographic trajectory, where Israel will become “*more religious, worse for women, worse for gays*,” is a clear expression of the sentiments many secular Israeli Jews articulate when referring to what they perceive as “religious coercion.”

Alona’s discomfort and antagonism are visceral: she feels under attack by the social codes that demand adherence to a patriarchal order, evident for her in the modesty signs and the expectations for women’s behavior while walking the streets of Jerusalem. Her reaction to these spaces—the “private areas” where women are told to cover themselves—is a rejection of the patriarchy she believes underpins “religious” society. Hence, without evaluating whether her view is “correct,” “truth-based,” or “paranoid,” I read Alona’s narration of her secularity as a defensive yet active take-up of a counter-position towards threats she perceives from her own position.

Nitzan: *I’m an atheist and this isn’t democracy*

Similar trope of one’s secularity as counter-position is present in the Nitzan’ s narration and gestures, albeit one which lacks the rootedness in any form of Judaism as a tradition, lineage of wisdom, or knowledge.

I have known Nitzan from Jerusalem for a while now. She is part of my circle of friends and acquaintances, a well-known figure in the alternative music scene, particularly in Jerusalem. She shows interest in my work, so I ask if I can interview her—also she recognizes herself as a "secular Israeli Jew." Nitzan, in her sixties, is an active person. We meet at concerts, and once she takes me with her to a protest in the *Sheikh Jarrah* neighbourhood in East Jerusalem against the forced eviction of Palestinian residents. I also know she goes to other protests against the Israeli government's actions. Our encounters usually take place in Jerusalem's bars, which form a kind of artistic and musical underbelly of the city. Nitzan often talks about politics and I am not surprised, then, when early in the interview, the discussion shifts toward the current political situation:

"*I hope there will be peace someday, but I don't think there will be. My worry is that Israel is going to become a very religious state, a kind of dictatorship… I also go to the demonstrations because I want to see some kind of peace process, for the Palestinians to gain their independence. Because Israel is not a democracy—it has never been a real democracy. There is a great apartheid against Palestinians, with everything that happens in the occupied territories. And now, the same shit is coming into Israel itself, into the Green Line,*[179] *as they call it. I can see a process over the past twenty years: how I went from talking to all kinds of people and saying what I think very freely to realizing that maybe I shouldn't say everything, everywhere, to everyone. Because sometimes, it might even be dangerous… The violence always comes from the right. And people started to see it… Not everyone who is now involved in the demonstrations against Netanyahu is a leftist, they just don't want dictatorship. So they shout Democracy! But you know, we are very privileged… We have been living very freely, people like me, we grew up in a completely different atmosphere. Many Israelis deny what is happening in occupied territories. They don't want to know. So for them, this IS democracy. Not for me, though. They just live their life, they want to do whatever they want… But now, it has come to the point where people must take sides. This situation draws a very bright and thick line between secular and religious people.*"

[179] Green Line is the demarcation line established in the 1949 armistice agreements between the newly established State of Israel and Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (known in Israel as the War of Independence).

I try to follow up, asking what changed in the atmosphere:

"*I came from a mixed city, our neighbourhood was both religious and secular. My father is religious, and my mother is an atheist. They still live together. Everyone lived on their own terms. I had religious friends in the neighborhood, even though I grew up secular. But it was not so divided… I don't hate the religious. But I started to be very angry with religious people when I realized how much money from my taxes goes either to settlers or the religious. The religious people treat the seculars as the donkey of the Messiah—chamoro shel Meshiach. The whole system is fucked up."*

Nitzan speaks about the "seculars" a lot. I press further: What does it mean for you, Nitzan, to be secular?

"*Oy, ze kashe—that's a hard question. It means I live my life and listen to my own consciousness and moral values. My father was very religious, and we had a difficult relationship because he is a Holocaust survivor, and it fucked him up. I remember being around 12 years old and I thought that being religious is very easy because you know what to do: everything is settled, you don't have to think too much. But my father did not treat me nicely, so I thought that being religious is also fucked up. You can be religious and a bad person. So, I realized I don't want to be religious. Plus, I don't need a rabbi to tell me what to do."*

And again, "being Jewish" comes to the scene as a fact, yet one which is very hidden:

"*Being Jewish for me just means that I was born to a Jewish mother and father. When I started to travel as a 20-something-year-old, anyone who asked me, I answered, I'm Israeli. My identity is Israeli, not Jewish. That is just something that is written in my ID as my nationality. I am very Israeli, I love this place, I was born here, I care about this place… but this setting of Israel being Jewish is a big mistake—they mixed nationality with religion.*"

Even though Nitzan sees herself as secular, she also, like Nir, speaks about "other" seculars, those who:

"[...] cannot cut out their connection to religion. They still want to send their kids to school to learn stories from the Bible, to do Kabbalat Shabbat[180] *like a tradition, but without a religion. They would drive their car on Saturday but before they would still light the Shabbat candles [...] So, most of the seculars here are like this and that's why we have this current situation. That's why we have all these rabbis interfering and religious educational programs in schools. So, they are not really secular… Personally, I am very disconnected from any form of tradition. With my kids, we never celebrate any holidays. I'm an atheist."*

As in the previous trope of secularity as autonomy, Nitzan's narrates herself as a secular because it reflects her autonomous moral compass—an insistence on defining morality and ethics without the mediation of religious authority, without a "rabbi to tell me what to do." Yet, her secular positioning is not merely a rejection; it is a counterpoint shaped in relation to multiple reference groups. She distances herself not only from religious authorities and the "religious" society which she pays through her taxes, as a "the donkey of Messiah" but also from those "other" seculars who, in her view, remain tethered to "religion" as a tradition, thereby entangling it with the state and public sphere. For Nitzan, these blurred boundaries sustain the conflation of nationality and religion, a fusion she seeks to undo.

She does not see herself as Jewish, not religiously, not nationally. Her rejection of Jewishness, however, is not absolute. While she insists, "I am Israeli, not Jewish," she simultaneously acknowledges the impossibility of fully escaping this ascribed identity: she *knows* she is a Jew, as she was born as one, as she, from the state's point of view, is ascribed as one by her birth. Also, albeit implicitly, she is an Israeli because she is a Jew. This dual movement—claiming distance while remaining inscribed within "being a Jew"—is persistent throughout other tropes, as seen, for example, in the narration of Nir.

This entanglement becomes even more evident in her critique of the state. Nitzan gestures towards the state itself and its current political situation: Nitzan

[180] Welcoming or receiving Shabbat, a part of the Friday evening service.

does not see Israel as a democracy but as an apartheid regime, where "religious" political forces align with the right-wing, reinforcing discrimination of Palestinians. Her secularity, then, is not just an assertion of autonomy but an expression of political dissent, which is shaped by her awareness of her privileged position as a Jew within a "Jewish" state.

In this sense, her secularity can be also understood as a synonym for Israeli "leftism." Nitzan, in the vocabulary of José Casanova, might be seen as a secularist: one for whom the complete separation of the state and church would allow people to arrange their personal lives according to their wishes—their autonomy. At the same time, she is deeply rooted in the place, politically engaged in its struggles, and emotionally attached to its future. Her secularity, then, is not a cosmopolitan detachment but a local, situated identity that emerges from and remains bound to the realities of Israeli life.

Another key site of counter-positioning is her familial history. Nitzan's rejection of Jewishness is not only political, but also deeply personal, framed through her father's religiosity, which she explicitly distances herself from. For Nitzan, secularity is also synonymous with atheism—a means through which she consistently performs her disconnection from "religion," "tradition," and anything that could be subsumed under these terms, including holidays. For her, secularity does not entail a selective embrace of Jewish cultural markers, as it does for some; it demands a more radical rupture that extends to rejecting holidays and traditions. This refusal marks a sharp contrast to others who differentiate between religious "order" or "establishment" and cultural continuity through "family" and "tradition."

Nitzan does not claim an alternative Jewishness; she seeks to undo Jewishness as a defining identity altogether. Yet, despite her disavowal of Jewishness, the very structures she critiques continue to define her social positioning. Again, her insistence that she is "Israeli, not Jewish" signals an effort to reconfigure her belonging on "statist" terms, but Israel is not in the form or condition with which she can align. Her claim itself reveals the limits of narrating one's self as a secular Jew. While she disavows Jewishness, she simultaneously acknowledges the impossibility of escaping it: her birth to Jewish parents, the categorization of Jewishness in Israeli state structures, and the persistent presence of "religion" in the public sphere all complicate this rejection.

In Nitzan's narration of secularity, another trope is present, where secularity might be read as a synonym for Israeliness itself. This might be surprising, given that "Israeliness," as a current condition, is simultaneously perceived as a process of the "religionization" of the state and society. Yet, as I wrote in the last paragraph of *Being a "Secular Jew": Tropes and Gestures*, to narrate one's self as secular means to gesture in multiple directions.

Secularity as Israeliness

As seen in the case of Nitzan, many secular Israeli Jews see themselves first and foremost as Israeli, even though the state recognizes "Israeli" only as a category of citizenship, not as a nationality.[181] However, based on the interviews I conducted, some "secular Israeli Jews" also see "being an Israeli" as a synonym for "being a Jew." Here, I offer a reading of narrations of secularity as Israeliness in two interconnected senses. First, Israeliness as a condition, where secularity is the unmarked default—where "religion" is perceived as distinct from "family and tradition," as seen in previous narrations. Second, Israeliness as a synonym for being a secular Jew, where living in Israel itself sustains the very notion of "Jewishness." Secularity as Israeliness weaves through other tropes in multiple shades.

Ishai: ***Tradition is a peer pressure from dead people***

In Jerusalem's spring, pollen drifts thick through the air, clinging to my damp forehead as I try to wipe it away. Worn out from the heat, I make my way to meet Ishai, a 30-something native of a northern *kibbutz*, currently living in Jerusalem. He sits across from me, composed and self-assured. He reached out to me himself after seeing my research call in a public Facebook group, and his curiosity is apparent. Ishai's mother is American, so his English is fluent and smooth. I think to myself—this is good for the recording of the interview. I suggest he first tell me about himself more generally, and Ishai jumps straight to "secularity":

[181] See the section *Field and Subjects*.

“*I'm originally from the north and obviously grew up as a secular Jew, like the rest of my family, like the rest of my community, the rest of my congregation. So, there was nothing odd about it. And then, as soon as I grew up, I left my hometown and travelled the country, and I noticed that apparently, I'm a minority, which is quite interesting*.”

I wonder if, growing up, he was aware that he was a “secular Jew,” as he put it.

“There was no name for it because, for me, growing up as a secular Jew, we celebrated holidays, but not in a religious way. So, we celebrated them in a communal way, through a congregational way, and with this family kind of vibe—but not by celebrating the religious parts of it. So, growing up as a secular Jew, you always kind of ask the questions: Why are we celebrating this? There's no evidence for this. Why? What are we doing? And then comes the question of tradition. And tradition, for me at least, is defined as peer pressure from dead people. So, you keep asking those questions, and then as soon as you step outside of your bubble, you understand that people look at it from a different perspective.”

So, what does it mean for Ishai to be a “secular” Jew today? Like others, he first has to search for words—he wasn’t expecting this question. His immediate reaction is: “*Wow, that’s an interesting question.*” After a pause, though, he turns towards “objective truths”:

“*It's being attached to facts and evidence and things that are genuine and real, things you can grasp with your senses and not with your beliefs… So, whatever we can grasp with our senses and look at objectively, and agree upon—that, for me, is just common sense. And that's the main part of being secular… It has to make sense. And if it doesn't make sense, then it's not real... So, it's not a question of faith or what I believe; it's a question of what's objectively true. It's also critical thinking. It's also questioning everything and finding a reasonable way.*”

Ishai is surprised again when I ask him what it means to be a Jew or Jewish. Once more, he turns to “facts”:

"I have a bachelor's degree in general history, so I'm into facts. When you look at history in terms of the collective, it goes back thousands of years, and you understand that you're part of something quite unique. I won't say better than other things, but it's quite unique when you look at it objectively: being an ethnic group of goat herders and shepherds from the desert who then spread across the world, eventually coming back to the same original place, but in a different way… But besides that, it's a matter of circumstances and coincidence. The fact that I'm a Jew is pretty random and arbitrary… My personal definition of Jewishness is that I decided to stay here in Israel—that's a strong decision. That I came back after living for a few years in the U.S. That I define this place as my home, with my family, my friends, my congregation—with everything, with my identity."

Today, it seems, my role is to constantly shock Ishai with my questions. I ask him what is Jewish about Israel. His brow furrows, as if he struggles to grasp the question and needs to repeat it to himself.

"It is a weird question… I think it's a general question with a personal answer. For me, what makes this country Jewish is the fact that we all have the same origins, we all share the same traditions, the same background. That doesn't necessarily mean that we want to continue with the same traditions, because, you know, habits change. We evolve and we change. And so, for me at least, that is what makes this country Jewish."

What is apparent from Ishai's narration is that the basic questions about recognizing oneself in the category of "secular Israeli Jew" were unexpected, unusual, and even "weird." The personal meaning behind each of these components had, for Ishai, remained largely unexamined as a set of implicit conditions rather than consciously articulated identities composing his subjectivity. His initial surprise at my questions suggests that his secularity, his Israeliness, and his Jewishness were not things he had previously had to define in explicit terms; they simply were. This sense of givenness is echoed throughout many of the interviews, reflecting a broader trope of secularity as Israeliness, where being a "secular Jew" often functions as a default, unmarked identity. At the same time, it reveals the perceived lack of necessity to articulate "Jewishness" explicitly, since living in Israel itself grants the category of "Jew" a kind of master

identity—one that does not need to be pronounced or actively performed (as mentioned by Nir).

Ishai's secular upbringing was "asymptomatic," as everyone around him was the same in the *kibbutz*—secularity did not have a name. Ishai uses the words "my congregation," which usually connotes an assembly or gathering for "religious" worship, but this is not how Ishai understands it: the *kibbutz* community celebrated holidays, but "*not the religious aspect of it*." Here, *congregation* signifies coming together as a community, a family, bound by a shared sense of "tradition," a recurring perception in the narrations of other interlocutors. In this, instead of seeing "secular people doing religious things," I read such narration of secularity as itself a ritualized performance, both as embodied gesture and as a narrative repetition.

Yet, for Ishai, the "*tradition as a peer pressure from dead people*" needs to be examined: that is the moment where Ishai starts to articulate another, intertwined and recurring trope, the secularity narrated and gestured as reason and common sense. First, Ishai articulates secularity as a commitment to "facts," "evidence," and "things you can grasp with your senses." This framing aligns with a rationalist or positivist epistemology, where knowledge is defined by verifiability and objectivity. His statement that "*it has to make sense, and if it doesn't make sense, then it's not real*" suggests that for him, secularity is also an intellectual stance in favour of reason—secularity is framed as an epistemic virtue rather than simply a lifestyle choice, hence one can talk about "secular epistemology." In this sense, I read his narration also as a trope of a counter-position towards those who are not rooted in such "factuality" and reason.

Ishai turns towards reason also when speaking about "being a Jew": his academic background in history informs his view of Jewishness as an ethnic and historical continuum, yet one that is also "arbitrary and random," as a matter of coincidence. The active element of "being Jewish" for Ishai, is the fact that he decided to come back and stay in Israel. This, for him, is the ultimate definition—and once again, in a circular way, he arrives at the trope of secularity as Israeliness. This perspective might be read as a reflection a Zionist ethos in which Jewishness is tied to geographic presence and participation in the Israeli national project. Ishai's identity is not defined by "religion" but by the existential act of living in Israel.

Finally, Ishai's response to the question of what makes Israel "Jewish" reveals an implicit narration of secularity as Israeliness. His initial hesitation suggests that the basis of the question is unfamiliar or counterintuitive. When he does answer, he emphasizes that "*we all have the same origins, we all share the same traditions, the same background*," before adding that traditions evolve and change over time. Ishai, at this moment, returns to the notion of "tradition," which needs to be examined to determine if it is based on objective facts, as he stated earlier. However, shared tradition does not undergo such scrutiny, because it is one of the elements that makes Israel Jewish in his eyes.

It is not my position or role to construct a dialogue with Ishai's claims about whether they are or are not "based on facts." The important thing is Ishai's self-understanding, which points to broader narratives of secularity that frame Jewish identity as a historical and national belonging outside the realm of "religion." In my reading, this reveals an instrumentalized use of "tradition" to assert a claim of collective belonging, specifically contrasting with a type of "tradition" that must be examined through "reason."

S*ecularity as Reason and Common Sense*

Ishai's narration of secularity as Israeliness can be also read as a trope of reason and common sense which, in his case, unfolds in the precise, unyielding language of positivism as a secular epistemology. This trope, I suggest, is also inextricably bound to the trope of secularity as autonomy, for it is through the clarity of individual reasoning that the sense of autonomy takes form. Yet, there is another layer to this trope where secularity as reason softens, takes shape in gentler words and more fluid gestures, as seen in Sagi's case.

Sagi: *You can't do half of Torah*

Sagi, in his late twenties, and I first cross paths at a lively student party at Tel Aviv University. He is in charge of the music, setting the tone for the night, while also making sure the foreign students feel at home—he is our *madrich*.[182] He is a student himself and he navigates his role with both engagement and ease.

[182] *Madrich* means a guide in Hebrew. Such a person might serve as a guide, mentor, and contact person for students or members of youth movements and organizations.

He is natural. After a while, as the music sways the crowd, he approaches me and asks what brought me here. It is a question I have to get used to, and my obligatory response slips out almost automatically. Sagi, however, is immediately intrigued and enthusiastically insists on being interviewed, as he almost yells: "*Opaaa, secular Israeli Jews… that's me!*"

A few days later, I am standing in front of his dorm room. The interview with Sagi is one of the first I conduct in Tel Aviv, and for a moment, I feel the awkward intimacy in the interview setting. The room is small, and while Sagi sits comfortably on his bed, I face him, unsure of how to navigate this closeness and how to behave.[183] Later, I come to the conclusion that this type of intimacy is also a part of conducting research focused on someone who self-identifies as "secular"—a person who, for example, is not bound by the "religious" prescriptions of modesty.

First, I suggest to Sagi to tell me something about his family and background:

"*My family is traditional, like masorti,[184] not religious. It was just like—God exists, we believe in God, we are not religious. It means we celebrate Shabbat, and we do not eat pork or seafood or mix meat and dairy. That was the baseline… We still celebrate the holidays together, betach—of course. But holidays are about family, not religion, so we do it… A few months before my Bar Mitzvah,[185] my grandmother died. In Judaism, to honor your parents after they die, you have to keep all the rules for one year. So, my father started going to synagogue more often, and I started going with him. And I really got into it. I went to study there, and I had my rabbi. I became religious.*"

I ask him what being religious means to him then:

[183] The intimacy of interviewing is further explored in the *Researching Desire, Creating Desire* section.

[184] *Masort*i, translated as being traditional (in the vocabulary of Yaacov Yadgar "traditionist" or "traditionism," Yadgar 2011) is another discursively available mode of Jewish subjectivity in Israel and elsewhere. Usually, it is understood as being somewhere between beeing *hiloni* (secular) and *dati* (religious).

[185] *Bar Mitzvah*, literally meaning "son of the commandment," is a Jewish coming-of-age ritual and celebration, held when children reach a certain age (13 for boys, 12 for girls—*Bat Mitzvah*), as they become responsible for their actions before God. Until then, the parents are responsible for the children's actions.

"I think it is about having order to your day. Praying in the morning, following the mitzvah[186] *of being a good person. It was very meaningful for me—I was trying to learn Jewish ethics. But it was also hard. You know, if you are religious, you are not allowed to masturbate and… you know, cum. For a teenager, it is very hard. And I kept failing. So, I always felt bad. And then there were my friends from high school. They saw being religious as stupidity. Their parents were also disturbed when they joined me for something religious. I get it. It is scary. They can try to convert you, pull you into their world."*

For a moment, I am not entirely sure who *they* are. But Sagi clarifies it quickly:

"Yes, I mean religious people. The Orthodox. I understand those parents. It is very, very scary. They can try to convert you, make you not join the army, send you to study Torah instead. And that would change everything. My parents were not so stressed about me starting to wear a kippah[187] *and dressing only in black. But my grandparents—from Iraq and Morocco—were more nervous. They worried I might change my entire life, drift far from them into something unfamiliar."*

Sagi still faces me, comfortably seated on his bed, laughing throughout the interview and completely relaxed. He looks like any other young man walking the streets of Tel Aviv. His teenage years—those religious years—now feel to him like distant echoes, like a phase almost funny to recount. Sagi wants to pronounce it—he does not want this period of life to be determining for what is he now:

"Being religious was a very small part of my life. It is not what defines me. In my eyes, being religious is constant work. You either follow the whole book, whole Torah, or you do not. How can I do half? For me, it is all or nothing. So I stopped believing. I could not even do the small things… During the army, I started reading a lot of books by Western philosophers, and I got into it. I found my answers without believing in something fictional. Spinoza, Nietzsche. Since then, I have had no religious beliefs. But sometimes… sometimes I miss the

[186] *Mitzvah*, a commandment from God, an obligation to perform certain religious duties and commitments. There are 613 *mitzvot* to be kept: 365 negative ones and 248 positive ones.
[187] The *kippah*, or *yarmulke*, is a skullcap worn by "religious" Jewish men on the top of the head. Some Jewish women also wear a kippah, though they often face backlash, as the practice is considered controversial by some.

community. Sitting together, chanting. I must say, if I got the chance to pray now, I would enjoy it. But I would not do it. It would make me happy to be part of a Jewish group, but just for a bit. Not in the long term."

Sagi continues and tells me that he does not believe in God now. I am curious whether he finds something "Jewish" in his life currently.

"*I never really thought about being Jewish. I guess I consider myself Jewish because I was circumcised. And because it is part of my tradition—things that remind me of my childhood. But I don't think about myself as being Jewish during my life… My grandpa is from Iraq. He had to leave because of everything—the Holocaust, the worsening situation in Iraq because of it. So… feelings of being haunted, of always being chased by something—that is something we can relate to."*

Sagi does not mention once during the interview the word "secular." Yet, like others, also Sagi recognizes himself as being one. His narration of secularity unfolds through the textured window of familial background: believing in God, following certain "religious" commandments—such as keeping the main *kosher* dietary rules (not mixing dairy and meat, not eating seafood, not eating pork), and celebrating *Shabbat* and holidays—does not necessarily make one "religious."

To be "religious," according to Sagi, is marked by visual, embodied, and intellectual performative practices: dressing in black, wearing a *kippah*, having a *rabbi*, studying, and being a subject to commandments and following them in their totality. For him, both "becoming religious" and later "stopping believing in something fictional" are decisions stemming from a sense of autonomy to do so, hence the trope of secularity as autonomy is also present.

Sagi frames his religious past as a moment of youthful experimentation rather than a defining identity marker. His recollection is marked by an interplay between affective attachment and rational distancing. His narration is structured as a kind of a reverse conversion and a temporary immersion. While his initial attraction to religious practice was grounded in the structure it gives to one's life and in an ethical discipline, Sagi narrates his eventual departure as an inevitable outcome of rational inquiry.

The choice to leave "religion" is positioned as a product of intellectual maturation, as a shift from "faith" to "reason" that is underscored by his engagement with Western philosophers like Spinoza and Nietzsche during the years of his army service. In this framing, religious beliefs become something to be outgrown, something that reason naturally displaces. The theme of army service as a pivotal moment of "secularization" and "rationalization" in one's life was a recurring topic among many of the interlocutors I encountered.

Unlike Nir, for whom the question of "faith" is irrelevant, for Sagi, it is crucial. By positioning religious practice as a totalizing system that one must either fully accept or fully reject, he implicitly speaks of faith as well—the faith that one can fulfill religious obligations in their all-encompassing form ("*the whole Torah*") and the loss of such faith. Sagi sidesteps the possibility of partial or flexible "religion" as an approach that might allow for selective or temporary engagement. Even though he sometimes longs to pray again and feel a connection to a Jewish community, he does not consider this a viable option. Here, the paradox of "secular longing" emerges, which is a theme also present in other narrations: an attachment to holidays as "tradition" and "family," a desire for the affective warmth of ritual without its binding commitments. Sagi's secularity is not only narrated through the trope of reason and common sense but also through an exclusionary logic that defines "religion" in absolute terms.

As in the trope of secularity as counter-position, Sagi's self-narration is also marked by a distancing stance towards "those religious" people—the Orthodox. In a gesture of distinction, he expresses understanding, concern, and even distress about the worries of his grandparents and the parents of his friends. Orthodox, religious people, he suggests, *"can try to convert you, change your life, convince you not to join the army and just study Torah."* In this sense, the religious become the "Other" as potential threat. They are perceived as capable of "converting" someone from being *hiloni* or *masorti*, thereby undermining one of the cornerstones of "being a Jew" in Israel: military service.[188] The army is often seen as a crucial experience for both nation-building and the performance of belonging—as a service to the "nation" and the state. Here, the trope of secularity

[188] The military service in Israel is compulsory for both men and women in Israel, with exemptions. One of these exemptions was intended for a *haredi* segment of the Jewish population. That changed during the recent years and in 2025, the ultra-Orthodox *yeshiva* students started to be conscripted as well, which caused a major backlash from the *haredi* population.

as counter-position also applies to Sagi's narrative, where "religiosity" is perceived as a threat to the coherence of the collective.

Finally, Sagi's dialogue with his "Jewishness" reflects the trope of secularity as Israeliness: he narrates his Jewishness as unthought and incidental, similar to Ishai's case. "Being a Jew" is tied to a physical marker—circumcision—something he did not choose, as well as to "tradition" and historical memory. He does not think of himself as Jewish because, in Israel, he does not necessarily have to.

Yet the past—like in Lea's narration of her grandmother surviving the Holocaust—shapes his sense of vulnerability. "*The feeling of being haunted*" is positioned as the only part of Jewishness he explicitly claims. The reference to the Holocaust, displacement, and "being haunted" is also an important part of the shared affective state among the "secular Israeli Jews" with whom I spoke: to be a Jew is to be haunted. Hence, rather than understanding being a Jew as someone living and practicing Judaism, it means being understood and labelled as a Jew externally, by those who wish to eradicate "Us."

Secularity as Judaism

As is evident from all the preceding tropes, "being secular" does not exist in a vacuum but emerges through ongoing negotiation and dialogue with the very conditions that make such a claim possible. The fundamental drama of this dialogue reaches its climax in the tension between "being a secular Jew" and "being a secular and a Jew." In the trope of secularity as Judaism, I offer another possible cumulative reading of secularity as it is narrated and gestured—this time with a tender emphasis on "Judaism".

Hila: ***Rhythm of life here is the rhythm of my people***

Hila was one of the first to respond to my post in a Jerusalem's Facebook group. She is in her mid-forties and made *aliyah*[189] to Israel from the U.S. nineteen years ago. Hila lives near the *Machane Yehuda shuk* (market) in

---

[189] The process of Jewish immigration and the acquisition of citizenship under Israel's Law of Return.

Jerusalem, and to reach her apartment, I have to cross through it. But it is a peak hour, and movement is barely possible. I feel like my head is about to explode.

By the juice stall, a *mesiba*—a party—has erupted. The vendor has turned the speakers up to maximum, and people have started dancing around it quite organically. The crowd tightens and bodies press together. I try to push forward, but I am caught in place. From the other side, another seller repeatedly shouts out the day's price of potatoes. Another vendor thrusts a blend of spices into my palm, forcing me to taste. *Balagan*—a mess.

Normally, I would stop to observe the vivid scene, but my focus is on the interview. Also, I do not want to keep Hila waiting. She does not seem to mind my delay, though, and when I finally arrive, she greets me with a smile. I suggest that she tells me a bit about herself to start. As she begins to recount her childhood, her background, and her upbringing, her narration of secularity begins to take a shape and gains concrete contours:

"*I grew up pretty secular, pretty unaffiliated. Like, you know, we ate matzah on Passover. We ate nothing on Yom Kippur. We had latkes*[190] *on Hanukkah. We had apples and honey on Rosh Hashanah.*[191] *That was pretty much Judaism for us… But I've had different phases of religiosity. I came to Israel first as a tourist on Birthright.*[192] *I came back a month later, travelled around for ten months. I did explore religion. I studied in a seminary for a little while. And then, I rejected religion. But something still stays with me, like I keep a kosher kitchen. I don't eat pork or shellfish or anything like that. And I didn't grow up like that. I grew up eating everything. You know, sometimes I see pictures of shrimps or lobsters or whatever, and part of me is like, "Oh, yum." And part of me is nauseated. It's like a combination. I want it, but at the same time, it's disgusting.*"

I wonder what was behind her decision to move to Israel from the United States:

[190] Fried potato pancakes.
[191] Names of Jewish holidays and typical dishes and foods eaten during their celebration. On *Yom Kippur* people fast as it is considered the "holiest" day of the Jewish year—the day of atonement and repentance.
[192] Taglit-Birthright Israel (commonly referred to as Taglit or simply Birthright) is a program that offers free ten-day trips to Israel for young Jewish people from the Diaspora. The program aims to strengthen and cultivate participants' sense of "Jewishness," to deepen their connection to Israel, and allow them to explore their Jewish heritage.

"As I said, I first came through Birthright. I fell in love with it here. I felt like I was coming home spiritually, which is something I wasn't expecting. Back then, I would take a free trip anywhere but being Jewish and coming to Israel—there was something about it. It just felt like home. So, after I finished college, I moved here through aliyah."

I want to return to the moment she described as her rejection of religion.

"I still feel connected to Judaism, just not the religious expression of Judaism… I actually care very strongly about the religion itself. I just personally feel that what we see today as religion—like the ultra-Orthodox, which is held up as the model of religious purity—has nothing to do with actual Judaism. There's nothing in Judaism about proving your religiosity by wearing a black hat. There's nothing in Judaism that says women are supposed to walk behind men. But in some ultra-Orthodox communities, they have to… because, God forbid, a man walks behind a woman, sees her rear end moving, and might have thoughts… They've taken it too far. They're like the Jeweliban—the Jewish Taliban. In some ways, I feel like the ultra-Orthodox are trying to ethnically cleanse Jerusalem of secular people, bit by bit. There are parts of the city I don't go to. I don't feel safe. I don't feel comfortable. Once, I was spat on by some kid there because I wasn't dressed modestly enough by his standards. He also cursed me. But I was dressed modestly—I was on my way to a Shabbat dinner…"

I imagine Hila walking through the *shuk*, just as I was moments before, buying groceries for her friend's *Shabbat* dinner—only to be cursed a few hours later. It immediately reminds me of a moment when I was walking down Jaffa Road in West Jerusalem, and a stranger shouted at me, "*Tzniut! Modesty!*" But her simultaneous connection to and disconnection from religion intrigues me more, so I encourage her to share further.

"I do feel connected to Judaism very spiritually, and I have my own personal issues with God… I guess every Jew, and really every person in the world, has that on some level. Even atheists probably have issues with whatever it is they don't believe in sometimes… And I also feel connected to Judaism through Zionism, because I'm very…" Hila hesitates and searches for the right words. *"I don't want to use the word nationalistic, because I have a couple of Arab friends.*

We have our political differences, but still—we're friends. No problem. For me, Zionism means living in the land, living here in Israel, living a fully realized Jewish life."

So, what does that Jewish life look like for her? Hila first returns to her childhood:

"Well, I grew up in America and experienced very little antisemitism, especially compared to what people in other parts of the world have faced… I didn't grow up feeling deeply connected [to "Jewishness" or Judaism]. *There was one other Jewish girl in my class. Then, in third grade, another Jewish girl joined. I definitely grew up as a minority. We celebrated the holidays of the majority—Christmas, Easter, all of that. And I knew that wasn't me. I knew I was different. So, I always felt different. But here, in Israel, I'm part of the majority. The rhythm of life is the rhythm of my people. Shabbat is the day of rest. I'm not Shomer Shabbat,*[193] *but I rest, I chill. I don't work… And soon, we'll have sufganiyot*[194] *everywhere, not Santa on every corner."*

I ask whether, for her, there is a difference between being Jewish and being Israeli. This time, without hesitation or a wink of an eye, she offers two ways to approach the question:

"On a political level, I don't see someone who's an Israeli citizen but not Jewish as any less Israeli. I mean, obviously, at least 20% of Israelis aren't Jewish—maybe even more. Nearly 20% are Muslim, and then there are Christian, Druze, and others… So, you can absolutely be Israeli without being Jewish. I have a friend who isn't technically Jewish because her mother isn't Jewish, but she served in the army. She did a lot more for this country than any penguin sitting in a yeshiva. So, who's more valuable to me as a citizen? The one who served the country, regardless of religion. And then, on a personal level, Zionism, Israeliness, and Judaism are all entwined for me."

Hila's way of narrating her secularity points towards other, previously mentioned tropes. Before addressing these, however, I want to consider the possible reading

[193] *Shomer Shabbat* is an expression used to describe a person who observes *Shabbat* according to Jewish law (*halacha*). Such a person refrains from using electricity, driving, and engaging in certain types of work or business during *Shabbat*.

[194] *Sufganiyot* are deep-fried doughnuts eaten during the holiday of *Hanukkah*. The oil in which they are fried symbolizes the oil used in the miracle of the *Hanukkah* story.

of secularity narrated as Judaism in this case. Growing up, "being secular" meant not being strongly affiliated, yet still "doing Judaism" through the ritualized celebration of Jewish holidays—primarily connecting to them through the typical meals and foods eaten on these occasions.

Later, she explored "religion" more deeply, ultimately reaching a conclusion of rejection. However, there are still performative practices through which Hila engages with "religion" and the affective states surrounding it: keeping *Shabbat* as a day of rest and maintaining a *kosher* kitchen. I interpret her simultaneous expression of "disgust" and "yumminess"—her ambivalent reaction of "*I want it, but at the same time, it's disgusting*" when looking at shrimp and lobster as non-kosher food—as a metaphorical gesture towards her relationship with "religion" itself. This ambivalence contains the tension between attraction and repulsion, between desire and rejection.

The resolution of this tension is never final; however, as Hila's narration unfolds, it takes more precise contours, clarifying which affective state prevails in which situations and towards what the "yumminess" and "disgust" are oriented. Hila depicts her arrival in Israel as a spiritual homecoming, as she cares strongly about religion itself, about Judaism, to which she feels spiritually connected. She has "personal issues with God" (but not with the idea of God; rather, based on the context, I read her claim as her having occasional arguments or disagreements with God[195]) as any other Jew, any other person, even an atheist in her words. That is "yum."

What is not "yum"—what is "disgusting," though—is the ultra-Orthodox model of religious purity present in current Israel, which is something that Hila rejects as the fundamentalist "Jewliban" (Jewish Taliban). For her, that is not Judaism as she understands it—the "yummy Judaism." The disgust or distaste, even a rejection, is expressed and gestured towards "religion" as represented by

[195] To have a disagreement, dispute or heated conversation with God can also be seen as a "Jewish" theme (see, e.g., Laytner 1977). In *Bereshit* (Book of Genesis), Jacob, a patriarch and forefather of the Israelites, wrestles with an angel (or a "figure," or [divine] "agent," see commentary on Genesis 32, available at: https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.32.27?ven=english%7CThe_Contemporary_Torah,_Jewish_Publication_Society,_2006&lang=bi&with=Commentary%20ConnectionsList&lang2=en, last accessed 11. 6. 2025) and is given the name "Israel" in place of Jacob in an aftermath. Some authors and rabbis understand the name Israel as denoting "the one who wrestles with God." Also, other patriarchs, such as Abraham in case of his plea for Sodom, or Moses, Job, Elijah, Jeremiah, and David all, to certain extent, argue with God (Cohen 2001).

the ultra-Orthodox parts of the Jewish Israeli society, which she perceives as threatening and oppressive.

In this sense, both tropes of secularity—narrated and gestured as the "actual" Judaism itself, and of secularity as counter-position—are present. At the same time, deciding for herself what is "yummy" and what is "disgusting," what constitutes "actual Judaism" and what does not, is implicitly grounded in a sense of autonomy in making these choices. Therefore, the trope of secularity as autonomy is also applicable here.

There is one more aspect of "yumminess" that emerges when Hila connects Judaism and Zionism. She quickly clarifies that she does not want to sound "nationalistic," and illustrates this by mentioning her Arab friends. For her, Zionism means "*living in the land, living here in Israel, living a fully realized Jewish life.*" In contrast to America, where she felt like a minority, in Israel, as part of the majority, "*the rhythm of life is the rhythm of my people.*" In this sense, her secularity is also narrated as Israeliness, since, on a personal level, the rhythm of Israel is necessarily the "Jewish rhythm" of the majority through which belonging is performed and felt. Hila narrates her secularity which, in her case, is also firmly "Jewish," as part of the Zionist project, where the gestures of secularity fall in unity with the rhythms of the Jewish calendar and collective life. This convergence gives rise to a new, cumulative trope: secularity as Zionism, which I explore further in the next section.

On a political level, as she explains, she is aware that being an Israeli is not synonymous with "being a Jew." The value of a member of the collective here is not dependent on "ethnic" or "religious" categories, but on their worthiness in the project of the nation-state, as a productive citizen contributing to the collective through military service.

Hila articulates a moral hierarchy between non-Jewish citizens who serve the country and the "penguins in Yeshiva," a derogatory term for ultra-Orthodox people who have an exemption from compulsory military service. This depiction of an "unproductive" citizen echoes Nitzan's notion of the "donkey of Messiah," where some secular Israeli Jews view the ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel as "parasites" living off the shoulders of the "seculars" who pay taxes and bring sacrifices during the army years. Hila's "secularity," then, is actively constructed

and shaped through encounters, affectionate states, contested urban spaces, and moral hierarchies of worthiness.

Daniel: *Judaism is an ongoing conversation*

The "yumminess" of a certain type of Judaism, where I offer a reading of narration and gestures of self-recognition in the "secular Israeli Jew" as a trope of secularity as Judaism, can also be found in the case of Daniel. What flavours does this "yumminess" take on in Daniel's case? How does he narrate his secularity, and to what—or whom—does he relate his gestures?

Daniel, a student in his mid-twenties, arrives at my flat in Jerusalem's *Rehavia* one evening. He comes by way of another interlocutor, someone I interviewed earlier, so while we have never met before, he is not entirely a stranger. As with others I meet on the margins of familiarity, I give him three options for where we might sit and talk: a quiet café, his place, or mine. He chooses the latter. My flatmate is at home as well, so I do not feel nervous. We sit on the balcony and the city stretches out before us. Below, the Valley of the Cross is bathing in evening light, and beyond it, the silhouette of the *Knesset*[196] is visible against the darkening sky. Just weeks ago, the building was engulfed by crowds as Israel's largest labour union, *Histadrut*, declared a momentous general strike—part of the wave of demonstrations against Netanyahu's proposed judicial overhaul.[197] Now, though, the horizon is calm.

Daniel immediately asks for a glass of wine. I hesitate because having a tipsy interlocutor is not exactly what I had in mind for the interview. But, then, I wonder if this is his way of easing his nerves. After all, being interviewed is not an everyday act—a demand to articulate, to make sense of one's own story under another's gaze. I pour the wine. Daniel starts to speak about his family:

"My grandparents were the pioneers in this country. From these youth, socialist movements which later on founded kibbutzim. My grandfather was an editor of Haaretz, the leftist newspaper. My parents are very, very secular. They come from a generation for which religion is the enemy, you're scared of

[196] Israeli Parliament.
[197] See *Time Frame and Ruptures* in the methodological part.

religion.[198] *Israel as a country was founded on everything but religion. What is happening now is kind of a revenge of religion."*

Daniel is clearly referring to the turmoil that has gripped Israel since the beginning of 2023 and the protests against the government, whose proposed judicial measures many of the interlocutors perceive as a threat and a step towards the "religionization" of the country.

"But I was very religious from an early age. I mean, I'm secular by all definitions, but I'm a very religious person deep down. I was always kind of religious. I was always praying. I was always talking about God. But my parents know fuck about Judaism…"

I wonder how come he was religious then, having a very "secular" upbringing.

"I grew up in South Africa, because my parents went there for work. I had to go to Christian school because my parents didn't like the Jewish community there. And in that school, the students had to pray. So, I was praying too, even though it was a Christian school. And we moved back to Israel when I was 14. And I became kind of religious. It was a cultural shock, and I guess, I tried to adapt. Like trying to belong to the culture. I did tefillin,[199] *and I started to go to synagogue every Friday."*

The image of Daniel's parents—of a generation shaped by a fear of Judaism—quickly comes to my mind. They must had been horrified. And I am right:

"My parents were fucking terrified. They were terrified. I also asked them to put up a mezuzah.[200] *They were terrified. But then, my mom—she's kind of a hippie—said, 'Fine, he's just trying to find himself.' And my dad said, 'Fuck, you*

[198] This "fear of religion" describes Israeli scholar Gideon Katz (2011, 2024) when writing about the case of Israeli secularism. He uses the term "Judaeophobia." I interpret this "fear of Judaism," which Katz addresses in his writing, and the anxiety about potential religious coercion as effects of the "nationalization" and "ethnicization" of Jewish identity as discussed previously.

[199] Black leather boxes with Hebrew parchment scrolls and straps worn on the forehead and on the arm.

[200] Small parchment scroll inscribed with verses from the *Torah* placed inside a case and affixed to the doorposts of Jewish homes.

can do anything, just don't be religious.' So, it lasted for a bit, and then I became less and less religious. I think that was the moment I started seeing a lot of lies in religion. At one point, I said to myself: this doesn't make sense. Because on the surface level, it's a lot of bullshit. But when you go deeper, it's philosophy… I find religious people beautiful, but there's one thing in the Orthodox community that I really fucking despise, and it's the status of women. And that doesn't make sense."

So, then, what does it mean to feel religious if religion is also full of lies? What does it mean to feel both secular and religious at the same time? Daniel's narration takes wide turns through both philosophy and politics:

"I'm religious, but in a very Spinozian way. Baruch Spinoza—beautiful man. So, I'm religious in the sense that I see everything as God or Infinity. I study Jewish thought, and as part of my scholarship, I visit the Orthodox community. I think Orthodox Judaism is much better than Zionist Judaism… I'm a very specific kind of secular person because I find the way people view things religiously fascinating. I don't feel that religion is forced upon me. Because if someone tries to force it, I can always say, 'Look, let's open the Gemara[201] and see who's right.' That said, the fact that, for example, stores are closed for Shabbat is fucking irritating and inconvenient. Secular people feel they're being coerced into religion. But then, if you ask an Orthodox person, he'll tell you, 'I feel like I'm being coerced into secularism.' This is why I don't believe in a Jewish state, to be honest. Once you have a Jewish state, you have to define what Judaism is—and that's something that hasn't been defined for 2,000 years. Judaism, at its core, is an ongoing conversation. Trying to define it will always lead to conflict. And if you embed that struggle into the body politics of a nation-state, then what's happening now is inevitable. This country is a ticking time bomb."

I would like to know, if he sees some solution for the society's rifts:

"Yesterday, I spoke with my friend about secular Judaism in Israel. Secular Judaism was founded on socialism—it was originally meant to replace religion. But since that foundation collapsed, it has been left very empty, very

[201] *Gemara* is a collection of rabbinical commentaries and analyses.

vacant. It denies categorically any sort of association to Jewishness. In many ways, the only thing they see as Jewish is being Israeli. That for me is a big problem because that is a made-up thing, which was invented 70 years ago. Judaism is a real thing that's been going on for 2500 years. It's a thought. There's a legal system, there's theology, there's philosophy… So, this diluted version, emptied version of secular Judaism explains a lot of the fragmentation of the Left and secular society. I think one of the most important things is to find a new route to secular Judaism. Because for a lot of secular Jews, it's disorienting. There's this fear of religion, because it's always been something imposed on them. But I think there has to be a reconciliation with the fact that everyone has a religious side. I mean, you have to believe in something. Even believing in science requires a kind of leap of faith. So I think, [this new route of] *secular Judaism takes Judaism not as a dogma or as a doctrine, but takes it as a school of thought."*

I remember Nir's reaction to my question about "belief" in God. Hence, I formulate my question differently: is this new route of secular Judaism, which Daniel proposes, with or without God for Daniel?

"It's with God. Everything is with God. I believe in Spinoza's God. It's nature, it's the universe. We say 'universe' because 'God' became a dirty word. But you can call it whatever you want—why not just call it God and ignore the fact that it has been appropriated by religious dogma? God is infinity, God is the beginning, all those things we don't have answers to… And if you're a secular Jewish person then you have to still learn. You can't overlook the Bible or the Talmud or Maimonides, just like you can't overlook Aristotle and Plato. You have to incorporate these things into your thinking… I think secular Judaism suffers from a fear of religion. But it's just a mimetic force. Secularism in Jewish society emerged at the same time that Orthodox—Haredi Judaism did. They are two mimetic voices. Secular Jews in Israel don't realize they're doing exactly what they accuse the religious of doing. But I don't want haredi people to change. I don't want them to be more like me. I want them to be exactly as they are. They have the right to believe what they believe."

Daniel narrates himself as being *both* secular and religious. Daniel's "yumminess" of Judaism opens up without the need to choose between "secularity" and "religion." Against the background of personal history and intellectual curiosity, Daniel negotiates the terms of his "Jewishness" on grounds rooted in Jewish philosophical tradition and legacy, but also ones that take a firmly "Jewish" political stance. His narration of secularity takes a form of trope of secularity as Judaism—narrated and gestured through different flavours, though, than in the case of Hila.

First, I want to focus closely on "being secular" and "being religious," on secularity and religion as they appear in Daniel's narration. Daniel distinguishes between the "secularity" of his parents and his own. The same distinction is made between his religiosity, or his feelings of being religious, and the religiosity of the "Others"—in this case, Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox people. His parents' secularity is the "old" secularity, the secularity of pioneers, the socialist secularity of founders of the *kibbutzim*, of the founders of the country as a generation with fear of religion, fear of Judaism, where religion is the enemy. That is also the empty and vacant secularity—the collapsed, diluted version of secular Judaism without a reference to "Jewishness," where "God" became a dirty word. These "Other" seculars, not Daniel, fear the "religious" coercion.

The "mimetic counterpart" of this "old" secularity is "religion" as dogma, as doctrine, represented by the "Other" religious people—the Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox Jews. These "mimetic counterparts," in Daniel's words, merely fear the same imposition of the Other's way of life. Daniel uses the phrases "being religious" and "being less and less religious" in reference to this "old" understanding of religion and secularity when speaking about his childhood and teenage years. That ceased to make sense—Daniel's process of personal "secularization" is narrated here as a trope of secularity as reason and common sense, necessarily intertwined with secularity as autonomy. He still wants to decide for himself whether to do groceries during *Shabbat*, for example. In his case, this autonomy is not expressive but implicitly present as a *conditio sine qua non.*

A renewed version of his current religiosity emerges as a new "secular Judaism," reflecting a Spinozian notion of an all-encompassing God present in everything and everyone. In this sense, the "old" religion and religious people do

not need to change for Daniel; they have a place within this expansive understanding. Daniel's version of secular Judaism is an ongoing conversation and a non-dogmatic school of thought, which is deeply rooted in traditional Jewish sources while also engaging dialogically with non-Jewish philosophy. An attentive reader might notice how engagement with the works of Baruch Spinoza and "Western" philosophers leads to different outcomes: for Sagi, such engagement resulted in "de-religionization," whereas for Daniel, it helped him to articulate and deepen his affectionate connection to, and "new" understanding of, what it means to be "religious."

Daniel gestures his "new" secular religiosity in multiple directions, also as a trope of counter-position: against the "old" secularity of his parents and the "Other" seculars; against the "old" religion based on dogma and "bullshit" (though without the antagonism articulated by Alona and Nitzan—although Alona's narration "flirts" with the trope of secularity as Judaism, as she also distinguishes between "Judaism" *itself* and a modified Judaism, against which she positions herself); and against the "Jewish" state, which presumes the ability of Zionism to define what "Jewish" and "Judaism" mean. Hence, his narration is also a counter-position to the trope of secularity as Israeliness and secularity as Zionism, as present in Hila's narration and gesturing, where secularity as Israeliness, Judaism, and Zionism merge. In contrast to this, Daniel's stance is self-proclaimed anti-Zionist: his secular Judaism takes the form of a "Jewish" critique of Zionism, very similar to the critique provided by Nir.

Secularity as Zionism

As the final trope emerging from the conducted in-depth interviews, I offer the trope of secularity as Zionism, which surfaces reluctantly. I place this trope last not only as a structural choice but as a reflection of its character—ambivalent, ambiguous, unstable, and concealed beneath the more loudly, coherently, and expressively narrated and gestured tropes. To narrate one's secularity as part of "being a Zionist" inherently carries an awareness of its possible connotations, both historical and contemporary. It is to step into a contested terrain of meaning-making between multiple parties, and people *do care* about how they are understood and read. For Hila, to "be a secular Jew" is part of "being a Zionist." For others, such a clear-cut distinction is not obvious; rather, they narrate and

gesture their “secularity” as Israeliness, which allows for relating to softer words like “family,” “land,” “historical continuum,” “language,” and “tradition.” One should also not forget the trope of secularity as a counter-position, gestured and positioned as an explicit critique of Zionism from the “Jewish” position (in the case of Daniel and Nir) as mentioned previously, and from the “Israeli” position (in the case of Nitzan).

During the interviews, I asked only twice whether the interlocutors considered themselves “Zionists.” Early on, it became clear that this question, though seemingly simple and innocent, disrupted the flow and “chemistry” of the conversation. It was met with an undercurrent of suspicion: Was I trying to trick them? To accuse them? To box them into a category they weren’t sure they belonged to? The question seemed to initiate not just an answer, but a defensive responsive stance as a recognition of the risks involved in such a loaded term. For many, the label “Zionist” carried a weight that could not be easily disentangled from the broader political, historical, and moral implications. To embrace it was, in a sense, to step into a minefield of potential misinterpretations and misunderstandings. As my intention is to cherish the narrative agency of the interlocutors, I refrain from stating that someone is *actually* a “Zionist”[202] without fairly acknowledging that. Instead, I am offering Joni's narration, in addition to Hila's, as another way in which “secularity” might also emerge and be read as Zionism, or at least as part of it.

Joni: *Zionism is a word of the past*

Joni is in his early twenties, raised in Jerusalem. He is easy to spot—tattoos on his arms and legs, a skateboard always nearby, and a face that has become familiar to me from the many hours he spends hanging out at the

[202] As I stated earlier, in the *Introduction* section of this dissertation (see footnote n. 17), the public discourse and reception of the terms “Zionism” and “Zionist” have shifted significantly during the writing process, particularly following the attention the Israel/Palestine region received after October 7, 2023, and the subsequent war in Gaza. All of the interviews were conducted before this period. In this dissertation, I refer to Zionism as an ideology and political project rooted in ethno-nationalist thought and the emergence of nation-states in the late 19th century. By the time this dissertation might be read, “being a Zionist” may, in some contexts, have become synonymous with a slur. In my writing, I strive to approach “Zionism” from a neutral ground, though I acknowledge neutrality is, to some extent, always an illusion. When the terms “Zionism” or “being a Zionist” arise in conversations and interviews, my focus is on the specific meaning the particular speaker attributes to the term.

same café bar where my friends and I meet. It is one of those places where regulars come and go, and you are always likely to see someone you recognize, especially on Thursday nights and early Friday afternoons. One day, another regular at the café starts a conversation with me. "*You know, these kids*," he says, leaning in a little as if sharing a secret, "*the whole skateboard community here in Jerusalem, they are cool. And they have interesting stories to tell*." When I suggest the interview to Joni, he does not hesitate and agrees happily. A few days later, Joni shows up at my place for the interview, with a skateboard, and indeed, he is cool. Joni first speaks about his background and family, and the word "Zionism" comes up very early in the interview:

"From my mom's side, I'm the eighth generation here. Another part of the family came from different parts of Europe after they were basically expelled. Part of the family emigrated to the US and part here. They arrived with a very Zionist idea of building Israel and bringing a modern world to the Jewish people. Both of my parents are very Zionist. It's interesting because they are also super left-wing. They are very pro-Palestine. They understand the situation; they know it's super complicated."

I wonder how Joni sees himself within this matrix of positioning:

"So, knowing that my grandparents came to Israel from a different country with the belief in building a Jewish state, that definitely influences me—it pushes my thoughts in a certain direction. So, there's that… And also, my mum's mainly a dreamer, and my dad's a thinker. So, I kind of get both sides of that—the thinking and the dreaming. I really take after my dad in the sense that he has this balance; he can look at a problem and see what Israel is doing wrong, or vice versa. Even though he feels very Israeli and identifies strongly as both Israeli and Zionist, he can still reflect and say, 'Israel is doing this wrong, and this wrong.' Whereas, I feel, it's very hard for Israelis who are very patriotic to acknowledge when Israel is doing something wrong. And my mom is this crazy dreamer. She always wants peace, and you need that, especially living here. You need that kind of utopian ideal to keep you humane. She's an activist, going to the West Bank, to Gaza, but at the same time, she's a Zionist."

Joni keeps talking about his parents, but I am more interested in how he feels. So, I ask the question—for the second and final time during my fieldwork: Would Joni call himself a Zionist? Joni hesitates and takes his time to answer, saying that it is a good question.

"I think... it's a word of the past, you know? My parents are Zionists, but now, we're just like, whatever. We don't want to put labels on it. I don't think I've ever heard my friends talking about someone being like, 'Oh yeah, he's a Zionist.' I don't remember anyone saying that. But yeah, I would call myself a Zionist if I think about it. I was in the military, and I stayed beyond my time because I felt I had a purpose. I love a lot of things about Israel, and I see a lot of good in it. So, if that fits under the category of Zionist, then yes."

While talking about his life, it becomes clear that for Joni, it is somehow easier to narrate himself through the figures of his parents, and he does so with a lighter tone than when the question directly concerns him. This also happens when I ask him whether he has ever felt any "Jewishness" present in his life.

"My mom is very religious, while my dad is the exact opposite—he's very science-oriented and doesn't believe in God. As a young boy, it was really nice for me to go to the synagogue, being surrounded by kids, with food… But when I was 12, I started developing my own ideas about it. One day I told my mom, 'Today, I'm not going with you to the synagogue.' She always tried to pull me back, but I was doing it just for her. I had already formed my own ideas about God, religion, and Judaism. Mainly, that it's not for me. I didn't really see it as something I needed in my life. There were a lot of contradictions happening that just didn't make sense to me. My dad is the complete opposite of my mom, and his life is pretty good. He can eat whatever he wants, you know? I don't keep anything now… When I travelled during the past months after I left the army, I realized that I'm not in any way, shape, or form Jewish per se… But if anyone asks me if I am Jewish, I'm OK with that. I'm proud to be Jewish. I'm a proud Jew... But Judaism is not just about religion. There are people, there's a blood type... I don't feel like I necessarily have to do anything to be Jewish. I just know I am. So, I am a Jew, but I don't keep anything. And also, most people in Israel who aren't religious still like

to have a Shabbat dinner, light a candle, and have challah—the bread—and they're not religious at all. It's just a tradition, but it's also a very Jewish tradition. And if we go a little deeper, there's also the trauma of the Holocaust, and you can feel it. If you meet Jews, you can sense that there is a tension, that something is a little off."

I decide to ask Joni what it means to be a proud Jew—what is he proud of?

"I think mainly what makes me proud is Israel. Not necessarily Judaism. But it's also an interesting religion because you have all these crazy different things in Judaism, like sacred geometry and stuff. That is actually pretty cool, and I'm also proud to be part of that interesting cult... But Israel is a crazy, crazy country."

Joni must think I am crazy too because I keep asking. So, does that mean that you are a proud Israeli Joni?

"Yeah… I'm proud to be Israeli in Israel and also outside, but there is a lot of danger if you are very open about being Israeli and Jewish. So sometimes I say that I'm not from Israel, that I'm an American—after my father, who is."

Joni's perfect English and his identity strategy while being abroad make me wonder if he is also a proud American.

"No... Less... I think it's connected to my army years in Israel. You're confronted with pain and obstacles that you have to overcome, in a productive way... You have a sense of belonging there. Everyone is part of this big group, of this tribe. Like tribalism. And that also gives you a sense of belonging and meaning. If you put these two together, it's a damn strong power. And you can trust the person next to you. So it's also a feeling of safety. Because, you know, everyone is Jewish... I mean, there are plenty of others in Israel, but Jewish is the base. And you don't get that in other places. And the States lack that sense of belonging and meaning… There were two wars happening when I served, one smaller and one bigger, and the whole country got together—I mean the Jewish

part. It didn't matter if you were Ashkenazi Jew or Sephardi Jew, whatever, we agreed this is a threat, what are we gonna do about this? How can we support the soldiers, who are the kids of everyone? Because everyone has a daughter, a son, or a nephew in the military. So at the end of the day, there is at least this one thing we can all agree upon."

Joni's narration and gestures close this chapter—not merely as a final example but as an embodiment and crystallization of the ambivalent trope of secularity as Zionism. His story serves as a "grand finale" not because of its exceptionality but precisely due to its ordinariness, bringing together other tropes. Joni's case does not stand out as extraordinary; it resonates with the mundane experience of being a "secular Israeli Jew." Echoing Raymond Williams' (1958) assertion that "culture is ordinary," Joni's story brings into focus the deeply entwined, yet often unnoticed, connection between the everyday and the ideological, which makes visible how lived experiences of secularity are articulated through the most modest of gestures. They are sometimes assembling the seemingly "empty" character of secular Jewishness in Israel.

Joni narrates his secularity without directly referencing "secularity" itself: he does so through the convergence of multiple tropes, each one building upon the other through subtle gestures. He narrates his secularity as autonomy (*"I had already formed my own ideas about God, religion, and Judaism. Mainly, that it's not for me."*); as reason and common sense ("*There were a lot of contradictions happening that just didn't make sense to me… My dad is science-oriented and doesn't believe in God, and his life is pretty good."*); and as a counter-position (to the "religiousness" of his mother and those who see Judaism as "just a religion" and more than a "tradition"). Perhaps most notably, Joni's secularity is also bound up in Israeliness—therefore in the trope of secularity as Israeliness, where living in Israel itself sustains the very notion of "Jewishness" (*"I'm not in any way, shape, or form Jewish per se. I don't feel like I necessarily have to do anything to be Jewish. I just know I am…"*).

This "Jewishness" shapes the contours of belonging and meaning when recalling the years spent in the army (*"I think mainly what makes me proud is Israel. Not necessarily Judaism… Everyone is part of this big group, of this tribe. It gives you a sense of belonging and meaning. You can trust the person next to*

you. Because, you know, everyone is Jewish... I mean, there are plenty of others in Israel, but Jewish is the base."). His secularity, though, only briefly and awkwardly "flirts" with the trope of secularity as Judaism; for a fleeting moment, he stumbles over it (*"It's also an interesting religion because you have all these crazy different things in Judaism, like sacred geometry and stuff. That is actually pretty cool, and I'm also proud to be part of that interesting cult."*), only to return irreversibly to the pride of being an Israeli in the ethno-national and tribal sense of belonging and survival.

Joni's narration is layered with intergenerational influences, particularly through the legacy of his "nation-building" Zionist ancestors and from his parents, whose left-wing, pro-Palestine stances coexist parallelly with their Zionist beliefs. That is what forms the backdrop of Joni's life. Yet, Joni positions himself within this matrix not through overt political identification but rather through a lived and instinctual Zionism—as an almost post-ideological stance. He struggles to label himself as a Zionist, suggesting that the term feels outdated and unnecessary among his peers, a word of the past. However, his experiences in the military, where he had a sense of purpose and served due to his mandatory service, and his undisputed pride in being an Israeli, eventually led him to the conclusion that he *is* one.

The trope of secularity as Zionism becomes particularly salient when Joni gestures towards his "Jewishness." In his case, the "Jewishness" as an adjective is irrelevant—he is Jewish because he is a Jew, even a proud one. His pride is directed more towards Israel than to Judaism as a "religion" or "school of thought and ongoing conversation," as in Daniel's case. His pride in Israel is not rooted in a pronounced ideological stance, which Zionism would represent; it is more about its embodiment of a "tribe" as a "secular," nationalistic kinship where belonging and safety are paramount. The sense of "Jewish" unity, trust, and collective purpose Joni found in the military sheds light on how the military institution, in this way, acts as a vessel of "unexpressed" ideology, as a structure that affirms the sense of identity through the practice of its members, rather than through explicit political discourse.

The Israeli army, in Joni's narration, functions as an identity-affirming institution, which helps to maintain a sense of coherence in the face of collective threat. It also builds on the shared trauma of the Holocaust and the instinctive

distrust towards the "Other." Its power and persuasiveness lie not in articulating ideology explicitly, but in its ability to sustain a quasi-religious sense of kinship. In the trope of secularity as Zionism, a different type of consciousness—the "ethnicized," racialized (*"There are people, there's a blood type..."*) and nationalized version of Jews—is pronounced. Here, secularity is not an "absence of religion," but the lived reverberation of a consciousness shift, as introduced in the *Ethnic Jews: Beyond Ontological Jewishness* section, which is rooted in survival and communal unity emerging from it.

Conclusion: Gestures in Multiple Directions

In tracing the tropes through which "being a secular Jew" is narrated and gestured—both physically and symbolically—I have illustrated how secular Jewishness emerges as a performative dialogue rather than a stable point of reference. Through portraits of specific interlocutors, I have outlined what I call a *tropology* in three senses: first, it represents a typology of tropes emerging from the in-depth interviews I conducted and how I read them; second, as a method of analysis inspired by engagements with the works presented in the *Theoretical Terrain* section and by Yuval-Davis' (2006) theorizing of "identity talks;" and finally, as a way of presenting the tracing of meaning-making through narrations and gestures that compose the figurative tropes of secularity.

These tropes remain fluid, with their contours continually shaped and reshaped by other narrations and gestures, both with explicit and implicit awareness of the recipient (of the audience) of such gesturing and narration. While not all tropes were articulated by multiple speakers in the final text, their recurrence was not limited to singular instances; instead, they accumulated and transformed, layering upon one another in a cumulative way. These tropes do not function as discrete categories but as entangled modes of self-narration, unfolding through intersecting trajectories. I have approached them as interpretive possibilities: ways of reading secular Jewishness in Israel that remain provisional, open-ended, and continuously reconfigured in practice, where being *hiloni* is a relational practice of dialectical positioning and recalibration. Instead of treating "secularity" as a fixed or self-evident trait, I traced how it is narrated and gestured (towards what and whom), how it is negotiated and under which conditions, and how it is lived and inhabited. The following chapters seek to address the question

of with whom and with whom *not* these tropes of secularity are intimately lived, imagined, and inhabited.

In total, I offered six interconnected tropes of “secularity”: secularity as personal autonomy, as a counter-position, as Israeliness, as reason and common sense, as Judaism, and as Zionism. I started to build the tropology from the notion of *Secularity as Personal Autonomy*, which was, to a certain extent, present as a recurring trope in all the other tropes. Indeed, “secularity” could then be understood as synonymous with autonomy and autonomy as also its prerequisite: to turn around with a nod—*that's me*—when being interpellated into a discursive order that enables the subject to “be,” necessitates the subject's own sense of agency and autonomy to do so. To narrate oneself as “secular” is to emphasize and assert one’s independence, self-determination, freedom, or self-sufficiency. Secularity, in this trope, is also often a response—a counterpoint to multiple expectations that subjects perceive as either constraining, threatening, limiting, or irrelevant: “religion” as dogma, “religion” as a coercive force, Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox interpretations of Judaism, the authority of a rabbi, the “religious” establishment and its model of “religious” purity in Israel, the gender order of the “religious” world, or Religious Zionism.

Secularity, narrated as personal autonomy, is deeply intertwined with the second trope of *Secularity as Counter-position.* To narrate oneself as secular is to actively construct a distinction between “Me”—the secular subject—and those identities or conditions perceived as external, foreign, or “Other.” This narrative gesture functions as a performative counter-claim, as a negotiation of selfhood defined through opposition, as a declaration of “Self” that is inevitably framed within broader discursive formations. Here, secularity emerges as a disagreement and refusal: a defensive yet active take-up of a counter-position against the backdrop of the condition the subject feels they are inhabiting—whether in opposition to those already listed in the previous paragraph, as an articulation of political dissent against the “Jewish” state itself, as a counter-position towards imposed “Jewishness”, or as a rejection of the “secularity” of the “Others”.

As a third trope, I presented the trope of *Secularity as Israeliness* and offered its reading in two interconnected ways. First, “Israeliness” as a condition, where secularity is the unmarked norm, and where “religion” is viewed as separate from “family and tradition,” and second, “Israeliness” as a synonym for

being a secular Jew, where living in Israel itself upholds the very idea of "Jewishness" without the necessity to "do Jewishness." In some instances, "Israeliness" was experienced by individuals as the primary means of connecting to the collective, without an overt reference to "Jewishness." However, as I demonstrated, this self-narration of secularity was also contested by its counter-positions.

In the fourth trope of *Secularity as Reason in Common Sense*, the narration and gestures of "being secular" took shape within either the precise, unyielding language of positivism as a secular epistemology or the softer, less pronounced vocabulary of "reason" and rational distancing from "faith" and "religion" as something fictional. First and foremost, it needs to "make sense" to the subject, with rationality, logic, science, and critical thinking serving as guiding principles.

Each of the tropes (and the interlocutors narrating and gesturing through them) had to, to a certain level, relate itself towards "Jewishness" and Judaism. In the trope of *Secularity as Judaism*, I suggested a counterintuitive reading of "being secular" as Judaism, since "being secular" does not exist in a vacuum but emerges through ongoing negotiation and dialogue with the very conditions that make such a claim possible. The fundamental drama of this dialogue reaches its climax in the tension between "being a secular Jew" and "being a secular and a Jew." In the former, secularity is the defining feature, with Jewishness merely an incidental, arbitrary, secondary, or unquestioned characteristic for the subject (as in secularity as Israeliness). In the latter, "being a secular and a Jew" suggests a more complex and dynamic interaction between claimed secularity and Jewish identity, where both elements are actively negotiated in a profound conversation with Judaism.

As the final trope, I positioned the troubling and ambivalent trope of *Secularity as Zionism* that is unstable and concealed beneath the more loudly, coherently, and expressively narrated and gestured tropes. In some narrations and gestures, Israeliness, Judaism, and Zionism merge together, while in others, only Israeliness and Zionism are deeply entwined. Yet "Zionism" here is not a pronounced ideological stance but rather an implicitely lived and instinctual Zionism—an embodiment of a "tribe"—a secularized, nationalistic kinship where a sense of unity against a threat, and the consequent affectionate state of belonging, come first. I understand such instinctual Zionism, through its

institutions (such as the army), as providing a quasi-"religious" sense of kinship and collectivity. I read "secularity" in the trope of secularity as Zionism not as an "absence of religion" but as the lived reverberation of a consciousness shift (as introduced in the *Ethnic Jews: Beyond Ontological Jewishness* chapter and in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter), which is rooted in survival and the communal unity emerging from it.

Partially, I provided my interpretation and discussion through the very act of analysis and writing. After all, when data takes the form of writing, implicit interpretation is already necessarily "there".[203] Ethnographic writing, as a mode and regime of representation, is never a neutral act; it is always burdened with choices about which voices to amplify, which moments to foreground, and which connections to draw. Through the tropology, I aimed to approach "secularity" in Israel as a dialogical process: a multivocal conversation *with*, *against*, and *alongside* its specific contextual anchoring to ensure the subjects recognizing themselves in the category of "secular Israeli Jew" are not confined to a predetermined script that would rigidify their being.

By elevating ethno-religious understandings of "being a Jew" into a political model of social organization, Israel, through Zionism as an ideology rooted in ethno-nationalism, has transformed and delineated categories that were lived experiences but not fully institutionalized as a legal category. This legal recognition of "being a Jew" is pivotal, but it does not equate to the complete liberation of the secular Jewish subject: being completely free (*hofshi*) from the historical continuum and from the very category of its being. That suggests that a new mode of self-identification and embodiment was created and enabled, which, moreover, manifests in and impacts the realm of personal relationships—intimacy and desire.[204]

Through the "Zionist identity discourse," a particular mode of Jewish subjectivity emerged—one in which "being a Jew" does not necessarily require "doing Jewishness" or "doing Judaism. This enabling became so effective and successful that it was internalized by its subjects to the point where the genealogy of these inventions became invisible and naturalized as something transhistorical. This brings us back to the double-bind or reverse effect of power, as introduced in

[203] That is, "positioning the ethnography as an argument" (Gay y Blasco and Wardle, 2007: 3)
[204] See the *Infrastructure of Intimacy: Thick Life, Thin Lines* chapter.

the *Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories* chapter.[205] And yet, as I continue to argue, such an understanding offers little insight into the "reality" of the subjects, nor does it provide the ethnographic "feel and grip" of their lived experiences. It merely provides the contextual backdrop upon which the "drama" of personal lives unfolds.

The negotiation of one's being as a "secular Israeli Jew" is a dialogical process, narrated and gestured in multiple directions. Very rarely does this dialogue slip into a monologue, as in the case of Tomer. Tomer is "Jewish" or "a Jew" only insofar as the state recognizes him as such, which is a distinction he does not explicitly engage with in his narration, and a privilege he does not reflect upon. Yet, like others who wish to narrate themselves outside of the discursive order into which they are interpellated and through which their existence came into being, he recognizes himself in the available discursive category by agreeing to be interviewed—*to become a subject*. This dialogical process thus unfolds in relation to both the material conditions of the Israeli state, where "being a Jew" becomes an ascribed, externally imposed identity, and the spectrum of individual responses to that ascription, to Judaism, and to "Jewishness" itself.

Such a process of relating might be reluctant and even dismissive, but one that is nonetheless tethered to history, "tradition," and affective bonds towards survival, landscape, the symbolism of language, and cultural legacy. The "religion" in these heated dialogues is not Judaism *per se* but the available versions of what is understood as "religion" in Israel, where the religious rabbinical establishment is intertwined with the state itself, serving as a gatekeeper of the proper "Jewishness" and its performance.

In such an environment, the subjects gesture and narrate their "secularity" as both a political stance and as an assertion of the need for autonomy, allowing for personal, embodied, "civil" religion, or secular Judaism, on terms that the

---

[205] Here, one might recall Judith Butler when referring to Foucault: "Foucault points out that juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent [...]. The question of the subject is crucial for politics, [...] because juridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not 'show' once the juridical structure of politics has been established. In other words, the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation. Juridical power inevitably 'produces' what it claims merely to represent; hence, politics must be concerned with this dual function of power: the juridical and the productive. In effect, the law produces and then conceals the notion of 'a subject before the law' in order to invoke that discursive formation as a naturalized foundational premise that subsequently legitimates that law's own regulatory hegemony" (Butler 1990: 2–3).

subject would not find restrictive, but that would allow for creativity and personal attachment. This aligns with scholarly discussions of Zionism as a form of civil religion, where the land, history, and national symbols function as sacred elements that replace or supplement what is understood as traditional religious observance. Yet, people narrate their secularity also against this “sacralization” as present in the Zionist project, precisely because it lacks the deeper, and not only superficial, connection to Judaism as a school of thought and philosophy.

The aim of this chapter was, through the tropology of secularity, to illuminate the multiplicity of ways in which self-proclaimed secular Jewish subjects in Israel navigate and negotiate their own being. Through the process of subjectification, individuals receive the “name” and, in doing so, become subjects. However, this subjectification is not a passive act; it is a dynamic and creative one. Through the tropes presented, I have attempted to show the contours this creative process might take. The often-heated dialogue occurs both with the state and its very conditions, as well as with the “Other.” What a reader might notice is that the “Other” is represented only sporadically by figures such as the “Arab,” “Palestinian,” “Christian,” “Muslim,” “Druze,” or other “Others” who share the space with the subjects of this dissertation. The present “othering” is predominantly focused on the “religious” and other “seculars,” as it unfolds along the axis of the secular-religious spectrum. The other “Others” emerge more prominently in the following chapters.

3. 2. Topography of Locations: Shabbat Shalom, Ramadan Kareem

"You always have to take into consideration the city itself."
— Yossi, interlocutor

This chapter builds on the knowledge produced in the previous chapter, *Secular Subjectivity in a Postsecular Condition*, and expands it by engaging with the spatial aspect of possible and impossible encounters, wherein the topography of the research locations is inscribed with local identity politics. I conducted my fieldwork in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, two urban centers both regarded as capitals. I begin by offering a personal ethnographic recounting and mapping of these locations, and then, through the "dialogical windows" that emerge from the interviews I conducted, I position them through the imaginaries they invoke as "mirror images." As will become apparent later, the cities themselves carry symbolic identities. They draw and redraw the limits and opportunities for meeting the "Other"—the one with whom one might wish to form an intimate relationship, or the one whose proximity would be unreal, unlike, or troublesome. At the same time, the narrations of the cities reveal much more: how subjects understand themselves, who the "Other" is, and what modes of "being" the cities allow.

It is early April 2023, and this year, *Pesach* (Passover), *Ramadan,* and Easter converge. Tens of thousands of Muslims head to *al-Haram al-Sharif* (known as the Temple Mount to others) through the Old City's winding streets. Friends advise me to avoid the area today: "*The crowds make it tense; you are always just a step away from finding yourself in a dangerous situation,"* they say. But I decide to go anyway. I risk it, and luckily, nothing happens, even though I get stuck for more than an hour behind the Damascus Gate. So many bodies make it impossible to pass. I sit down in a Palestinian café nearby to calm my anxiety from the crowds with a glass of cold *Taybeh* beer. Once I finally make it through, I rush to the city centre of West Jerusalem to do the groceries before everything closes, because this evening, *Shabbat* also starts.

On the way, I see a group of Christian pilgrims with huge wooden crosses hanging on their shoulders. I take a picture with my phone, as I do when a man on a donkey passes by, mingling with the scooters and taxis, creating a completely

chaotic, surreal scene. At the grocery store, I decide to pick up a few bottles of wine for our Friday dinner guests. The cashier, a visibly observant Muslim woman, speaks to me in Hebrew but I do not understand. An Orthodox Jewish man behind me steps in: *"She is not allowed to touch the bottle with alcohol; it is Ramadan,"* he explains in English. I hesitate, unsure of what to do. But he already knows. He takes the bottles, scans them, and carefully hands them back to me. He wishes her *Ramadan Kareem*, and she responds with *Shabbat Shalom*. Only I am the foreign idiot here. In Jerusalem, the space itself is a constant reminder of that. As Yossi, one of the interlocutors, told me: "*You always have to take into consideration the city itself.*"

I conducted my research in two cities,[206] in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, which, at first glance, could not be more different. Both are perceived as capitals: of what and whose specifically, is sometimes less clear. Jerusalem was declared the "complete and unified" capital of Israel in 1980 through the enactment of the Jerusalem Law[207] which became part of the quasi-constitutional body of Israeli Basic Laws. Due to the disputed status of East Jerusalem (which Israel gained control over after the 1967 Six-Day War, having been annexed and controlled by the Kingdom of Jordan between 1948 and 1967) and the United Nations' refusal[208] to recognize a unified Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel, most countries with diplomatic representation in Israel have their embassies based in Tel Aviv.

Al-Quds in Arabic, *Yerushalayim* in Hebrew—the navel of the world, the un/holy city, the city of gold,[209] a city of madness. A city of Christian pilgrims, soldiers, pomegranate juice sellers, a divided yet united city—depending on one's perspective. The city of *chulent*[210] in the Orthodox neighbourhood of *Mea*

[206] In this respect, it was therefore a multi-sited ethnographic inquiry (see Marcus 1995), even though "multi-sited" means, indeed, much more than just an inquiry conducted in more than one location/locality. Multi-sited approach is interested in interconnectedness, flow, traversing narrations and ideas *of* "the site," *through* "the site" and *in* "the site."
[207] Available at:
https://m.knesset.gov.il/EN/activity/documents/BasicLawsPDF/BasicLawJerusalem.pdf (Last accessed 11. 6. 2025).
[208] The annexation of East Jerusalem, and in particular the change of its status, has been rejected as an occupation and a violation of international law by several United Nations Security Council's and United Nations General Assembly's resolutions.
[209] The designation comes from Naomi Shemer's famous song *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*, which refers to the Jewish diasporic longing for Jerusalem and celebrating its unification under Israeli control after the 1967 Six-Day War.
[210] Sometimes also spelled *cholent* is a mixture of meat, legumes, and potatoes.

Shearim, the site of every-Friday demonstration in *Sheikh Jarrah*, home to only one official gay bar (to the best of my knowledge) and one un-official (again, to the best of my knowledge), and the Mount of Olives, where the resurrection is believed to begin after the coming of Messiah. It is also a city from which, on days of good visibility, you can see the Dead Sea as well as the concrete wall[211] separating Israeli and Palestinian territory. That one is always visible.

Tel Aviv, literally The Spring Hill, is also known as a city of madness, albeit of a different kind. Depicted as the navel of a "start-up nation,"[212] as a city of hedonism, as the capital of economy and technology, as a city of expats, the LGBTQ+ community, gastronomy, clubs, and parties. The White City[213] of Bauhaus architecture, the showcase, a city of honking horns, delayed buses, AM:PM[214] shops, and the capital of Israeli secularism. A city of the sound of *matkot*[215] on the beach, which is competing with the call of the *muezzin* in *Jaffa*. A city that burns like a greenhouse in August, a city that scratches like sand in one's bathing suit, and there is a synagogue just down the street from a tattoo parlour. A city where veiled Jewish women and veiled Muslim women bathe in the waves side by side, and the excited voices of their many children are indistinguishable, as are their babies' chubby hands. Neither of them is thrilled about the dogs on the beach, and neither is thrilled about my tattoos. But they would agree to watch my bag, and I would watch theirs when we head to the sea. I have no idea what these women think of the *Etzel Museum*[216] which stands not far from where we are

[211] The perspectives and discursive framing of the wall, referred to by some as the "apartheid wall," and by others as the "security fence," vary depending on the side and position from which one speaks. The use of specific words is not without consequence and is not neutral. For more see, e.g., Wills 2016.

[212] Israel is often referred to as the "start-up nation," which is a term popularized by the book *Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle* (Senor and Singer 2009). The book celebrates Israel's economic growth and its high-tech sector. However, as Getzoff (2020) argues, this narrative represents a form of "neoliberal Zionism" that valorizes entrepreneurialism as a Zionist ideal while erasing conflict with Palestinians. Getzoff argues that this framing constructs an Israeli citizen-subject defined by military service and economic competitiveness, and positioning them in opposition to "Arabs" and Palestinians. This critique resonated with the interlocutors, who described the rising cost of living fueled by high-tech salaries and foreign capital, making Israel increasingly unaffordable to live in for many.

[213] The symbolic labelling of Tel Aviv as the "White City," often celebrated for its Bauhaus-inspired architecture and perceived as a beacon of modernity and progress in the desert landscape is challenged by Sharon Rotbard's book *White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa* (2015).

[214] AM:PM is a chain of stores in the Tel Aviv area that stands out from others due to its 24/7 opening hours.

[215] A very popular paddle ball game played on beaches. The unmistakable sound of a rubber ball bouncing off wooden bats is a metronome of local beach life.

[216] Etzel Museum or Etzel House is a museum dedicated to the members of Irgun who died during the conquest of Jaffa in 1948.

swimming. For one, it may represent the memory of the “heroic Irgun fighters,”[217] killed in the 1948 battle of Jaffa; for the other, the destruction of the former Arab *Jaffa*'s neighbourhood of *Manshiya* and dispossession of Palestinian’s properties. And maybe, none of my assumptions is actually correct and I am, once again, the foreign idiot here.

I have chosen these cities as my “base” for several reasons. As previously mentioned, they are two metropolises—two centres, both practically and symbolically. They differ not only in their urban topography and histories—Jerusalem, with its ancient roots, stands in contrast to Tel Aviv, founded in 1909—but also in the composition of their populations and atmospheres. While Tel Aviv's “secularity” is both assumed and accentuated, Jerusalem's “secular” circles operate more as a “community,” a “family,” evoking a “village-like” atmosphere, and positioning themselves as a minority.

However, it is the roles these cities occupy in the collective imagination that are most striking. These roles, and their associated symbolism, reflect the divisions of a stratified society: Jerusalem is often seen as the embodiment of religion, conflict, and fanaticism, while Tel Aviv represents a boundless secularism, rooted in the pleasures of life and consumerism. In Jerusalem, there is frequent disdain for Tel Aviv, while in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem is similarly dismissed. Yet, the apparent rivalry between the cities does not necessarily point to a complete separation or a lack of mutual affection. In many cases, it is better understood as ambivalence—a complex and contradictory relationship that, despite its tension, carries an underlying sense of proximity.[218]

Many of the interlocutors I interviewed have lived in both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv at different points in their lives. Residents of Jerusalem often visit Tel Aviv for concerts, to meet friends, relax at the beach, spend weekends with family, or for work. Conversely, Tel Aviv residents frequently travel to Jerusalem in search of what could be described as “niche” cultural experiences. The relatively smaller alternative scene in Jerusalem is sometimes perceived as more authentic or “cool.” Additionally, institutions such as the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design and the Hebrew University contribute to Jerusalem’s reputation among some as a city of intellectuals and artists.

---

[217] Irgun was a Zionist paramilitary organization active in British Mandatory Palestine from 1931 to 1948.

[218] Here, again, I solely focus on the narrations of “secular Israeli Jews,” the subjects of the dissertation.

The symbolism of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, their imaginaries,[219] and the roles they play in the fantasies of both their own inhabitants and foreigners (including my own fantasies) are not only backdrops to my fieldwork, because the "space" is an active participant in the whole story. The cities do not merely reflect ambivalence, contradictions, and tensions; they also actively generate them. These urban spaces cultivate narratives of dichotomy and hostility between the "secular" and the "religious," yet they also give rise to moments of unexpected tenderness when, in the midst of all the mess happening on the ground, one might find themselves whispering "*I love you"* to the city. This duality, where contention and affection coexist, speaks to the deeper, more intricate emotional ties people have with their environments, with the people they inhabit these spaces with, and with the landscapes to which they narrate and gesture their being, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Just like the bodies that inhabit and traverse their streets, the cities hold layers of complexity and elusiveness and resist a singular narrative. The contrasting perceptions of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv by their inhabitants and their mutual positioning reflect how people perceive themselves and what they define themselves against. Both places represent *something*, but how this "something" is negotiated changes and often carries conflicted messages. Both places have a price—a toll, as does the way of living in them.

I spent more months in Jerusalem than in Tel Aviv, totaling only two months in the latter. Initially, I spent a month as a student in *ulpan* (Hebrew language school) at Tel Aviv University and I lived in a students' dormitory in the north of the city. Later, I relocated to a shared apartment in *Neve Tzedek*. In Jerusalem, I lived in two distinct areas: *Baka* and *Rehavia*. Each of these locations had its own unique characteristics, and my choice of residence was influenced partly by chance and partly by factors such as budget constraints and personal connections. The trajectories of my residence and movement also defined the limits of intelligibility of the places, the possibility of encountering particular individuals, and shaped the situational imagery that arose from these locational entanglements. For the most part, I mirrored the urban movements of the people I interacted with or lived with as roommates.[220]

---

[219] On the topic of urban imaginaries see, e.g., Çinar and Bender 2007.
[220] See also the *Field and Subjects* section in the *Methodological Foundations* part.

In what follows, I first offer a partial characterization of the places through the process of ethnographing. This characterization is, for obvious reasons, highly subjective, drawing on field diaries, impressions, and emotional memory as ethnographic glimpses and sketches. However, such a mapping of the fieldwork sets the stage for the dialogical windows based on the interviews conducted and provides a view into the mutually constitutive imaginaries of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. These windows are not only about the cities themselves but also about the multiplicity of ways in which people understand themselves and their surroundings, and how the cities shape their sense of belonging.[221] In the following chapter, *Infrastructure of Intimacy*, I build upon both the tropes of secularity discussed in the previous chapter and the spatial aspects explored here.

Jerusalem: "City of Madness"

"There's a stigma about Jerusalem for the rest of Israelis because they say that it's a city of madness that doesn't make any sense."
— Ishai, interlocutor

"The air over Jerusalem is saturated with prayers and dreams
like the air over industrial cities.
It's hard to breathe."
— Yehuda Amichai[222]

Jerusalem sounds like a Palestinian sunbird
and honking drivers,
ben zona and *sharmuta*

[221] Critical geography views space as socially constructed and politically shaped and emphasizes the need to examine who creates, regulates, and benefits from space (Lefebvre 1991). Feminist geography expanded this analysis by exploring how gender, ethnicity, class, and other categories influence spatial hierarchies. Tovi Fenster (2006) critiques Lefebvre's "right to the city" concept (1968) and argues it overlooks identity politics and power relations that affect access to urban spaces (building on Dikeç 2001). She also challenges the public-private space dichotomy, highlighting how this division often marginalizes women and romanticizes the domestic sphere. Fenster introduces the concept of "right to belong," where everyday urban practices create a sense of belonging through performative reiteration (building on Bell 1999), though access to this right is not universally experienced. For a longer discussion on the approach of the mentioned authors, see, e.g., Crofony 2020. As was evident throughout the tropes of secularity in the previous chapter, women specifically articulated the impact of the "religious" on space and the gendered effects it had on their sense of belonging.
[222] Yehuda Amichai was an Israeli poet and writer (1924–2000).

She sounds like the *muezzin* on Friday
and *Lecha Dodi*.
Jerusalem smells like cats and jasmine,
and *knafeh* and Hummus Arafat,
and candles of the Holy Sepulchre
And all these sounds and smells
Are part of the story

It is the autumn of 2022, and I feel relieved as I move from the bustling and buzzing Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. I do not have enough sources to socialize in Tel Aviv on a daily basis, and at the same time, I have nothing to do here or with whom but to socialize, talk, "observe life," and write it down, that is, to do the fieldwork. Finding an affordable housing option is a complicated task itself as well. However, I get lucky in Jerusalem. Through the network of friends, I land an apartment that feels almost too good to be true. The current tenant is about to leave for an extended period, and he offers me the place in exchange for the simple promise that I will care for his carefully curated library as a fellow academic. In return, I do not have to pay the full rent.

The apartment is in the Jerusalem neighbourhood *Baka*, officially known as *Geulim*, which means "redeemed" in Hebrew. I have not heard anyone refer to the neighbourhood by its official name. Everyone sticks to the original Arabic name, meaning "valley." Baka is in the southern part of Jerusalem and is crossed by the historical Jerusalem-Jaffa railroad line, which was opened in 1892. Today, a bicycle path runs along the former tracks, leading to the First Station (*Tachana Rishona*), repurposed as a place full of restaurants and little shops. What adds to the neighborhood's charm, besides the tangerine trees, is mainly the architecture of the original buildings built by the upper-middle class during the years following the railroad's opening.

These elegant villas were predominantly owned by wealthy Arab (Muslim and Christian) and Armenian families. During the war in 1948, most of the owners and their families had to leave the houses and were unable to return afterwards or to get the compensation, since Baka became part of the newly formed State of Israel. Nowadays, I hear mainly English and French on the street,

the majority of the residents are of a Jewish origin and Baka is considered a posh neighborhood where the upscale new residential projects are being built.[223]

I became friends with a poet who lives in the apartment below me on *Derech Beit Lechem* (Bethlehem Road, literally “the street of House of Bread”). We talk about this splendid house, but also about what it means to live there. Yael is originally from Tel Aviv, and I can sense she is very sensitive and contemplative:

“I feel like a hypocrite in this house. I keep thinking about the family who built it for themselves. And then Nakba[224] *came. I don't know if they were forced to leave by the troops, or they left out of fear. It doesn't matter. Sometimes I have nightmares that they will knock on our doors and tell me: We want to see our house where you live now… But you know, it is the same story as in Europe after the war, Jews coming to see the places where they used to live…”*

We sip coffee on the covered terrace, surrounded by unique arched windows and decorative ornamental tiles on the floor. After a while, someone knocks on the door. Yael's friend from the neighbouring flat joins us for a coffee. We briefly repeat the topic of our talk, and the friend adds:

“Yes, me and my partner, we were also debating whether to take this rental. Whether it's ethical. At the same time, it's the nicest apartment we've ever had the opportunity to live in. In the end, we figured that if we didn't take it, someone else would live here anyway. It's not going to solve the history.”

Occasionally, when I am already lying in bed at night, reading, I hear shooting, little “booms.” It is hard to tell exactly where the shots are coming from—Jerusalem is hilly, it consists of many suburbs, and Arab-Palestinian villages are tightly woven along its edges. It might be a wedding. It might be local fireworks, but it could just as easily be a “security situation.” Also, it is impossible to tell from which direction it goes. You do not know what kind of

[223] See Zaban 2016.

[224] *Nakba* means “catastrophe” in Arabic. The term is used both to describe the displacement and dispossession of the Arab-Palestinian population from the territory of the newly established State of Israel in 1948, and the war itself. In Israel, it is referred to as the War of Independence, elsewhere it is referred to rather as the Arab-Israeli war.

shooting it is. The sound of happiness and the sound of death are sometimes the same here. The difference is in the context. It is early October 2022, and I scratch a poem in my journal:

It's 5 AM.
The voice of the *muezzin*
Wakes me up.
But is there a mosque nearby?
I don't know.
Maybe the ghosts of the family
That built this house
Have come to sing.
Because what can you do
With a memory
Besides singing?
It's 10:30 PM.
The noise of petite explosions
Wakes me up.
But is there a shooting, or a wedding?
I don't know.
Maybe we are all just searching
For our own *Beit Lechem*,
House of Bread,
House of comfort.

After a few months, I move to *Rehavia*, to *HaRav Haim Berlin* Street. With my new flatmate, we start calling each other "Berlin ravers" as an inside joke of a playful contrast to the street, our apartment, and even our lives as flatmates. All of it is remarkably calm and quiet. Our street intersects with *Derech Azza* (Gaza), where Prime Minister Netanyahu has his private residence. Over the course of the spring months in 2023, *Azza* Street becomes busy and crowded—not just because of the traffic to and from the city centre, but also due to the demonstrations against the government that take place in front of the residence. I

always walk to the city centre by foot, and from a certain point onward, there is always someone protesting at the junction, even if it is just a small crowd.

My "social bubble" gravitates around a few places in the city centre. They function as cafés during the day but in the evening, they transform into bars and venues for DJs and live concerts. The diversity is quite high—Hebrew, Arabic, English, and other languages can be heard here almost every day. One evening, after a concert, I sit at a table with two men originally from Nazareth. Both, they tell me, are Arab. They like these places too: "*Our colleagues and clients are Jews. We like them. Why not*? *Did you enjoy the concert?*"

The next day, I join a group of skateboarders, all in their early twenties. An awkward moment arises when I try to shake hands with one of them: "*Sorry, I don't do that. I don't touch women. I'm religious."* A man from East Jerusalem at the next table bursts out laughing at the look on my face, which struggles to mask my surprise. "*You wouldn't know, right? That's Jerusalem.*" Yes, I wouldn't know—there's so much I still do not understand about this city.

Every day there is something what surprises me, for example the heaviness of the music produced here. After an alternative gig in Jerusalem's industrial zone of *Talpiot*, I turn to Yaacov, *"The concert was like a brain surgery. People go there to basically have a lobotomy. To suffer, but to suffer together."* Yaacov does not think about his response, and immediately reacts:

"*You can see and hear the tension of the city in the art happening here. Whatever art comes from Jerusalem, especially music, it's dark, it's uncomfortable, it's deep. It's like brain surgery, nachon.*[225] *That's our way to cope. You are talking about a post-trauma nation, and within that nation, a segment of society is living in this crazy city. So, you feel it here.*"

I reflect on what Yaacov said as I watch the faces around me, and my ears almost hurt from raw drumbeats accompanied by the whining sound of synthesizers. This is one of the sounds which will always represent Jerusalem for me.

[225] Correct in Hebrew.

Tel Aviv: "Secular Dungeon"[226]

"*Tel Aviv lets you forget what country you live in. It doesn't ask anything of you. You can just be… You can live in a bubble and pretend none of this is happening.*"
— Ishai, interlocutor

Dear Tel Aviv, I give you less attention than I give to Jerusalem. I do not spend so much time with you. Do not get me wrong, you are fun, and between *balagan*[227] and *lichluch*[228] of your streets, the fairies live—that is what I scrap to my diary as I am sitting in the Caffe Tamati next to the *shuk HaCarmel*, as buses are passing by. The owner remembers me and tells me the story of how he named this place after the moniker he used for his wife.[229] But you are too fast paced for me. Too demanding. I did not build any profound connections while being with you.

I live in *Neve Tzedek*, and again, I am lucky. Our house is one of the last ones to be refurbished in the area, and it is just a short-term sublet for me, which is more or less affordable. Otherwise, it would definitely not be. This is a fancy neighborhood—the first one built next to the ancient Jaffa at the end of the 19th century. Just around the corner starts Park *HaMesila*, which ends basically at the beach. Also, just around the corner is the building of *Teder.FM* (or *Romano*) with multiple bars, clubs, and a restaurant. That is a kind of epicenter of the nightlife in the area.

One night, I go to dance at *Teder.FM* with my Czech friend. Very soon, we are approached by two men in their early twenties. They try to interact, but there is something clumsy about the way they do it. My "anthropological gaze" kicks in, and I start to ask questions. They are both from a smaller town south of Jerusalem and come from ultra-Orthodox Jewish families. When they were teenagers, they wanted to know more about the world around them:

"*So, we slowly left our families and our background behind us, and became completely secular. That is easy in Tel Aviv. We started to experiment, also*

[226] The title comes from a description one of the interlocutors used while talking about Tel Aviv.
[227] A mess.
[228] Dirt.
[229] *Tamati* can be translated as "my innocent woman" (pure or flawless alternatively) and comes from a verse of Song of Songs (*Shir HaShirim*), verse 5:2.

with drugs and all kinds of things. The only thing that doesn't work is with women. Until we were eighteen, we didn't even look into the eyes of a woman who wasn't from the family. That's not allowed."

I look around and can not stop thinking about the fact that I am the most dressed person out of everyone. They are much younger, and I feel like their teacher. It is a chokingly hot night in the middle of August, and people walk around in bras on the streets, even more so in clubs. What a striking contrast that must be for the men we just spoke to.

Yes, it is easy to be "secular" in Tel Aviv. The city rarely slows down, not even for *Shabbat*. While Jerusalem completely shifts into a calmer rhythm, Tel Aviv feels even busier: finally, the weekend! Finally, the time to head to a party, to the beach, to hook up with someone, to dance until the early morning before everyone returns to work to make money for their rents.

One day, I randomly meet on the streets of *Florentine* neighbourhood a man who I met last year during the *Purim*[230] street party in Jerusalem. It is Friday, *Shabbat* is about to begin, and he and his group of friends are ready to spend the night partying. He invites me to join the preparations in his flat: first, he lights the *Shabbat* candles and mumble a quick, automatic blessing, before having a joint and a shot of *Arak.*[231] Do not take me wrong, dear Tel Aviv, even you are able to surprise me.

Last but not least, you, dear Tel Aviv, feel like a breath of fresh air when I come to visit after a few months in Jerusalem. Suddenly, I do not have to think ahead about which parts of the city to go to and how to dress appropriately. Suddenly, the heaviness, the craziness, and the survival of Jerusalem disappear. Tel Aviv, do not get me wrong—you could easily be Barcelona, and I am just another tourist who, aside from my blond hair, looks the same as everyone else—because the norm is invisible.

My presence here rarely raises questions; you do not remind people that they are in Israel. You allow people to just be, close their eyes and listen to the beach guards yelling: "*Simu lev, simu lev!*"[232] You are holidays. Yet, I know, deep down, that you, Tel Aviv, are also a kind of illusion.

[230] One of the Jewish holidays. People wear masks and one can join the huge street parties happening across the country.
[231] Local alcoholic spirit.
[232] "Pay attention."

Dialogical Windows: Jerusalem-Tel Aviv Axis

In this section, I explore how Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are represented as competing symbols of “religion” and “secularity,” as well as the varying limits and opportunities of “liveability” these cities impose on their inhabitants. I focus on the statements shared by the interlocutors during interviews, when they reflected on their lives in Jerusalem and/or Tel Aviv. These conversations, along with those of friends and informants, came to reveal a recurring axis of reference between these two cities. This axis was not originally a focal point in the research, but one that emerged across almost every conversation anyway. Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, it seems, serve as shared reference points. I intentionally avoid offering a comprehensive background of the interlocutors, beyond the primary premise that all the statements come from the subjects of the dissertation. This omission is a deliberate decision as the discursive object here is the cities themselves and what they represent in the imaginations of their subjects. I present the data as a constructed ethnographic scene, based on the real setting of an event I participated in, bringing together the voices of multiple speakers in a fictionalized yet plausible conversation. In this imagined scene, I position myself as the “idiotic foreigner,” eager to grasp the complexities of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv through the perspectives of the interlocutors. The statements remain authentic to their original form, with only the framing reimagined to evoke a sense of shared space and exchange.[233] This approach allows the cities to emerge as discursive objects, shaped through the narratives and perceptions of those present in the scene.

It is one of those casual Thursday evenings in Jerusalem when the anticipation of the weekend softens the city's rough edges. I am invited to a birthday party on the rooftop of an old building on *Shlomtzion HaMalka* Street. The view is breathtaking. I have to remind myself that this is real, that I am here, living in a city covered by the prayers of millions. It feels both strange and perfectly normal at the same time. The rooftop itself is a mixture of mismatched chairs, a wobbly plastic table, and a couple of blankets that were laid out to warm the concrete floor. Someone has strung up colourful bulbs that cast a warm glow

[233] Apart from minor fillers and auxiliary sentences used to maintain the continuity of the conversation.

over the group of people gathered here. I already recognize some faces, while others are entirely new. Conversations flow in a mix of Hebrew and English, especially once I join the blend of voices. Mohammed does not speak English well, but I understand him as he gestures towards the cooler filled with ice and various types of alcohol. I will stick with wine today—thank you, *toda, shukran.* People talk over each other, voices are rising and falling, like the steep and slippery little streets of Jerusalem's Old City themselves.

My friend Yoav, who invited me here, hurriedly catches up on his hosting duties and introduces me to those I have not met yet. "*This is Timea, a friend of mine from the Czech Republic who's been living with us for a while, doing anthropological research*." A few people nod in acknowledgment, while others seem unsure how to react, but everyone remains nice. Eventually, Esther's face lights up, and she asks what I am researching specifically. I say, "*Well, in short, about the lives of secular Israeli Jews*."

The group seems to come alive, and Esther continues, "*Great! People usually come here to study politics, the conflict, or the ultra-religious. We are all secular Jews here!*" From one corner, someone clears his throat softly. And it is Asher who counters, "*Well, not all of us!*" and points at himself and Mohammed, who is now laughing as Asher quickly translates for him. "*I am an observant Jew,"* Asher adds*, "but my wife is secular, that is true.*" His wife, Yona, turns towards me, winks, and says, "*Cheers to that!*" as she raises her glass of wine in a toast.

After our glasses clink, Yona follows up: *"So, what kind of questions do you usually ask us? I've never been part of a research project; that must be exciting. Also, I think it's important, because there's a lot of bullshit in the media about us, about this place, about this region."* I do not want to go into too much detail—maybe some of them I will have a chance to interview later, and I am still anxiously balancing the question of distance and proximity. *"Well, I usually start with more general questions, like how people would describe their life here, what their background is, and where they live. So, we can do a little experiment, if everyone agrees, and we can imagine that we're doing an interview, and I ask you about the city you live in."* A few people mention that they are from different parts of the country, for example, from Tel Aviv. I don't see that as a problem. Yoav likes the idea and encourages the group: *"Yalla, let's do that!"*

David, who has not engaged much until now, finally gains some confidence and makes the first comment:

"Jerusalem is very intense. Listen, I've lived here all my life. I have friends from all different parts—Arabs, Orthodox, even some monks. Jerusalem is intense because there's always something happening, you know what I mean? And there are so many different groups; you really need to know how to navigate it. It's like three or four different cities from different universes, from different centuries, all mushed into one."

The group nods in agreement, and a couple of *bidiyuk*, *nachon*, *mamash*—exactly, correct, really, float through the air. To support his claim, David adds:

"The true Jerusalemite should speak both Hebrew and Arabic. Otherwise, you miss the nuances and the richness."

Yoav starts to laugh and almost spills his beer. *"But David, you don't speak Arabic."* David responds, *"Ata tzodek—you're right. But I wish I did. Ma la'asot? What can you do?"*

The conversation is joined by Nitzan, who recalls her first impressions of the city:

"The first time I moved to Jerusalem I said, 'Fuck, everyone here is completely crazy, really. What's going on here?' But then I realized, after a while, and what really amazed me, that people are very direct with you in Jerusalem. People just talk to you. You just go, and someone has to say something, and I loved it. You know, it seemed to me very authentic, no manners. This is one thing. The other thing is that I met many people here who're doing art and music, and I found out that when it comes to off-mainstream art and music, Jerusalem is the best. I mean, the best."

I wonder whether it is comparable to any other place in Israel, art and music-wise.

"Not in Tel Aviv… no, nowhere in Israel really. And the third point I can make is that here you really face the reality of the place. I mean the secular, the religious, the Arabs, everyone. And when I first came to Jerusalem in the 80s, we

used to go many times to Damascus Gate and just sit there all day and see all kinds of people from all over the world. It's really a place that attracts all kinds of people. And you realize the potential of this place. You know, if there wasn't this political conflict, this place could really be something amazing. You know, you see the potential and it's just WOW."

Adi, obviously moved by Nitzan's words, gazes at the horizon. From the rooftop, the walls of the Old City stretch out before us, and Adi glances up at the sky, where the stars stand out more vividly tonight, somehow:

"I think there are a lot of paradoxes in Jerusalem, which is what makes it so special. When I'm not in the city, I miss it. I really miss it. And when the bus is going uphill to Jerusalem, I feel my heart melting, and I feel at home. It's funny, though, because when I think about 'home,' I don't think of a physical place. But Jerusalem—it's like... I don't know, it's the energy here. This is a place I can call home, and it doesn't matter where I live within it. It's really a part of you."

Adi's partner, Nir, gives her a hug and adds:

"When they ask us, 'Where are you from in the world?,' we always respond that we are from Jerusalem. Definitely more than from the state of Israel. But it's also the worst place in the world. It's a terrible place. But it's the only place I have feelings for. I don't care about any other place."

Yoav gives his close friend Nir a comforting pat on the shoulder. The group lapses into silence for a moment, the weight of the conversation is settling in, until Yoav breaks the quiet again and summarizes the collective sentiment of the group with a simple remark:

"Achi—my brother, this is a city that imposes itself on you."

After David refills his glass, he returns to continue with his explanation:

"Takshivi li—listen to me. For us, Tel Aviv is escapism. There, you can forget that you are a Jew, that you are an Israeli, that conflict and religion exist. In Jerusalem, everything is condensed. You wake up in the morning, step into the streets, and you're immediately confronted with it."

Ishai, who stands next to David supports him:

"Tel Aviv lets you forget what country you live in. It doesn't ask anything of you. You can just be… You can live in a bubble and pretend none of this is happening."

Even Daniel, who had been hesitant to engage in the "experiment" up until now, finally enters the conversation. It feels as though we have all momentarily forgotten that we are merely pretending this is research. This is no longer a game, no longer an intellectual exercise; it is a real life and real consequences.

"It's a different country here in Jerusalem, you know, it's proper gritty. The conflict between Palestinians and Jews, and the tension between religious and secular people, is very, very significant here. In contrast, Tel Aviv is like an oasis. Everyone is just chill; it's not like in Jerusalem. When you go to demonstrations here, you look left and right, because someone might attack you. The police in Jerusalem are a bit stricter. Yeah, but in Tel Aviv, it's easy going—you could almost smoke a joint in front of a policeman, and he'll ask you for a hit."

As a sign of affirmation, a few people pass around a joint, accompanied by bursts of laughter. Nitzan, apparently inspired by the mention of the tension and conflict, responds with her own continuation:

"Since the Intifada, and all the military stuff, and bombings... Especially during times of war, it's always been very tense to go to the Old City. Even today, I don't feel as free as I used to when I visit. It's not the same feeling. I'm not stressed, but the interaction with people is different. The atmosphere is more tense for me as a Jew. I go there, but I don't feel one hundred percent free or safe, or whatever. I always think about the past few years. Every time I leave my home, I think something could really happen. I never had that thought before. It's interesting because the situation is heating up. I never had this feeling in Tel Aviv. Here, you have police everywhere, and many times, these colonialists, very right-wing people, at night, chase after Arabs to beat them, and it's annoying, it's really scary."

Nitzan smiles in the direction of Mohammad:

"It's scary also because I do have Palestinian friends. All my kids learned in a mixed school for Jews and Arabs, so they also have friends among them. This is why I sent the kids to a mixed school—there aren't many. Otherwise, the opportunities to meet are limited. I wanted them to see that Arabs are normal people and that you can talk to them."

The group starts to feel a bit uncomfortable; no one really challenges Nitzan's words, but it feels too real, too heavy. Liri senses the weight of the moment and quickly tries to steer the conversation in a more positive direction:

"Come on, guys… Our group of skater girls in Jerusalem is super mixed. And it's just the tip of the iceberg of how this country looks. It's a mix! Remember how I twisted my ankle so badly? I needed to figure out if it was broken or not. So, I went to the hospital. The first person who took care of me was an Arab guy, OK? Then, the guy sitting next to me in the hospital was a religious Jew, and the other was a Muslim girl from East Jerusalem. Politics are designed to separate people. When people are separated, it's much easier to control them."

Daniel shakes his head, and at first, it is not clear whether he agrees or, on the contrary, is preparing to push back:

"Liri, look, Jerusalem is a heavy city. Tel Aviv is more fun. There is no life in Jerusalem! Everything carries this weight here. Even when you go out, there is this heaviness, you know? And Tel Aviv—it is free and fun. I like to party, I like to do drugs. This city drains you; you feel its impact all the time. It is not like Tel Aviv, the city of the individual. Here, you always have to consider where you are going and what you are wearing. If you are a woman and you are wearing something a bit short... you just avoid certain parts of the city."

Liri grins at Daniel, probably thinking: What are you going to tell me about a woman's experience! Liri's face encourages Tamar, who has not said anything today except for greetings:

"But he is right, Liri. In Tel Aviv, I can be whoever I want, do whatever I want, dress however I want. I can have tattoos. When I go back to Jerusalem, where I grew up, I feel like a foreigner. Jerusalem is a sad city—it has become really religious. Neighbourhoods that were not religious are now Orthodox. Of course, it still has its magic. But I do not want to live here anymore."

Ishai jumps in quickly, making sure the thread of the conversation about the differences between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem does not slip away:

"Well, life in Tel Aviv is not life in Jerusalem, is it? Jerusalem is extreme, and essentially, the non-religious community here is quite small—it's like a village. Tel Aviv offers a dramatic difference from Jerusalem. Here, everyone knows everyone in the non-religious circles; it is like living in a tiny little town. It is almost ridiculous here; if you do something, everybody knows about it right away. You cannot hide; you would have to run away to Tel Aviv."

The atmosphere clears and lightens for a moment as everyone inwardly recalls bits of gossip they would rather keep to themselves. In the "secular circles" of Jerusalem, though, secrets have a short lifespan. A few people giggle, the tension lifting slightly. Ishai continues:

"When I first came to Jerusalem, I had this mystical feeling, like wow, I am going to Jerusalem. But then you arrive here... And now you see all these crazy people walking around with crosses on their backs. You are just like, dude, what is going on? This is just a total disaster. How dumb these people are with religion."

David, who feels he has not spoken for a while, counters:

"But this is also a beautiful thing! I know that this might sound a bit hippy, especially coming from me. But Jerusalem is also about love—everyone comes together here. It's not like—I'm an individual, and I do whatever the fuck I want. I really believe people need to be together. And this is what I really enjoy about Jerusalem. You go out, and somebody will talk to you or look at you, and you will be affected by your surroundings. You won't be in this bubble, like in Tel Aviv, which, in my opinion, makes people very, very sad. Because it's an individualized

city. I like contact."

Liri feels the same—it's the "politics" that separates people:

"I like Jerusalem; it's not like anywhere else in the country. It's so mixed that it's OK to be part of the mixture—to be both an individual and also a part of it. The balance between those two things—between being an atom and being an atom that's part of a molecule. When you live here, despite your personal beliefs, you still have to exist—and to exist, you need to survive. And to survive, you need each other. That happens whether you want it or not when you're local. People from outside Jerusalem—people from the north or anywhere else—often have strong opinions about Jerusalem. But when you live here, and you're part of that molecule, you constantly shift between your own feelings and the people around you, your surroundings, all the time... And I love this balance of Jerusalem from that point of view. I lived in Tel Aviv, and it was too rough. I went to the kibbutz and to the village, and it was too quiet. And here in Jerusalem, you have that perfectly balanced mixture of the two. It's kind of an airport vibe, you know, when you have water between international places, and the water doesn't belong to anyone, so nobody has ownership, despite the fact that everyone is fighting about ownership."

Everyone drifts off into their thoughts for a moment. Nir and Adi hug even tighter, but eventually, someone brings us back down to earth. And it is Joni, who just joined the rooftop gathering, of course, with his skateboard in hand:

"I think the thing that really stands out for me about Jerusalem specifically is how hard it is to find a non-religious, good-looking, or appealing person to me. And at least to share some things in common and get along; that's very hard to find in Jerusalem. The secular community here is so small; you know everyone. I meet my ex-girlfriend every Thursday evening in the same bar because that is the place where everyone from the community goes… That means that it is hard to find people who listen to similar types of music or have something in common, like lifestyle or interests. It is super hard—especially in Jerusalem. In Tel Aviv, it is different; it's like every other big city. You just go there and instantly feel like you're on vacation. People are beautiful; they're topless. That is super different. But I hate Tel Aviv; I could not live there. In dating, people play mind

games there, and I don't like it."

Ishai looks at Joni, wondering how he can act like he has just discovered America.

"That is what I'm always saying. Tel Aviv is not Israel and Israel is not Tel Aviv. That's a lie for tourists. These things are separated. Tel Aviv is just a small, shiny part."

Daniel wants to follow up on the topic of relationships and sexuality, likely sparked by the fresh energy Joni brings to the rooftop:

"Yeah, Tel Aviv is hypersexualized. Jerusalem is asexual. Even though the religion itself is not asexual, the atmosphere here is. Tel Aviv is also the gay capital of the world. And that means a lot of things. That means a lot of sex, a lot of sexual things on the street. It can be also here in Jerusalem, but the secular and gay community is so small!"

Adi, still holding Nir tightly, adds:

"Jerusalem has a small village vibe. Totally… The fact that it's so small here is really interesting because I feel that most of the people around me, outside of our small community, are nationalists. At my school, most of the girls are Orthodox. I'm always the 'other voice'—the only one besides my community. For these people, it would be extreme to say that Palestinians are human beings or that they have rights. It marks me as a liberal. A leftist in their eyes. An extremist… But I love Jerusalem. Jerusalem is everything. Jerusalem is home."

The group looks around, and yes, most of the faces are familiar. They might not all be close friends, but they definitely keep running into each other at the same few spots around the town. Ishai brings another comment to the table, regarding the "village" and "community" vibe:

"Look, we all know there's a stigma about Jerusalem for the rest of Israelis—they say that it's a city of madness that doesn't make any sense. And for me, as a secular Jew, I see the reason for the madness. I mean, I'm not blind. I'm

very much aware of what's happening in the city. I'm very much aware of what's happening in the Eastern part of the city—about the cultural and financial separation of two parts of the same city. But I also found peace and quiet. And I found my own personal bubble, in a way."

Even though it was primarily Esther who wanted to join the "experiment," she left the conversation pretty early on while talking to Asher, Yona and Mohammad. Now, she comments on Ishai:

"Yeah, but Ishai, when you talk about the situation in the city, that's also why you don't see half-Jewish, half-Arab couples. In my opinion, Tel Aviv is different in this."

Tamar agrees, glancing down at her outfit. It is clear this would not be suitable for certain parts of the city:

"I think it's super different here than in Tel Aviv because Jerusalem is right on the border of the West Bank. So there's also that tension, and it makes women much more sceptical about men. I'd say they're way more afraid to walk certain places than they are in other cities in Israel."

Finally, also Gavriel gathers his courage and shares his impressions with the group:

"My grandparents were actually born in Jerusalem, in the Old City, in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, before Israel was a country. My mother also grew up in Jerusalem. I always heard stories about it growing up, but I never lived here because my parents later moved up north. My ancestors also came from Syria and Egypt... In Jerusalem, it's much more explosive. Also, because Arabs in the north of the country have Israeli citizenship, but here in Jerusalem, they don't. They live much more under the military presence. That's why I wouldn't go to East Jerusalem; I would be afraid. There are places I just wouldn't go. To be honest, I usually don't have any interactions with Arab people living in Jerusalem, just as I don't interact with ultra-Orthodox people. But I do interact with religious people," he points toward Asher. *"The religious-secular spectrum in Jerusalem is much closer. I have religious friends, I have secular friends... But also, I don't*

know if you've noticed," Gavriel continues while directly addressing me*, "there's a difference between neighbourhoods like Rehavia, Baka, and Katamon. I live in Katamon; it's more similar, it's more homogenous. So, you don't have so many chances to meet outside of a certain group. Maybe it's not only about religion and how secular I am or not but it's also socio-economic differences."*

Ishai reacts instead of me:

"Jerusalem is geographically divided into neighborhoods. So, areas like Rehavia, Talbiya, the German Colony, and Katamon are a bit more secular in nature. It's kind of a safe space because if you go to certain other parts of the city, it becomes a bit more religious. It's a comfort zone—very nice and convenient. You have businesses opening on Saturdays, and that's nothing out of the ordinary in these parts, at least."

Tamar, who now has built a life in Tel Aviv after leaving behind her childhood and teenage years in Jerusalem, decides to challenge Ishai:

"Ishai, I don't know, the city is becoming very, very religious… The population of Orthodox people in Mea Shearim is enormous. And they don't have space in their neighborhood, so a lot of neighborhoods that weren't religious before are becoming religious now. My parents live in Moshava-—in the German Colony, as you said. Moshava was always religious, but mostly American religious. It's still like that, but Katamon, Rehavia, Beit HaKerem… it's all getting more Haredi than it used to be. So, the schools, restaurants, pubs… nothing. There's nothing to do. It's getting more and more religious. Also my sister moved out because of it."

Hila shares this perception with Tamar, even though she just quickly stopped by to say hello:

"They're like the Jeweliban—the Jewish Taliban. In some ways, I feel like the ultra-Orthodox are trying to ethnically cleanse Jerusalem of secular people, bit by bit. There are parts of the city I don't go to. I don't feel safe. I don't feel comfortable. Once, I was spat on by some kid there because I wasn't dressed

modestly enough by his standards. He also cursed me. But I was dressed modestly—I was on my way to a Shabbat dinner."

The group momentarily pauses when Hila says "Jewliban." It sounds like a complete exaggeration. At the same time, many in the group, especially women, can relate to the experiences Hila describes from the streets. Strong words, however, are not unusual on the rooftop—Nitzan, for example, hates the people who celebrate Israel's Independence Day, hold barbecues, and wave Israeli flags. She calls them "fascists." Strong words are not something that would stop the conversation from flowing. But it seems there is anyway a need for an exhale, and it is David who provides it once again:

"What I like about Jerusalem is that I can walk for hours and not get bored. That is crazy, no? I really like the diversity. I like that I can meet so many people from all parts of the world—so many tourists, or people who come here to live and study. And all the people who live here, like Orthodox Jews, secular Jews, religious people, Arabs... You can meet so many people in one day and have so many conversations. Yes, sometimes it's overwhelming and harsh. Sometimes it can be stressful, but you can feel the holiness—not in a religious sense, but in a cultural sense. You walk the streets where people walked 3,000 years ago. Jerusalem is a lot to take because we all live here under a lot of pressure. I think the direction that Jerusalem chooses will point to where we're all going in the broader sense. If we can live in peace, in at least relative peace, between all the religions and groups here, if we manage to solve things here, then everyone can."

Gavriel feels inspired by David's talk about diversity:

"In this, Jerusalem is different from other cities, different from Tel Aviv. I grew up in a small village in the North, and before I came to Jerusalem, I didn't have many religious friends. But here, I have so many religious friends, and it really opened me up to spirituality. Sometimes, I like to go to synagogue on Saturdays. Or I have friends who wouldn't open their phones on Saturday, but they wouldn't say they are religious. They just enjoy it. Maybe they are traditional, like Masorti. But the differences here in Jerusalem are probably much more fluid than in other places in Israel. So, I think this is what's so special about Jerusalem: the definitions are more fluid than I expected before I came here. You can be so many

different kinds of being religious. Because it's so diverse. I don't know where exactly I fit. And if you ask different people, they'll give you different answers. If you ask me on different days, I might give you different answers too."

A few people chuckle at Gavriel not knowing if he is actually secular or not. But maybe that is not even important right now. Maybe being secular is something of a relational "situationship"—one has a relationship to the available category, but that relationship is based on a particular situation and set of conditions. Tamar feels somehow similar as Gavriel, and wants to support him through her perspective:

"Look, I am secular, but I believe in God. I like to fast on Yom Kippur. I go with my partner's mom to synagogue sometimes. It's nice. And it was easier here in Jerusalem to fast, for example, because, as I said, it's generally more religious. In Tel Aviv, it's harder. But I wasn't forced to be religious in Jerusalem. It's just nicer to believe in something, to have some rules. But again, what you see in Jerusalem now is too much. As I said, it's a sad city."

It seems that the group is now divided between those who love Jerusalem with all its craziness and those who are tired of it for the very same reasons. A few people left, and the newcomers are now steering the conversation back to Tel Aviv:

"When I moved to Tel Aviv, it was such a relief, like being reborn, you know? I come from a village, so my mentality and the fact I have tattoos were very different. When I go back to visit my parents, I can't believe I grew up there. Also, in that village, there are no Arabs, even though there are Arab villages around. But in Tel Aviv, I have Arab friends from Jaffa. Look, I don't really care about this conflict. This is a conflict that will never end. I'm living in my own bubble. I don't really look at the news. I don't read the papers. I don't really care what's going on. I don't want to know. Tel Aviv is a magical city… For people like us, who have a lot of tattoos, it's really hard to be in these kinds of places outside of Tel Aviv because people there have their own opinions, their own religious stuff…"

Another newcomer chimes in, echoing the sentiment:

"I like the variety and liberty in Tel Aviv. People can live together, even

though they have different cultural backgrounds, and it's easier for homosexuals and others to coexist there compared to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, it's a bit harsher. People here tend to define themselves by their culture and religion, which isn't great for peace. The division is very clear, with a religion framing a lot of interactions. I came to Jerusalem from the Galil,[234] *where I could host someone in my house and religion was never a question. But here, political and religious aspects are always on the table. People immediately ask, 'Who are you politically and religiously?' In the Galil, I didn't feel that at all. But here, it feels almost mandatory, and people are obsessed with it. I feel that if someone's appearance isn't immediately recognizable, people are quick to ask who you are."*

Joni feels like he finally has someone to talk to:

"I think it's also because Israel is constantly under some kind of conflict. And then, to stay safe, people categorize each other. You walk into a room, and you immediately say to yourself: this is an Arab, a Jew, an Orthodox Jew, and so on. You've noticed who lives in Baka, right? It's a pretty easy line of understanding who lives here, just based on how they look, how they dress. There is this emphasis on it in Jerusalem. It's probably all over Israel and less so when you're in central Israel or Tel Aviv, and more so in Jerusalem."

I ask Joni if he can easily tell who is a Jew and who is an Arab:

"With Muslims, you immediately notice their hair, what they are wearing, the way they cut their beards, and usually, they are in groups. If it's men, they're more in groups. And the women, they're usually wearing hijabs, right? The Christian Arabs are usually more well-educated, in my experience. Sometimes they also look less Middle Eastern and more European. If you go to Haifa, for example, they look exactly like us, so then you can't really tell. But here in Jerusalem, you know, there's the Old City, it's right here, a mixture of religions. So here, you can pretty much tell."

David, sensing that the "idiotic foreigner" (me) might develop some kind of

[234] Galilee in the northern part of the country.

bitterness towards Jerusalem, shifts the attention back to the city's beauty:

"I can say this as a secular person: some people from Tel Aviv say, 'Oh, it's overwhelming, it's extreme…' But I really think this is the beauty of Jerusalem. There are Arabs, Christians, and Jews—Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox—and each one experiences this place in a slightly different way. But everyone mixes together in day-to-day life."

But there is always someone who brings David back down to earth, and it is Esther:

"Look, David, Jerusalem really is like home for me. When I walk the streets, I know pretty much everyone, and even if I don't know them, I know their friends. That also means you can't be anonymous. In Tel Aviv, you can go to a bar and just disappear, and you won't see anyone. Not here, right? So, in my case, it's kind of a love and hate relationship with Jerusalem."

David smiles back to Esther:

"But that, my dear, is what makes you a true Jerusalemite."

Everyone is beginning to feel a bit tired of our "experiment" now. The group has mixed and changed, and it is about time to head to the concert just a few streets away because tonight promises to be a long one. I try to hold on to this moment for a bit longer. The way it smelled, the way it sounded, the faces and stories that have now woven themselves into this particular chapter of my own life. It is already slipping through my fingers. I must write everything down.

Conclusion: Mirror Images

This chapter built on the knowledge created in the previous chapter *Secular Subjectivity in a Postsecular Condition*, specifically in the *Being a Secular Jew: The Tropes* subchapter, by exploring the spatial dimensions of possible and impossible encounters. I examined how the topography of the research locations both reflected and reinforced local identity politics. At the same time, by tracing the symbolism and imaginaries of the cities, I was able to offer deeper insight into the subject's self-understanding and available modes of being.

I began by providing an ethnographic characterization and mapping of these locations, based on the process of ethnographing. This characterization was, understandably, highly subjective, relying on the field diary, personal impressions, and emotional memory as ethnographic glimpses and sketches. Nevertheless, this mapping of the fieldwork created a foundation for the dialogical windows opened through the interviews, offering insight into the mutually constructive imaginaries of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Then, I crafted a fictionalized, constructed ethnographic scene featuring a conversation among multiple speakers. The scene was grounded in the real setting of an event I had the opportunity to attend in Jerusalem. In this imagined scenario, I positioned myself as the "idiotic foreign researcher," proposing an "experiment" focused on exploring the participants' perspectives on life in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. While presented through the format of a fictionalized conversation, the statements remained faithful to their original form as expressed during the in-depth interviews.[235] This approach allowed the cities to emerge as discursive objects, shaped through the narratives and perceptions of those present in the scene. I intentionally refrained from providing detailed backgrounds or personal vignettes of the interlocutors in this chapter, aside from the premise that all statements originated from the subjects of this dissertation.[236]

The spatial dimension and the narratives surrounding it were not initially the primary focus of my inquiry, even though I was aware, as the approaches of critical geography remind us, that the production of "space" plays a crucial role in determining the possibilities of belonging and the realization of the "right to the city." Furthermore, space acts as an active agent in facilitating both possible and impossible encounters. However, the longer I remained in the "field," the more interviews I conducted, and the more informal conversations I held, the recurring axis of mutual reference between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv became increasingly prominent, persuasive and impossible to overlook.

I term this axis of mutual reference as "dialogical windows of mirror images." Through these dialogical windows that opened up in the interviews, I traced how these cities, and the spaces they represent, were imagined by the

---

[235] Apart from minor fillers and auxiliary sentences used to maintain the continuity of the conversation.

[236] See the *Field and Subjects* section of the second, methodological part. The way the subjects narrate and gesture their being is the focus of the subchapter *Being a Secular Jew: The Tropes* in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter.

interlocutors. As became evident, the cities themselves embodied certain symbolic identities, shaping and reshaping the boundaries and possibilities for encountering the "Other"—whether that "Other" was someone with whom one might seek an intimate relationship or someone whose presence might feel improbable, unsettling, or challenging. These windows were not only about the cities themselves but also about the multiplicity of ways in which people understand themselves and their surroundings, and how the cities allow for certain kinds of being.

Jerusalem was described as intense, explosive, as a madness and craziness that does not make any sense to the "outsiders," as a mix "mushed" into one entity, as authentic, properly gritty, and a special place full of "religion." As a colourful composition of diverse groups of people, as a multiplicity of layers, as the best and worst place at the same time. As a city which causes feelings of tension, heaviness, sadness, and feelings of being overwhelmed. A city that is draining for the individual, with an alternative art and music scene attempting to contain and channell all these emerging feelings.

Jerusalem—a city which imposes itself on its inhabitants, and whose character and reality need to always be taken into consideration while moving through it. A city where one needs to constantly consciously navigate one's surroundings and environment, which leads to an acute awareness of the "Other." The "Others" in the narrations of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv were Palestinians/Arabs, right-wing people, colonialists, nationalists, the "Jewliban," the ultra-Orthodox Jews, and religious people in general. Therefore, the subjects' awareness of their surroundings and the categorization based on specific Jerusalem neighborhoods, places, and respective dress codes is a way to strategically navigate urban movement: certain parts of the city, dominated by the "Other," cause feelings of fear, anxiety, unsafety, danger, sadness and stress. In this respect, also the gendered aspect of urban movement in Jerusalem was pronounced, with particular emphasis.

Yet, for some, this tense reality of the place is precisely what makes it special, beautiful, and deeply appreciated. Jerusalem—a city that represents home, not Israel—Jerusalem. A city where the rifts in society are not only visible but also palpably inscribed in the topography and tangibly felt: between Jews and Arabs/Palestinians, between the "secular" and the "religious." This reality

simultaneously allows for and compels one to not remain merely an individual, an isolated atom, an autonomous being, but to become part of a molecule that, for its existence and survival, needs the "Other" and must come together. Rather than a process of "othering," which emphasizes exclusion and distance, Jerusalem calls for what might be described as "t-othering." This "t-othering" suggests a complex form of *being together* with the "Other" within a politics of connection that acknowledges the "Other" as an essential part of the Self's own survival.

In such a setting of Jerusalem's "international waters," where, as Liri noted, *"water doesn't belong to anyone, so nobody has ownership, despite the fact that everyone is fighting about ownership,"* one is deeply aware of the existence of the "Other," who lives, figuratively, just "next door," as they inhabit and claim the same space. To inhabit, therefore, also means to coexist and to appreciate differences: to live in Jerusalem, one must coexist with these differences, however fraught that coexistence might be. Such appreciation has its necessary limits due to the negative feelings the city simultaneously imposes on the subject, yet these limits do not preclude encounters that are not characterized by "othering," where friendship and even love might flourish in certain grey zones of the city—those where perceived differences soften at the edges and where the permeability of "boundaries" becomes porous.

Jerusalem, through the narrations of the interlocutors, emerged as a city of paradoxes: while the nuanced categorization of the "Other," as mentioned above, is taking place, this very process also makes it possible to sit down—both figuratively and literally—at the same table, on the same roof, and to recognize a reflection of oneself in the "Other." Perhaps again paradoxically, this is more possible and imaginable for the subjects of this dissertation with the "Other" whose "otherness" lies in being Palestinian/Arab, rather than with the "Other" who is a Jew but categorized as "ultra-religious," "right-wing," and "nationalist."

Tel Aviv emerged as a counterpoint to Jerusalem, and functioned as a "mimetic" reference, if I invoke Daniel's terminology from the previous chapter. Both cities are magical for their inhabitants, for highly different reasons that stand in opposition. Tel Aviv represented escapism, a refuge for those who see the "reality" of the country in Jerusalem. Tel Aviv is simply not Jerusalem, and *vice versa*. Tel Aviv allows for a temporary loss of memory and for pretension: one can forget there that the "conflict" and "religion" exist, one can even forget that one is

a “Jew” and an “Israeli.” In this aspect, Tel Aviv is not demanding— *“it doesn’t ask anything from you”*—in comparison to Jerusalem, which forces one not to be blind. It also allows subjects to live in a “bubble” without considering the broader “reality,” the broader situation in the country. Tel Aviv, narrated as such, is an oasis, a vacation, an embodiment of “chill,” “fun,” “party,” and a synonym for easy-goingness.

Yet, it is also a city of the individual, of autonomy and anonymity without being imposed to form a molecule. Tel Aviv allows for a figurative breathing—an exhale, a relief, a rebirth. A city that is perceived as a symbol of freedom itself where one can *“do whatever I want, wear whatever I want, and behave however I want”* without any constraints. That is the shiny part, as well as “*a lie for the tourists*” because the rest of Israel, and Jerusalem specifically, is different.

In the imagination and narrations of the interlocutors, the claimed freedom contains the implicit notion of “asymptomatic” existence, where the norm is invisible: as all the reflections and perceptions were provided by the subjects of this dissertation, in Tel Aviv, their existence as “being a secular Jew” is invisible and unnoticed because it is the dominant mode of being. This is, again, the “mimetic,” mirroring image, since it contrasts with Jerusalem, where “being a secular Jew” is perceived as being a minority, a small village sharing the space with other modes of being.

At the same time, the “Other's” modes of being are necessarily present in Tel Aviv as well, and it is Tel Aviv's perceived character of being freer from what the interlocutors understand as “religious” and hence “political” coercion that, in turn, allows for the existence of Arab-Jewish couples and gay couples, at least on easier grounds than in Jerusalem. As Tel Aviv is perceived as predominantly “secular,” without the burden of “religion,” the “Other” is not seen as a threat or potential danger, as such “Other” is necessarily just a minority in the city.

If one can, in Tel Aviv, suffer—or, in this case, rather enjoy—the temporary loss of memory, it also means, on the other hand, that there is something one needs to forget, at least for a fleeting moment. When one *“does not look at the news, does not read the papers, does not care, and lives in one’s own bubble,”* Tel Aviv does not obsessively remind the subject of the harsh reality of the conflict. There is nothing more than to simply be. I read this curated amnesia, so impossible in Jerusalem, as another form of unacknowledged privilege, since

this absence of loud reminders is not universally accessible but reserved for those who form the majority. For those outside of the "bubble," Tel Aviv might not offer the same sense of relief, as their "otherness" is not erased or nullified but rather made invisible in another way: through indifference as a form of the politics of forgetting.

In this sense, I understand Tel Aviv's seductive detachment as operating not as a true escape from "politics" but through a similarly "political" process of non-engagement, where the absence of reminders is a privilege dependent on one's position. The city's promise of a carefree existence—of "just simply being"—hinges on the ability to suspend awareness of the conflict, which is a luxury not available to all. As such, Tel Aviv's indifference can transform invisibility from a means of liberation into a mechanism of exclusion.

By juxtaposing Tel Aviv's curated amnesia with Jerusalem's relentless confrontation with "reality," this dynamic reveals how "space" embodies different modes of experience. While Jerusalem enforces an inescapable awareness, Tel Aviv offers a fleeting respite. But only to those who can afford to forget. The city's perceived indifference, then, is not a neutral state but an active stance, which I read as a form of politics that delineates who is allowed to experience the lightness of being and who remains burdened by the weight of their own visibility.

My aim was to explore the symbolism, roles, and associated meanings, that is, the metaphorical "identities" that Jerusalem and Tel Aviv occupy in the imagination of their inhabitants, who were also the subjects of the dissertation. As Jerusalem emerged as a symbol of "religion" and "conflict," and Tel Aviv as a symbol of "fun" and "secularity," I offered a counterintuitive reading that identifies the presence of a process I call "t-othering" in Jerusalem, where one's existence and survival are based on the acknowledgement and awareness of the "Other" next door. In contrast, in Tel Aviv, I identified a process—or politics—of forgetting, which I read as a form of privilege for "asymptomatic" subjects, where *"you can forget that you are a Jew or an Israeli,"* at least as far as both the metaphorical and real boundaries of Tel Aviv reach.

In this respect, such a juxtaposition of the cities allows me to offer another layer of reading: building upon the tropes of secularity in the previous chapter, one can also read these dialogical windows as a narration and gesture of secularity itself: now through space and movement. While the "secularity" of the subject in

Tel Aviv is invisible, as I said, “asymptomatic,” in Jerusalem, being “secular” is symptomatic, and one of the marked modes of Jewish subjectivity. Hence, as I mentioned when commenting on Gavriel's narration, the claimed “being secular” might be read as something of a relational “situationship”—one relates to the available category, but that relationship is based on a particular situation and set of conditions.

To summarize the above, the “dialogical windows of mirror images” I presented in this chapter are not only metaphorical. They represent real passages through which the subjects move, both physically and existentially. While the subjects navigate their environment, they simultaneously engage in the practice of meaning-making. The dialogical relationship between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv suggests that space is both productive and reflective of its subjects, where both constraint and possibility exist not as mutually exclusive but as simultaneously occurring. Through the spatial meaning-making, the subjects create the “wiggle room” within the “reality” they inhabit.

The question why cities and their imaginaries should interest us in the politics of intimacy and desire is a topic I explore more closely in the following chapter, *The Infrastructure of Intimacy*. The character of the cities, their urban topography, and the imaginaries connected with them shape the ways in which individuals approach and encounter the “Other” who is seen as suitable, potential, or desired for forming a relationship. At the same time, these spaces also delineate which “Others” are considered impossible, and why.

Hence, this chapter operates on several levels: it serves as a connective *intermezzo* between the first and third chapters, expanding on the subject’s modes of “secular” being as narrated and gestured within space. Moreover, it provides the contextual “background music,” a landscape within which the “drama” of intimate life is situated, and simultaneously acts as a prelude to exploring the conditions under which certain individuals or relationships are regarded as “possible” or “impossible,” as the figures of Asher and Mohammad in the fictionalized scene on Jerusalem's rooftop.

3. 3. Infrastructure of Intimacy: Thick Life, Thin Lines

"*If there is love, fuck everybody.*"
— Nitzan, interlocutor

"*Intimacy is where it begins and ends.*"
(Bessire, 2021:169 in Mody, 2022: 276)

This chapter serves as an interpretive culmination of the preceding ones. The chapter *Secular Subjectivity in a Postsecular Condition* explored the contextual anchoring of claimed "secularity" in Israel: its conditions, and the ways people narrate and gesture their being as "secular Israeli Jews" through tropes I identified. In doing so, I offered (at least partial) answers to the following questions: Who are these people, and how do they understand themselves? What does it mean when they self-identify as "secular"? I then proceeded with *Topography of Locations: Shabbat Shalom, Ramadan Kareem*, which essentially asked: Where are these people located, and how do they perceive the cities they live in? Through the ways people talk about their environments and the imaginaries they construct about them, I further deepened the inquiry into how they understand themselves: who is the "Other," and what kinds of possible or impossible encounters their cities enable, and for whom.

In this final chapter, I return to Lauren Berlant's conceptual vocabulary of "infrastructure," introduced in the *Summary: Implications and Reintroductions in the Theoretical Terrain*, which helps me attend to "intimacy and desire" as an entangled site of multiple tethers, where intimate choices, hesitations, and acts unfold within a matrix of historical, legal, and affective forces. By following how subjects move through this infrastructure of intimacy, I ask: how is a "possible lover" distinguished from an "impossible Other"? How do self-understandings intersect with intimate decisions and preferences? And what does this relational texture reveal about the state and society of which these subjects are a part?

I begin with the figure of Nitzan, whose narrations function as a microcosm of the tensions and questions which run throughout the dissertation. I then provide a brief overview of the literature on the topic of intermarriage in Israel, which I see as a necessary part of the politics of intimacy and desire, and explain how my work diverges from it. From there, I engage with a growing body

of ethnographic writing on love, intimacy, and desire and their entanglements with "politics," in order to reflect on the epistemological and methodological concerns and limits of portraying "thick life" as a pull between autonomy and embeddedness. Finally, in the subchapter *Moving Through the Tethers: Imagined Futures, Potential Pasts*, I organize and analyse the ethnographic material through a set of five conceptual and metaphorical movements and employ the device of a constructed ethnographic scene once again.

Nitzan, whose figure, narrations, and gestures appeared both in the tropes of secularity and in the rooftop scene in the previous chapter, opens this one as well. Nitzan deliberately sent her kids to mixed schools for both Jewish and Arab children. She did so because—as she shared on the rooftop— she *"wanted them to see that Arabs are normal people and that you can talk to them."* However, mixed—or rather joint—Arab-Jewish schools are a rare sight in Israel, as most of the school system is separated (Levy 2023).

Nitzan's dedication to affording her children more diverse experiences than they would probably have otherwise was not always met with understanding. When the kids started to attend the mixed joint kindergarten in Jerusalem, her friend asked her: *"But aren't you afraid that one day she would marry an Arab?"* I was curious how Nitzan reacted to such a question. She said:

"Well, I looked at him and said: she's in kindergarten. What are you talking about?... It scares people to mix. But the funny thing is that I found out that to study with people of different nationalities, or different identities, just strengthens your identity. Plus, Jews and Arabs sometimes marry without being at school together anyway."

Nitzan's response directly led me to ask a follow-up question: Would she be afraid if her daughter married an Arab then?

"I wouldn't mind. I'm very romantic in a way, and if there is love, fuck everybody. And I can tell you that if one of my daughters wanted to marry a very religious person[237] *or a settler, it would be much harder for me."*

[237] In the context of the entire interview, Nitzan was referring to Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Nitzan's remarks condense a thick set of tensions that run throughout the dissertation. They are not just fragmentary opinions on love or parenting, but a gateway into the infrastructural tensions, frictions, desires and "realities" I aim to trace in this chapter.

Nitzan wants to believe that love can cut through all boundaries—that is her romantic ideal. But even in her bold statement, there are limits. Some boundaries, such as those between "Jews" and "Arabs," she is willing to challenge, even taking active steps to change the predominant segregated setting. Others, such as the divide between "secular" and "religious" Jews, or between "leftists" and "settlers," are much harder for her to cross. They feel almost unimaginable.

When dissected, Nitzan's narration follows a chronological sequence of steps: first, she expresses an active wish for Jewish-Arab recognition, interaction, and dialogue. Second, she shrugs off anxieties about mixed marriage as irrelevant or even ridiculous. Third, she affirms the principle of love and freedom, regardless of social pressure on a "transgressive couple." And fourth, she builds a hierarchy of acceptable and unacceptable partnerships, where ideological difference among Israeli Jews—particularly represented by "religious" Jews and "settlers"—appears as the least acceptable and *desired* scenario.

Her openness is thus not unbounded; it runs through hierarchies of acceptability, where some transgressions from the norm are more bearable than others. The moment of "horror" expressed by her friend—imagining the kindergarten as a starting point for future intermarriage between a Jewish woman and an Arab man—is highly revealing. One of the informants[238] recalled how she, along with other female classmates, was handed a worksheet during high school that essentially warned against entering a relationship with Arab/Muslim men and its possible dire consequences.

The discomfort surrounding such imagined relationships is not unique to the story Nitzan shared. As mentioned earlier, it echoes demographic anxieties over the preservation of the "Jewish" state which run deep in Israel (Burton 2015), Hakak 2016, 2016a; Kravel-Tovi 2017; Taragin-Zeller 2023). Ethno-religious

[238] The informant would fall within the scope of the subjects of the dissertation as identifying as a "secular Israeli Jew," but who was not interviewed, as I met her much later. She is now living with an Arab/Palestinian partner with Israeli citizenship.

intermarriages are rare,[239] as are intra-Jewish ones across lines of religious observance. It is not surprising, then, that the exceptions to such a pattern as an "affective trouble threatening the Israeli nation-state" (Gafter and Milani 2020) have become the subject of a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship[240]—especially sociological, anthropological, and ethnographic—since ethno-religious intermarriages in Israel "place a question mark over what, physically and metaphorically, should be enclosed within the borders of the State of Israel" (Kranz, 2016: 117 in Schaum, 2020: 15).

The gendered aspect of the "reproduction of the nation"[241] is quite clear here: as Yuval-Davis (1993, 1997) reminds us, women's bodies have become sites of contestation in national projects, since it is necessary "to ensure that the biological reproduction will fall within the legitimate boundaries of the collectivity" (Yuval-Davis, 1993: 621).[242] This helps explain the anxious preoccupation—mentioned by both Nitzan and the informant above—about the "danger," "horror" and "panic" provoked by the idea of a non-Jewish, specifically Arab/Palestinian/Muslim, spouse.

While centring the topic of intermarriage in Israel, scholars have focused on identity formation among "mixed" families (Gaya 2022); the porousness of ethno-religious boundary-making (Sabbah-Karkabi 2017, 2022); representations

---

[239] The report of Daniel Staetsky for the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (2023) shows that only 5% of Jews in Israel are married to a non-Jew (non-endogamous marriage), and "the relatively small group of intermarried Israeli Jews mostly owes its existence to the presence of non-Jews among immigrants to Israel from the former Soviet Union, where intermarriage is very prevalent" (Staetsky, 2023: 4). That contrasts with 42 % intermarriages present elsewhere.

[240] For a discussion on "mixed families" in Israel and their context, see, e.g., Fogiel-Bijaoui 2017.

[241] For perspectives and strategies of Palestinian women in Israel regarding the "birthing the nation," see, e.g., Kanaaneh 2002.

[242] The gendered aspect of the reproduction of the "nation" is closely tied to sexuality. An interesting discussion of this topic appears in David Biale's *Eros and The Jews* (1992). Biale suggests that Zionism functioned as a form of complicated and internally contradictory sexual revolution which aimed to reshape Jewish identity by redefining gender and sexual roles, while linking nation-building with ideals of physical labor and strength. Zionism, in this sense, positioned itself as an antipole to the "emasculated," "impotent" diasporic Jew. Additionally, Zionism emphasized fertility and family life as integral to the establishment of the Jewish homeland in Israel, thereby connecting sexuality directly to the national project. The image of the "emasculated," feminized Jewish man as a product of the Diaspora is explored further by David Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct* (1997). Boyarin argues that the Diaspora generated valuable countermodel to dominant cultural gender norms. He finds this alternative ideal in rabbinnic tradition and depicts a gentle and nurturing Jewish man and his "unheroic conduct." He contends that Zionism marginalized this alternative model in favour of militarized and heteronormative male ideal. For further discussion on "heroic" versus "unheroic conduct," see Yaron Peleg's *Heroic Conduct: Homoeroticism and the Creation of Modern Jewish Masculinities* (2006). Peleg offers another perspective. By analysing Israeli literature, he traces homoerotic elements in representations of masculinity to argue that homoeroticism was a part of Zionist imagery. This challenges Boyarin's view that Zionism placed heterosexuality on a normative pedestal.

of Jewish-Arab couples in discourse (Hakak 2022); and the motivations behind such partnerships (Racin and Dein 2010). Others have explored intermarriage through the lenses of conversion, gender, and citizenship (Hacker 2009); religious monopolies and the absence of civil marriage (Burton 2015); right-wing activism against intermarriage (Engelberg 2018); ethnic stratification and the reproduction of inequalities (Okun and Khait-Marelly 2010); gendered aspects, negotiations, and strategies (Triger 2009; Layosh et al. 2024; Meler and Oryan 2024); and finally, the dissolution and divorce rates among "mixed" couples (Kaplan and Herbst-Debby 2017).

While the literature offers a rich account of intermarriage as a site of national tension and symbolic boundary work, it tends to focus on heterosexual couples in which one partner is Jewish and the other Arab/Palestinian/Muslim.[243] What "Jewish" means in these studies—whether as an ethnic, religious, or all-encompassing ethno-religious category—is often left undertheorized.

In this sense, I find the literature on intermarriage to be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it brings necessary visibility to non-normative, symbolically "transgressive" relationships and introduces counter-narratives that challenge the dominant framing of Jews and Arabs—Jewish Israelis and Palestinians—as inevitable enemies and unescapable "Others." What is unspeakable in dominant discourse often emerges as lived reality "on the ground." On the other hand, this body of research sometimes reinforces the very binary categories it seeks to question, by drawing attention to exceptional cases that are then subtly reified as anomalies.

Therefore, I decided to turn my gaze in a different direction. Instead of being oriented towards "anomalies," exceptions, and margins, this research attunes to the mundane and often unmarked centre: lives of "secular Israeli Jews," a dominant segment of Israeli society. During the fieldwork, I followed people whose relationship trajectories, decisions, definitions, and desires were unknown

[243] These categories do not necessarily overlap in a strict analytical sense. However, I list them together here because, in everyday conversations, they are often used interchangeably as a discursive construct. Most of the interlocutors I spoke with used the word *Aravim* (Arabs) to refer to the group they had in mind, regardless of finer distinctions. There is also a second prevalent body of literature on intermarriage in Israel, when one of the partners is Jewish according to the religious law, and the other one only "Jewish enough" to gain the citizenship under the Law of Return, without being Jewish according to the religious law. The third body of literature is focused on "mixed" families along the lines of Jewish intra-ethnic division (mainly between "Mizrahim" and "Ashkenazim", e.g., Benjamin and Barash 2004) and along the lines of religious observance (see, e.g., Sadeh 2022).

to me in advance. I did not know beforehand whether they were single, married, divorced, or widowed. Whether they lived in an intimate partnership, with whom, or with how many people. Whether they even wanted to share their life with someone, and on what terms. Whether they were right-wing, left-wing, centrist, or apolitical. To what extent they had an inner dialogue with Judaism, or/and with the state. I just knew there must be these people who—for some reason—self-identify as secular and, when asked during the surveys, are more open to marrying a non-Jewish partner than other Jewish subgroups. And yet, they hardly ever do so. If they marry, they usually marry another secular Jew.

I did not look for a symbolic transgression *a priori*. My aim was, perhaps selfishly, to be surprised. To let people tell their stories about love, about childhood, about holidays which are "not about religion." To attend the routine where someone's presence goes unnoticed and someone else's is imbued with meaning. And then, their absence. I wanted to hear the sounds of the cities, to walk their streets, and to hear people frantically defend Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. And through the imaginaries of the cities, to better understand how people narrate themselves and Others, and how they live in an intimate proximity with both possible and impossible lovers. By attending to these layers in daily life, I began to observe how certain scripts of intimacy are enforced, undone, or reconfigured.

Both in the *Introduction* and in *Theoretical Terrain*, I traced the intellectual trajectory and works upon which I "embroider" the story of the "intimate s/State of Israel" presented here. Alongside the works already mentioned, I wish now to briefly return to anthropological literature on the ethnographic encounters between "love" and the "state." At this point, my aim is to provide a clearer understanding of where my work converges with this scholarship, where it differs and where the productive frictions lie.

Anthropologists have approached "love" as affect, as discourse, as embodied practice, as a site of identity formation, and as a social and political force and institution.[244] The "embroidery" of my work, however, does not ask what "love" is, what meanings it holds across different settings, how it can be theorized, or what forms it might take—i.e., where to "trace" love (Wynn 2015): as romantic love in the "Western" sense (Giddens 1992, Gell 2011 [1996]), as care, as sexual attachment, as a form of activism (Wright 2016), as a site of queer

[244] For an overview of relevant literature from the humanities and social sciences, see the *Introduction* of the dissertation.

critique, as part of "kin-work" (Dubuisson 2025), or as a relation to the non-human world (Haraway 2008, 2016).

As outlined in the *Introduction*, this dissertation draws on a growing body of ethnographic writing on love, intimacy, and desire and their entanglements with "politics," while turning anthropological attention to how the lingering forces—including state regulations, ethno-nationalist logics, spatial imaginaries, and hierarchies of acceptability—are lived, narrated, and organized in everyday life, as intersections of "intimate relations and the circuits of governance through which they become visible as political contestations" (Mody, 2022: 272).

Social anthropologist Perveez Mody provides a comprehensive overview of anthropological works on love and intimacy (2022), with specific focus on studies that place the connection between "politics" and "love" at the centre of their analysis. She poses a question for anthropological inquiry: "What is the framework by which to apprehend intimate choices that are reflexively conditioned and constrained by the relationships in which they are embedded?" (Mody, 2022: 272). In other words, how to look at "love" as a "site of knowledge as well as a site of contestation, transformation, resistance, or retreat"? (Mody, 2022: 276). The notion of a "political concept of love" (Berlant 2011, Hardt 2011) becomes essential for such an inquiry, yet it must overcome a key obstacle: the entrenched division between intimate and social forms of love understood as separate and even divergent. As Hardt (2011) argues, contemporary notions of love tend to separate private, romantic, or familial love from public or collective forms such as patriotism. This divide makes it difficult to conceive of love as operating simultaneously on personal and political levels. A political concept of love, he suggests, must "move across these scales" (Hardt, 2011: 677).

Mody illustrates this point by referring to Dalley's (2015) research on relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in northern Australia. Dalley argues that a "properly political" inquiry on intimacy must be attentive to the "localized instantiations of power" and the "hierarchies which pervade intimacy" (Dalley, 2015: 51 in Mody, 2022: 276). In this sense, I approach the question of possibility and impossibility in intimate encounters and choice of partners not only as a private emotional experience, but also as structuring force occurring simultaneously on multiple levels. Here, I want to

return to Butler's work[245] on a "reverse effect of power" as a double-bind, which provides at least a partial relief to potential pitfalls I have identified in the ethnographic writing on politics of love and intimacy.

My main concern in writing this work has been how to balance the ethnographic insistence on the emic perspective[246] with an analysis which takes into account the wider structures through which intimate choices unfold—those relationships in which such choices are embedded, as Mody writes. To put it differently: how can one—in the material act of writing— "traverse comfortably between the personal and political" (Mody, 2022: 276) without confining the subjects within the Marxist "false consciousness"?

Such "traversing" writing about love, intimacy and desire as both emotional, private experience and structural, political force contains an inner tension, contradiction and dilemma which cannot be smoothed by simply naming these dimensions. What remains is an uneasy gap: between honoring the agentive capacity of subjects to express their desires as autonomous and affectively "true," and adopting an interpretive stance that sees these desires as embedded in the systems of power. The challenge here is to avoid flattening lived experience to structural conditioning, while also resisting the temptation to treat "love" as freely chosen, that is, to ignore the material and discursive context that shape its forms and possibilities.

These concerns resonate with the arguments and observations of anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli in her book *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (2006). Situated in the distinct contexts of Australia, the USA, and Canada, she explores how intimate life in settler-colonial states is governed by the dual expectations of cultural continuity and liberal autonomy. She further examines the exercise of power and the politics of recognition that determine the conditions for "being indigenous." To be granted special legal status, indigenous people must prove, demonstrate, and perform an uninterrupted lineage of customs, bodies, beliefs, desires, and territory. That is, their "genealogical inheritance" (Povinelli, 2006: 227–228). However, to do so, Povinelli argues, they are confronted with a demand: "either love through liberal ideals of self-sovereignty and de-culture yourself, or love according to the fantasy

[245] See the *Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories* section.
[246] Cf. Balaš 2016.

of the unchanging dictates of your tradition and de-humanize yourself" (Ibid.: 228).

In describing the logic of conditional recognition, Povinelli reveals that to be a "worthy" subject of recognition in the state's eyes, indigenous people have to choose between liberal ideal of autonomous being and perform love and relationships as such or to submit one's self to the lineage of "tradition," where there is no space for autonomous "feeling and doing." The first direction would result in the loss of the right to claim the inherited lineage (uprooted from the "culture"); the latter, in subjection to predetermined scripts (uprooted from the "human").

As researchers, we are no less a part of the social and political matrix of relations, no less a part of "inherited worlds" (Schaum 2020) we study. To impose on the subjects of the research the "choice" between to "de-culture" or "de-humanize" themselves is to participate in the very logic of conditional recognition. By framing subjects' desires, choices, or affiliations through fixed binaries of agency versus submission, of autonomy versus structure, we may inadvertently enact a form of symbolic uprooting Povinelli criticises. In doing so, we risk asking our interlocutors to "choose" between being culturally intelligible or being fully human.

Hence, Povinelli (2006: 21) writes: "My goal is not to say yes or no to individual freedom and social constraint, the intimate event or the genealogical society. All I can hope is that by understanding how these discourses work to shape social life, we can begin to formulate [...] a politics of ''thick life''—in which the density of social representation is increased to meet the density of actual social worlds."[247] How, then, can one "embroider" the "thick life"?

I find inspiration in Butler's writing on agency of the subjects which opens up through the reverse effect of power during the moments of slippage (1993).[248] For Butler, these moments open a generative space for the unexpected. I see this interpretive and representational tension—the impossibility to reconcile autonomy

[247] Povinelli distinguishes between "intimacy" and "intimate event," and between "autological subject" and "genealogical society": "By the autological subject, I am referring to discourses, practices, and fantasies about self-making, self-sovereignty, and the value of individual freedom associated with the Enlightenment project of contractual constitutional democracy and capitalism. By genealogical society, I am referring to discourses, practices, and fantasies about social constraints placed on the autological subject by various kinds of inheritances. The intimate event, as opposed to intimacy, is simply the way in which the event of normative love is formed at the intersection—and crisis—of these two discourses" (Povinelli, 2006: 4).

[248] See the *Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories* section.

and embeddedness—as a core site for ethnographic possibility. I consider the friction between "feeling" and "doing," between spontaneity and determinism, between Povinelli's "autological subject" and "genealogical society" as a ruptured place where the "politics" becomes most visible. My writing then is an attempt not to reconcile these tensions and incoherences but to reveal them, and not only in the narrations of the interlocutors but also in my own mode of writing and representation.

When people I spoke with described themself as "free as possible" or "free to love whoever they choose," their relationship patterns rarely crossed the lines to which the sociological surveys point. They were genuine and yet, their stated ideals of love as autonomous coexist with internalized ("inherited") scripts of acceptability and impossibility. These constraints were not necessarily seen as imposed from outside; the intimate terrain of partnerships and love—as Nitzan's claim *"when there is love, fuck everybody"*—opened honestly felt possibility of imagined futures where one is "free" to forget about the legal architecture, familial expectations and symbolic weight of "othering."

It is in this infrastructure of intimacy, this complicated web of tethers, where the "freedom of love," in its honesty, is already situated. The infrastructure of intimacy, as "the living mediation of what organizes life" (Berlant, 2016: 393), becomes visible not in its smooth operation but precisely in its frictions and troubled transmissions in the movement through those tethers—in what Berlant calls "glitches."[249] These do not have to be grand and dramatic disruptions causing "traffic jam": as already sealed transgressive relationships as an object of anthropological inquiry mentioned previously. The glitches might be very subtle in their nature, as "episodes of hiccup" (Ibid.), as moments of affective misalignment.

Returning to the notion of infrastructure discussed in the theoretical part of the dissertation allows me to connect the intimate with the state: not as a vertical relationship, but as a horizontal density, a "thickness" of tethers, expectations, desires, and their calibrations. When the subjects narrate their "freedom to love" as an autonomy of choice, the small break between declared values and lived realities provides a glimpse to work of power in its intimate form. Such moments are neither fully "free" nor fully determined—as in the narration of an

[249] See the *Summary: Implications and Reintroductions* section of the *Theoretical Terrain* part.

interlocutor who claims, "*I just have to be attracted to the person, and we have to have something in common, but I don't think about the rest,"* only to, a few minutes later, reverse:

"Well, yeah, all my girlfriends were Jewish. Yesterday, I went to a party and there was a nice group of girls in the club. But when I approached them, I realized they are Druze.[250] *And it was awkward. They were different, you know. And anyway, I am Cohen,*[251] *so technically, I can't marry someone who is not Jewish—not even a convert."*

Or, for example, as in the case of a "proudly" and explicitly secular couple who harshly criticize the state as submissive to "religious coercion" in the absence of civil marriage and prefer to have a legally non-binding wedding ceremony for that reason. But at the same time, they acknowledge subtle preferences:

"I do think that my parents prefer me to have a Jewish husband, but I don't think that they would disapprove if I found someone else. The important thing is to find someone who loves you and he's a good person. And there are so many other more important criteria than religion. Religion doesn't define us. But it's important for us."

I read these examples as signs of an infrastructure of intimacy at work, which both enables the possibilities and frames their limits at the level of the ordinary, and where politics resides in the banality of the everyday. These negotiating movements are rarely visible within the large data sets of quantitative studies, which struggle to capture forms of negotiation that "take place in a way that is subtle, coded, and often not explicitly public" (Mody, 2022: 278). Povinelli's "intimate event" (2006) suggests that such moments should not be read as

---

[250] The Druze people, a distinct ethno-religious group, comprise roughly 2% of the population of the State of Israel. See, e.g. Theodorou 2016. They primarily reside in the northern part of the country, including areas along the Golan Heights, which have been considered by the United Nations to be an occupied territory.

[251] A person with the surname *Cohen* or its possible variations is usually believed to be a descendant of priests (*kohanim*) who served in the ancient Jerusalem's Temple. According to the Jewish religious law, such a person, in order to keep the ritual purity of the hereditary lineage, is subject to stricter rules than an "ordinary" Jew: he cannot marry a divorcee, a convert to Judaism, or "dishonored" woman, even though they are otherwise *halachically* Jewish. It is important to note, however, that not all individuals bearing the name Cohen also possess the status of a *kohen*.

personal inconsistencies, but as symptoms of the simultaneous pulls between the discourse of liberal autonomy and the discourse of genealogical inheritance.

Mody (2022), whose synthesis and overview serves as a starting point for the discussion of this chapter, closes her paper with a strong claim: "The new anthropologies of our time will need to bear clear-eyed ethnographic witness to the antagonistic intimacies of both love and hate and the multiple ways in which they orbit and elicit each other" (Mody, 2022: 283).

To take her invitation seriously, then, is not to seek resolution but to attend to the "hiccups" and "glitches" as ambiguities that may not be loud but always come with a consequence. To look closely at the "banality of the everyday"—the mundanity, the ordinariness, the seemingly "asymptomatic" being—requires a departure from much of the scholarship that centres on already "transgressive" relationships or specific minority groups (such as ultra-Orthodox Jews or queer individuals). Thus, as already noted, I turned to the very centre of what is perceived as a non-problematic given—as "normalcy" in a particular context: the intimate infrastructure that shapes (and is shaped), constrains, and enables relational life among secular Israeli Jews, without insisting they have to choose between "tradition," "culture," and "inherited lineage," or "autonomy" and "self-sovereignty," in order to be recognized as worthy and intelligible subjects of inquiry. To do so would be to reproduce the very uprooting logic this work seeks to question.

In the preceding chapters, I traced who the people described in sociological studies as *hilonim* are, how they narrate and gesture their being, and how they understand themselves and the "Others" through the narrations of space they inhabit. I did so by employing the tropology of secularity and the constructed ethnographic scene, where I wove together multi-vocal dialogue of interlocutors. In the following subchapter, I return to the knowledge created through these interpretive devices of writing and develop them further. Now turning my gaze, ear, and analytic attention to the workings of their intimate infrastructure, and to the "hiccups" that occur as they move through its tethers.

I am aware that I may not have been able to locate all the tethers that "vibrate" within the infrastructure of intimacy. In the Israeli context, I have considered primarily those forces that appeared most present in the narrations I listened to: legal and institutional frameworks (such as the absence of civil

marriage and the religious jurisdiction in personal matters); familial expectations around continuity; internalized scripts of acceptability; urban spatial imaginaries and topographies; the pull of liberal autonomy; and demographic anxieties tied to ethno-national reproduction. I approach these elements not as discrete or self-contained, but as forming an entangled horizontal density—as "the living mediation" in Berlant (2006) and as "thick life" in Povinelli (2006)—which organizes the conditions of possibility and shapes which forms of love feel free and easy, which partners seem impossible, and how individuals navigate the ordinary space between autonomy and inheritance.

3. 3. 1. Moving Through the Tethers: Imagined Futures, Potential Pasts

"I don't want any rabbi or religious person to interfere in my life."
— Nitzan, interlocutor

"Maybe if I lived in a different country [...], no one would care if I went out with a Christian or a Muslim. It's Israeli society that doesn't approve of it. That's the hard part."
— Tamar, interlocutor

In the opening section of this chapter, Nitzan spoke about the discomfort and about the "hardship" she would feel if one of her daughters were to marry a very "religious" partner or a "settler." These categories do not describe people outside of the Jewish segment of Israeli society, but other Jews who are perceived by Nitzan as fundamentally "Other." For her, these Others are "fucked up" in their religiosity, like her religious father who did not treat her well, or "fucked up" because they are settlers living beyond the Green Line, complicit in what she sees as an apartheid regime.[252] Her criticism follows ideological, not ethnic, lines: she does not object to her children marrying non-Jews, but sees as unacceptable those whose worldview represents a political and moral threat. These are the Jews, in her view, who rely on secular taxpayers, who enforce religious coercion, or who perpetuate settler colonialism. Nitzan positions herself as their counter-point. For Nitzan, the acceptability of a potential partner is conditional not on "Jewishness" but on the kind of future that partnership implies within a state she sees as leaning

[252] See the *Secularity as Counter-Position* in the *Tropology: Being a "Secular Jew"* subchapter.

toward dictatorship and increasingly undemocratic, caused by both religious coercion and settler colonialism, and their intersections.

By now, we know a great deal about Nitzan. Not just as a person, but as a figure through whom broader tensions are made visible. Her secularity is one of the counter-positions she takes towards the landscape she lives in: towards her family, towards the state, towards ideological "Others." Nitzan also never married. She told me:

"I never considered marriage. I will never get married because I don't need a rabbi to tell me what I can do. I can just live with someone. I don't need a rabbi to allow me to separate from someone and all this, you know? I don't want any rabbi or religious person to interfere in my life. And I really felt that as long as two people want to live together, it's good. [...] I don't like ceremonies."

And yet, in Israel, she never lived with someone who was not Jewish. In Europe, where she travelled in her youth, yes—she dated non-Jewish men. Those longer relationships with Jewish Israeli partners, at the same time, were only with the "seculars": she does not celebrate any holidays, she sees herself as a complete atheist. Her "Jewishness" is something that happened to her as a matter of fact. She knows she is a Jew, but her identity is primarily "Israeli," yet this distinction does not entirely free her from the infrastructure of which she is a part. Read through the prism of "intra-Jewish othering," it is not surprising that she follows a pattern of homogamy: with a secular partner in Israel, there is a higher chance of ideological alignment. In Europe, somewhere else, the ideological alignments might have softer edges. Abroad, the ideological commitments and hierarchies of acceptability appeared more permeable and less burdened.

During the interview process, I came to realize that certain topics were more approachable through the metaphor of "imagined futures" and "potential pasts," and by asking about children, parents, or friends rather than directly about the interlocutor. These detours often opened up space in the immediacy of the moment for reflections that might not have surfaced otherwise. These metaphors captured both the aspirations, fantasies, and projections oriented towards the future, and the historical imaginaries, inheritances, and genealogies that shape the present. So, for example, to better understand how the tension between autonomy

and normativity might manifest in practice of Nitzan's position, I asked her what she would do if she had a son: would she circumcise him?

"I'm very happy I had daughters, and I didn't have to deal with that. I can't really tell what I would do, but I wish I had the courage not to circumcise him. It's one of the things everyone does here. I don't know if people would accept that he's not circumcised… It's something subconscious of the nation."

Her happiness over having daughters is tied to the absence of a decision she would have otherwise had to face: whether or not to circumcise a son. Circumcision, as a physical marker inscribed on the flesh of Jewish men, has a symbolic significance reaching far beyond personal preferences and desires. Her hesitation over this potential past—the troubled movement between what she might have done, what she believes, and what "everyone does"—reveals the persuasive strength of ambient normativity, which does not need to insist loudly. It might only "whisper" through what she calls the "subconscious of the nation" (that is, the Jewish nation) to be able to discipline the subject. Such whispers resonated across the interlocutors' narrations, and the ambient pressure is not unique to Nitzan's case.

Tamar, quoted earlier, wonders whether, in another country, "no one would care" if she dated a Christian or a Muslim. Likewise, Nir, in the earlier chapter on tropes of secularity, speculates: *"Maybe if I'd grown up outside of Israel, I'd feel more Jewish. When you live around Jews, you feel the holidays, you feel Shabbat, you feel it outside on the streets. You are part of it.*" In all three cases, the whispering does not need to be codified, the normative "atmosphere" is enough to exercise its effects.

In this sense, I consider Nitzan's "being a Jew" (and, by extension, that of other interlocutors) through Althusser's notion of the subject as always-already "born," interpellated into a conceptual apparatus and order that transcends individual history. Here, I read "Judaism," selectively translated into and appropriated by the state's functioning, as operating as an ideological apparatus that gives subjects their name—a "Jew"—and discursively outlines the boundaries of a "Jewish" subject.[253] This has a material effect on the flesh, where such a

[253] See the discussion in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter of the *Intimate State of Israel* part.

"Jewish" body becomes both a destination for ideology and its source (Althusser [1970] 2002: 115).[254]

Although Nitzan does everything in her narrations and gestures to "live" herself out of this interpellation—identifying as an atheist, seeing her identity as Israeli rather than Jewish, refusing to celebrate holidays (not even as "tradition," as some other interlocutors do), intentionally rejecting marriage to avoid dealing with rabbinical authorities, and openly criticizing the very structures and premises on which the state is built—she still admits, in the space of a potential past, that she does not know what she would do.

Even the most articulated refusals may encounter a barrier which is difficult to dismantle, to dig under, or to jump over. Sometimes, it is not torn down but reluctantly accepted, as one negotiates its conditions and carefully crafts the space it delimits, as Mahmood (2005) notes. Following Mahmood, as discussed in the theoretical part, and other authors mentioned, I suggest that we might understand Nitzan's agency not solely as resistance, subversion, or refusal, but also as the creative inhabitation of normative structures —those delimiting barriers that subjects cannot fully escape. To ask the subjects to become more intelligible would be to reproduce the demand, as Povinelli (2006) describes, to either "de-culture" or "de-humanize" themselves.

I use Nitzan's narration, her figure, and her negotiating movement through the tethers which simultaneously bind her (as a "destination") and which she, reversely, enables (as a "source"), to signal which forms such movement through infrastructure might take. At the same time, it also hints at the conceptual approach and representational strategy I decided to elaborate for the following conversation through movement, which creates the "politics" of desire and intimacy.

In the following sections, I do not organize the ethnographic material around typologies or stable themes, but around a set of conceptual and metaphorical movements. As with movement and dance in their literal sense, these may be repetitive, spiralling, overlapping, or unstable. Sometimes they take the form of rehearsal; sometimes, of a final performance. And sometimes, one trips and movement fails or takes an unexpected turn.

[254] See the discussion in the *Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories* chapter of the theoretical part.

The metaphor of movement and choreography is well established in anthropological literature. Anthropologists and ethnographers have long used such metaphors as conceptual tools to understand, depict, and analyse social life, as they allow us to consider "relating" with Others and with space, echoing the saying "it takes two to tango." From theories of ritual passage that suggest movement from one stage to another (as in the work of Victor Turner), to following the flows of people, commodities, and shifting "-scapes" in a globalized world (as in the work of Arjun Appadurai), such metaphors also allow for approaching the "field" and the "subjects" as rhythms of interlocking and shifting positions and locations (Gupta and Ferguson 1996; Stöckelová and Abu Ghosh 2013), as discussed in the methodological chapter *Field and Subjects*.

I also see movement, or motion, as a metaphor aligned with the theoretical and epistemological framework introduced in the first part of the dissertation: movement necessarily entails instability, the "not-yet-known," and the ongoing positioning of the subject. The metaphor of "social choreography" as a "structuring blueprint" was elaborated by Andrew Hewitt (2005) in *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*. The notion of "choreographic" analysis in ethnography is also taken up by Lea Taragin-Zeller (2023), whom I have mentioned several times, with a reference to Charis Thompson's ethnography *Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies* (2005). Other examples might include the work of Tim Ingold (2011) or Brenda Farnell (1996). The language of choreography and movement appears in much earlier anthropological work too, and movement itself was, for a long time, a keystone of fieldwork: the movement of the researcher between "here" and "there," where "culture" of such here and there could be understand not as bounded, but as "traveling encounter" through "routes" instead of "roots," as James Clifford (1996) notes.

To trace the movements through the tethers of intimate infrastructure, I again employ the device of a constructed ethnographic scene. This time, I construct one ongoing conversation, imagined as unfolding around a long table during a Friday night dinner (that is, a Shabbat dinner, though most of my interlocutors referred to it simply as "Friday dinner"[255] in English). In this scene, I bring the voices of different interlocutors into reimagined proximity, as if seated at

[255] *Aruchat shishi* in Hebrew.

the same table, reflecting on the topic at hand. The scene, as presented here, never happened in precisely this form, but in a way, it always did. The voices remain faithful to their original articulations;[256] they are only reimagined in their constellation, dialogue, and juxtaposition. The voices do not represent fixed positions. They reappear, diverge, contradict themselves, destabilize, and echo one another across the five sections of movement.

I situate myself at the table as well: both as a participant and as a commentator, sometimes in my head, sometimes aloud, just as I asked questions during the interviews. Not every interlocutor's voice is included: I selected particular articulations and variations as they emerged throughout the interviews to represent diverse positionalities. Some names are already familiar to the reader, but new ones were invited to the table as well. Following movement in this way allows me to create interpretive invitations instead of strict analytical containers: glimpses into how the Self, the state, and the intimate are co-constituted as "politics" in everyday life.

Movement I: Claim of Freedom

The first movement I suggest to trace is the claim of freedom, the demand and assertion of personal autonomy, which was also the most vocal trope of "secularity" that served as a precondition for the other ones. Similarly, in the topographic chapter about the dialogical windows of cities' mirror images, Tel Aviv represented freedom for the interlocutors—to be whoever one wants, to do whatever one wants, and to dress however one wants—in contrast to Jerusalem, where one needs to take into consideration the city itself and the "Others" with whom they share the space. The claim of freedom and autonomy in "love" and intimate partnerships and relationships was correspondingly prevalent. Such a "free," unbounded movement appears to lack the need for "rehearsal."

Following the "secular" ethos of the autonomous individual, I imagine this movement as what is called "improvisation" in contemporary dance—not in the sense that the subjects would not know what to do, but that they feel they do not have, and do not need, a script for such a movement, which can then follow any direction as infinite choice. It is important to note that the claim for freedom here

256 Again, apart from minor fillers and auxiliary sentences used to maintain the continuity of the conversation.

serves as a provisory starting point, since all the movements necessarily oscillate between "freedom" and "constraint," between "autonomy" and "inheritance," between "improvisation" and "rehearsed muscle memory." Thus, the first movement, the first analytical step, focuses on what interlocutors say they *want* and *desire*, and *imagine,* where autonomy is the self-declared value enabling the choice.

"If there is love, fuck everybody." Nitzan's voice is always loud when we meet and today is no exception. Whatever she says sounds like a motto: half a line from a protest song, half a romantic manifesto. I catch myself thinking that I would happily join any party, formal or not, that would have such idealistic sentences as their mobilizing slogan. I like the idea of a couple standing in their romance against the whole world.

Maybe the atmosphere of the Friday night dinner, where we have started speaking about relationships and dating, plays a role in my suddenly romantic mood. While I do the fieldwork here, my partner is conducting his research elsewhere; we are in a long-distance relationship. That probably shapes my mood too, because I imagine us exactly as being together against all the odds. Thankfully, Sagi, who is currently single, pulls me out of such ruminations:

"Exactly. I had girlfriends of many origins—half Iraqi, half Polish, from Chile and from Poland, also Siberian and non-Jewish. I had a Jewish Ethiopian girlfriend in the past too. It's about the character."

Maor, who married his Peruvian non-Jewish wife abroad and registered the marriage later in Israel, seconds Sagi:

"My words. I am not looking for an approval. I do my own thing. I don't care about someone's approval. My family is very cool, for them the fact my wife is not Jewish is not an issue. But if someone had a problem with that, we would not be in touch."

My heart skips—here we go again—the romance which is prepared to cut all the ties for survival! Maor continues:

"I dated women from abroad who weren't Jewish, to put it shortly. As I told you, I do what I think is best. I'm really not worried too much about what other people say or think. It was never an issue for me."

Nitzan smiles—that is the spirit her "fuck everybody" ignited. Daniel, shares the same view:

"Yeah, for me the question whether my partner is a Jew was never important. It's just not a factor. I don't really see people for their ethnicity or religion. If there's a connection, there's a connection."

Aviva, who now shares a life with a Jewish boyfriend whose parents are from Ethiopia, wants to express the same position too:

"You're free to choose whatever you want. I dated a Muslim guy, Jews, an Arab, and a Russian guy. The whole rainbow."

Lior nods his head in agreement:

"I think love is the most important thing in a relationship. So, I absolutely don't care if my partner is Jewish or not. Even though my parents would not like it."

At that moment, I cannot help but recall a conversation with another secular Jewish Israeli man, years ago, which initiated this doctoral research. He said, almost casually: "Of course I would date a non-Jew, but I wouldn't consider her as wifey material."[257] Tamar, as if overhearing my thought, jumps in:

"Well, I didn't have any boyfriends who weren't Jewish. It's important for me. It's important to raise the kids as Jewish. And with other men, like non-Jewish, it won't be possible. There was always a rule for me that I wouldn't date someone who is not Jewish. Even in the dating apps I used, all the names I swiped right were Jewish Israeli names."

---

[257] See the *Towards the Dissertation Topic* section of the *Introduction.*

Tamar left Jerusalem where she grew up because she, as a secular woman, felt that the city is becoming increasingly religious, more Orthodox as she says. She does not like it—for her, Jerusalem is a sad city because of that.[258] She narrates and gestures her secularity mainly through the tropes of personal autonomy, counter-position, and Judaism. I remember one evening, when I asked Tamar what it means for her to identify as secular. She did not start talking about "faith," or about "religion." Instead, she narrated her secularity through the differences between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv allows her to do whatever she wants; Jerusalem prevents her from it. Tamar believes in God, sometimes goes to the synagogue, and sometimes fasts on *Yom Kippur*. Since she is with her current partner who is more observant than her, she eats *kosher* with him and separates the sinks according to the religious law. That night, when we spoke, she also told me: *"When my boyfriend keeps Shabbat, I keep it with him. But I'm not planning on being religious. I like my life right now.*"

Even though few people raised their eyebrows—especially Nitzan, for whom Tamar is not a "real" secular because she wants to do "a tradition without religion,"[259]—Tamar's remarks trap me again in my head. "Freedom," I start to realize, might look different for each of us. Tamar's choice to be only with Jewish partners is no less an autonomous decision and desire than the stance of those for whom "Jewishness" does not matter. Maor's *"I do what I think is best,"* in relation to his non-Jewish wife, is, at its core, shaped by the same impulse as Tamar's boundary: to act in accordance with what feels right. But before I can finish my thought about how one person's limitation might be another's freedom, that is, how autonomy and agency do not always appear where we expect them, Joni counters Tamar:

"I don't agree. If the future mother of my kids is a foreigner, like not Jewish, it's actually amazing. And non-Jewish and atheist—even better! Great. I have a hard time with religion in general. It's something that I just can't really wrap my head around. And I don't disagree with people that are religious. That's your choice. But don't enforce that on me, as long as I'm not enforcing anything on you. So, an atheist is all I need."

---

[258] See the *Dialogical Windows: Jerusalem-Tel Aviv Axis* in the *Topography of Locations* chapter.
[259] See the *Secularity as Counter-Position* in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter.

The moment Joni finishes his "atheist" wishful thinking, Adi brings a huge pot of *maqluba*[260] to the table. As everyone is too busy to fill their plates, I use this break to think about Tamar's and Joni's preferences and desires which appear to stand in direct opposition. Even though Tamar *"is not planning to be religious,"* she selectively yet autonomously engages with "tradition," which hence, as in her narration about symbolism of Jerusalem, is different from what she perceives as "religion" and "religious" in Israel.

To be "religious" in Israel, for secular Israeli Jews, means a very specific, Orthodox, mode of being—being *haredi*—and everything which comes, in the symbolic construction, with such a label. This is the group, and its symbolic impact, against which they narrate and gesture their being, not against the "Judaism" per se. Judaism as "tradition" and "culture" might be the "yummy" one, as Hila's narration illustrates, or the welcomed "secular Judaism" pointed out by Daniel earlier.[261] The political dimension of what is perceived as "religious" in Israel is rooted in its connotations which are multiple for the subjects of my research.

For women, it is very often the gendered aspect of being forced to modesty interfering with their right to bodily autonomy, reflected also through the limited movement through certain parts of the city,[262] and the unequal treatment during the process of a divorce, which is in Israel under the rabbinical (hence male and patriarchal) jurisdiction. Another criticism of the "religious" is directed towards their perceived dependence and thus exploitation of "secular taxpayers" who serve the country through the military while the "religious" are exempted from such a duty. The last important connotation is a perceived increasing political influence the religious parties have in the country, which, in the eyes of the "seculars," causes illiberal tendencies. When this "religious" influence is connected with right-wing Zionism,[263] the criticism also goes against the stricter positions toward the occupied territories and Palestinians in general, which is viewed as a danger for the preservation of the state and even worsening the current security situation.

I, then, understand Joni's wish to have a foreign, non-Jewish, and atheist

---

[260] A traditional Middle Eastern dish made of layered rice, meat, and vegetables, baked in a pot and flipped upside-down for serving.

[261] See the *Secularity as Judaism* section in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter.

[262] See the *Dialogical Windows: Jerusalem-Tel Aviv Axis* in the *Topography of Locations: Shabbat Shalom, Ramadan Kareem* chapter.

[263] The proponents of religious Zionism are also referred to as "national religious" (*dati leumi*).

partner as another autonomous attempt to uproot and free oneself from the connotations and weight that come with the other version: Israeli, Jewish and religious partner. Such a person, as we know from his previous narration, is represented by the figure of his mother, who is not as "reasonable" as his father.[264] "Religion," in this weighted sense, is viewed as something which prevents the freedom of choice. To be a "secular Jew" allows one to choose to which extent to engage with "religion" as "tradition," and if at all, and to find one's own preference—partners included.

An improvisation, at the beginning as a provisional starting point, suggested that the next movement could take any direction (Jewish or non-Jewish, Israeli or non-Israeli) in the form of real or potential partners. While the research subjects—the dancers—warm up in an improvisation of seemingly endless possibilities, the two dancers, represented by the voices of Tamar and Joni, have already found their preferred movement, which suddenly has clear contours. For all involved, however, the emphasis on free choice is an essential prerequisite that allows for both self-perceived improvisation and "contoured" movement.

Both improvisation and "contoured" movement imply a certain hierarchy of acceptability in the form of dance partners with whom it is possible to share the stage, or under what conditions and where. For example, it would certainly not be the dance partner who would dictate the choreography to the subject and exercise "coercion" over what choices should or should not be made. But what other kinds of acceptable dance partners come to the scene, and why? How do we sort the "candidates"? How is the "casting" carried out? And so, the next movement begins along the lines of possible lovers-dancers, and impossible Others.

Movement II: Possible Lovers, Impossible Others

Adi's *maqluba* is delicious. Both she and her partner Nir are vegetarians, so this one is fully plant-based. I also do not eat meat, and with partners who were the same, life was much easier. For some of my friends back home, shared dietary rules are one of the important signs of compatibility—one that reflects the shared values and ethics which orient their lives. For me, it was never a top priority, but I can understand the value of such a preference. After all, we all want to make our

[264] See the *Secularity as Zionism* section in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter.

lives easier, not harder. We want our partners to "get" us, we do not want the constant struggle having to "translate" and over-explain ourselves. Ease is a logic that underpins many of our intimate choices.

When Maor said *"I do what I think is best,"* such a "best" might also entail what is doable without complete exhaustion. Just as shared dietary preferences can smooth daily routines, so too can the same language, "tradition," or political views. As Hila once said about living in Israel, *"the rhythm of life here is the rhythm of my people"*[265]—and that, too, makes things easier. One interlocutor told me that having a Jewish partner meant that, in a moment of crisis, she would never hear that she is a "dirty Jew" from his mouth. And that is a soothing feeling of security: her partner will not hold her "being a Jew" against her and "other" her. In this sense, I think to myself—still chewing the first spoon of rice—people here are no different and there is no need to "over-fetishize" their preferences as distinct or "exotic" simply because they are "Jews in Israel," as subjects of scholarly inquiry. Yet besides "sameness" as an important factor for our partnership choices and practices, what constitutes the hierarchies of acceptability in a given context and what shapes them?

As if no time passed between Joni's "atheist foreigner" and serving the food, Sagi seamlessly follows on him:

"Well, Joni, when I had a non-Jewish girlfriend, it was a bit stressful for my parents. They were always stressed because of the difficulties that come with it. Like the children are not Jewish and it is something to deal with, it has an impact. So, they were a bit nervous about it."

I ask Sagi how he felt because I remember that he said "it's about the character":

"I was not stressed about the fact that she is not Jewish. But I know that this country can be not nice if you are not Jewish. Also socially… It crossed my mind, and I think it is fucked up but it would not stop me to date or to marry someone who is not Jewish but still—it is just annoying part of this country."

[265] See the *Secularity as Judaism* section in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter.

Sagi's mention of "the annoying part of this country" makes me pause. It is not only about social discomfort, this ambient normativity as in the case of Nitzan considering the pressure on parents to have their sons be circumcised, though he mentions it. His words point to a deeply entangled legal system that governs the very terms of possibility in choosing a partner. What exactly makes this "part" so annoying?

If Sagi's potential non-Jewish partner—the one with a "fitting" character—does not undergo a conversion to Judaism, they would have to travel abroad to get married through the civil ceremony as thousands of others do every year, where Cyprus or Czech Republic are among the favourite destinations.[266] Such a marriage, including a same-sex one, would be registered in the Israeli Population Registry, provided it was legally performed under the laws of the country where the ceremony took place.

While the Law of Return grants the right to get an Israeli citizenship to any person whose at least one grandparent was a Jew, the Orthodox religious authorities (*Rabbanut*), who hold the exclusive jurisdiction over Jewish personal status matters, do not recognize such individuals as Jewish unless they were born to a Jewish mother or underwent an approved conversion. For many immigrants then, this discrepancy causes tangible legal problems and social challenges. Also, even if both partners are *halachically* Jewish, they may still face obstacles to marrying through the *Rabbanut*.

For example, *kohanim* (men from the priestly lineage) are prohibited from marrying converts or divorced women, as mentioned earlier. Others may be considered *mamzerim* (children born from prohibited relationships), which disqualifies them from marrying most Jews. *Agunot*, women who are refused a religious divorce (*get*) by their husbands, are unable to remarry, and their future children could potentially face status issues (and be considered as *mamzerim*). Same-sex couples are also excluded, as the *Rabbanut* does not recognize such unions.

In the case of two Jews marrying abroad through the civil ceremony, they

[266] According to the statistical report of Israel Democracy Institute (2023), approximately 9,000 couples per year throughout the years 2003-2019 used this option. Almost 35% of these couples consist of a Jewish man and Jewish women who could get married through *Rabbanut* but chose not to. See Finkelstein, Goldbergand Ravitsky Tur-Paz 2023. *Statistical Report on Religion and State in Israel – New Chapters*. The Israel Democracy Institute. Available at: https://en.idi.org.il/articles/49002. Last accessed 17. 5. 2025.

still have to go through the Orthodox *Rabbanut* if the marriage ends in a divorce. In the case of a Jew and a non-Jew married abroad, the situation is even more complicated since there is a double-track of the judicial system: religious and civil courts are involved. In Israel, the option of a formal "civil union" is available only to couples where both partners are officially registered as having "no religion." For someone registered as Jewish by nationality (*le'om*) and by religion (*dat*), changing this status is legally possible but involves a rare court process.[267] Another alternative is to be recognized as "common-law partners," a status that Israeli law generally acknowledges for cohabiting couples. The NGO New Family Organization offers a Domestic Union Card, which helps couples formalize their relationship through legal contracts. While this status grants many of the rights associated with marriage, it does not offer full legal equivalence.

One of the most recent developments in the question of marriage was the 2023's Supreme Court ruling which allowed the institute known as "Utah online wedding." The USA's State of Utah began offering civil marriage ceremonies conducted online via a conference call. Even with initial legal problems and controversies, the Israeli Supreme Court stated that since such a wedding is legal according to the laws of Utah, it must be validated also in Israel and registered as such. In 2024 alone, over 3,000 of couples where at least one person is an Israeli used this option.[268] As the conversation we now hold over Friday's dinner takes place no later than May 2023, the Utah online marriage option is only beginning to gain awareness, and no one talks about it by the table.

When I think about this context, Sagi's frustration becomes clearer: even if he personally does not necessarily prefer a Jewish partner, the legal architecture entwined with the Orthodox monopoly in Israel makes sure that his "not minding" is never just a private matter.[269] Even when both partners are Jewish Israelis, and even more so when one is not, marriage requires navigating a bureaucratic fortress that sometimes resembles a "Kafkaesque castle," as Maor puts it:

[267] See the *Field and Subjects* chapter in the *Methodological Foundations* part.
[268] See Tercatin, R. 2025. *Avoiding the Rabbinate: 3,000 Israeli couples married last year in Utah's 'Zoom weddings'*. The Times of Israel. Available at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/avoiding-the-rabbinate-3000-israeli-couples-married-last-year-in-utahs-zoom-weddings/. Last accessed 17. 5. 2025.
[269] For more on the situation of non-Jewish spouses of Israeli Jews, see, e.g. Kranz 2016.

“Talking about annoying parts of this country… Getting married in Israel in general is a fucking joke, the Israeli bureaucracy… I’m sure, Timea, that you know that a lot of Israelis go to the Czech Republic to get married or Cyprus. Even if my wife was Israeli, I would never deal with all of the paperwork, forget about it. I know a lot of people who just didn't get married, they just live together.”

Tomer, who tattooed few of us around the table, confirms Maor’s words:

“If I meet a non-Jewish girl, I don't even think we need to get married. We can just have a ceremony on the beach for the family. You know, simple life, simple things… But I never dated anyone who is not Jewish, that is true. I don't really know if it's important for me. I don't really care about religion, nor my family. I did not have a proper bar mitzvah[270] *and stuff like this. We just had a barbecue in my house. That's it.”*

Lea, who has just joined us, is intrigued by the discussion about the legally non-binding ceremony on the beach. I know that Lea sees herself as “100% secular,”[271] as she once told me. She is highly critical of *haredim* and the *Rabbanut,* particularly regarding what she perceives as their political influence, which she feels limits her. Lea often talks about her husband, but only now do I learn that they are not legally married:

“We didn't want a religious wedding, we didn't want to visit Rabbanut, so we are not officially registered as married. Even if we married abroad, we would have to get a divorce at Rabbanut and we are not willing to do that. It was a mutual agreement; my husband is more radical in that. Our families supported us with this decision. My sister married the same way a month before me. My father is a lawyer and told me horrible stories about women forced to reconcile with the husband even though they wanted a divorce. So, it would cause a lot of problems. That is something that we cannot accept.”

---

[270] As explained earlier, a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* marks the beginning of religious adulthood, when a person becomes responsible for their own actions. It is celebrated at age 12 for girls and 13 for boys.

[271] See the *Secularity as Personal Autonomy* section in the *Tropology: Being a “Secular Jew”* subchapter.

Sagi agrees with Lea's view of *Rabbanut*'s role and influence:

"The absence of civil marriage is absurd. I understand that they have political power, and they control certain things, but as long as people keep voting for them—and their population continues to grow—they will gain even more power. They control the ministry, and they are preventing civil marriage."

Everyone here knows what "they" and "their population" means: Sagi is talking again about the "religious" sector of the society, the religious political parties and the Ministry of Religious Services. As the survey conducted by a think tank Israel Democracy Institute (2024)[272] shows, 83% of secular Israeli Jews do not view the *Rabbanut* as a religious or spiritual authority. However, in practical and political terms, it is.

The issue of the absence of civil marriage clearly resonates around the table and shifts the atmosphere from the idealistic proclamations of "freedom to love" to an angry criticism of the "religious," who prevent the "seculars" from organizing their lives as they wish. So far, the absence of civil marriage is discussed mostly in terms of the discrimination of "seculars" and gay couples. I start to have an urgent feeling that someone might be missing in the picture. So, I take a breath and ask what has been on my mind: whether the lack of civil marriage is not only a wish of the "religious," but also a way in which the state prevents the loss of a Jewish demographic majority and thus can continue to claim the "Jewish" character of the country. Maybe it is not so much targeted at the "seculars," I ask, as it is about preventing the marriage of Jews with "Arabs"? For a moment, there is just silence. Lea is the first to respond:

"Well, that's an interesting point. I admit I haven't thought about it. Most of the people that try to fight against the Rabbanut are either secular or gays and lesbians. I'm sure there are also mixed couples but they are less high profile. You don't really hear about them."

[272] See Finkelstein and Goldberg 2024. *Jewish public opinion regarding the Chief Rabbinate and the elections for the Chief Rabbis*. The Israel Democracy Institute. Available at: https://en.idi.org.il/articles/54586. Last accessed 17. 5. 2025.

What Lea says makes sense to me: I am aware not only of how rare intermarriages between Jews and non-Jews are in Israel, but also of how much discomfort the very idea of intermarriage can provoke across different segments of society.[273] Among the already small number of intermarriages, only an insignificant fraction involve a couple of a Jew and an Arab, whether Muslim or Christian. There are definitely legal and bureaucratic obstacles for such couples in case they want to get married.[274] But why are they formed in such small numbers in the first place?

What struck me throughout the fieldwork was that most people I spoke with talked about the freedom to love "whoever they want," including non-Jews in general. But very few mentioned "Arabs," unless I explicitly brought up the possibility. Why is it that "non-Jewish" can be a seemingly open category, but only as long as certain groups remain unnamed or unimagined within it?

In the possible "lover-dancer casting," so far, nothing here was particularly surprising. People often lean towards sameness in partnerships, towards homogamy (and hence, endogamy): to speak the same language might create deep bonds; shared political views prevent arguments over dinners; the same phrases that our mothers with the same backgrounds use make us laugh as we walk hand in hand after the visits during the holidays we both know. Even the dietary choices, the organization of free time, music preferences, all of these are the little mundane factors which makes relationships feel easier, more "natural," and less as a "labour."[275]

---

[273] See the *Introduction* of the dissertation and the opening of the *Infrastructure of Intimacy: Thick Life, Thin Lines* chapter.

[274] Even more problematic is the situation of couples in which one partner holds Israeli citizenship or residency, including residents of East Jerusalem, and the other is from the West Bank or Gaza. These cases primarily affect members of the Arab/Palestinian minority in Israel, many of whom have family, relatives, or other ties in those areas. In such situations, there are significant legal barriers to unifying the family unit inside Israel. "The Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law," first enacted in 2003 during the Second *Intifada* as a temporary security measure, prohibits Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza from acquiring Israeli citizenship or permanent residency through marriage, unlike non-Jewish spouses from other backgrounds. Since its enactment, the law has been repeatedly renewed and remains in force. As this topic exceeds the scope of this dissertation and was not raised by any interlocutor, I include it here only to provide a more contextual picture. See, Knesset (2024). *Knesset Plenum Approves Government's Request to Extend Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law by One Year*. 13 May 2024. Available at: https://main.knesset.gov.il/en/news/pressreleases/pages/press5324w.aspx (accessed 18. 5. 2025). See further: *Adalah, The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel*, Haifa, which covers this issue extensively. See also Shalhoub-Kevorkian's (2015) *Security Theology, Surveillance and the Politics of Fear*, chapter *Israel in the bedroom: Citizenship and entry Law.*

[275] These observations are based on the analysis of the interviews I conducted, which I examined in dialogue with my own experiences: I used a small-scale autoethnographic reflection as a method of analysis. For example, Lea expressed a preference for an Israeli partner specifically because she wants someone who speaks Hebrew fluently. Lior, who sees himself as liberal and "tries to avoid

This ease also helps sustain the feeling of "improvisation," the free movement of choice, so important for the interlocutors I spoke with. As being a "secular Jew" in Israel is often narrated and gestured as a counter-position towards the broader contextual landscape of the country, if the potential lover "dances" on the same side of our position, that too, contributes to the chances for the relationship's success.[276]

However, such "sameness" sometimes means more than one is able or willing to bear, as in the "contoured" movement of Joni. In such situations, the appeal of "difference" becomes an escape from the weight of overfamiliarity, from the normative choreography that sameness might simultaneously impose. I read this, too, as a movement through inherited legacies, which I explore in more depth in the next movement section.

Then, there are structural conditions affecting the choice of a partner: separation in schools, as Nitzan noted, along with housing and patterns of urban movement. This separation follows the lines between "religious" and "secular," as well as between "Arabs" and "Jews." It is therefore harder (yet not impossible) to encounter the "Other" in any meaningful way in everyday life. Added to this is the basic demographic fact: statistically, it is simply more likely to meet a "Jew" than anyone else in Israel.

These are recognizable dynamics that set the preconditions for whether the "casting" even takes place. But the framing of the absence of civil marriage as primarily a problem for "seculars" and gay couples reveals something deeper: the imagined "non-Jewish" partner—the theoretical Other whom people here refer to as a "possible lover"—looks, more or less, like me.

I am a non-Jew, and I am also not "religious" in the sense in which that label is used around the table. My presence does not disrupt: I am familiar with Judaism, but I do not "practice" it; one can take me home to celebrate holidays as "tradition," not as "religion," as Ariel did for Pesach.[277] But most importantly, I am not only a "non-Jew": I am also a "non-Arab," which would, in most cases, move me from "possible lover" to the category of "impossible Other." Here, the

---

categorizing people by ethnicity or religion," and he would ideally partner with "the most liberal woman," too, prefers a partner who speaks Hebrew. As I am in a long-term relationship with a foreign partner and our shared language is English, I, too, regret that he cannot read my poems in Czech; they have entirely different flavours in English.

[276] See the *Tropology: Being a "Secular Jew"* subchapter.

[277] See the *Tropology: Being a "Secular Jew"* subchapter.

improvisation again, takes the shape of a "contoured" movement.

Ishai, who was nodding his head in agreement at the beginning of the dinner and murmuring that having a Jewish partner is *"not important at all. I see the person as himself or as herself. It's a non-issue for me,"* reacts further to my question about the prevention of intermarriages and develops the thought:

"You ask a very serious question, Timea, with a very definite answer… It's kind of taboo—that you don't date or see people from the Arab community if you're an Israeli Jew, for numerous reasons. Reason one is from their side. There's a lot of pressure, because Arabs live in a tighter community, and they're being very vocal about disagreeing with certain things. So, it's also a taboo for them. It's a mutual thing we don't do—it's crossing boundaries."

The "mutual taboo of crossing boundaries" reveals the limits of imagination around which two can actually "tango." At this point, many of the articulations shift from general declarations of openness to more ambivalent, or constrained, reflections. The freedom of movement in love begins to tighten into a choreography that avoids certain steps. Maor, along with a few others, agrees in unison with Ishai:

"That's a different story, of course—a completely different story… It's a big issue mainly for them. It depends on the family, but it's not very common. Also, there's a lot of domestic violence in Arab households, and when you want to date an Arab woman, you can have problems with her brothers and cousins. Plus, the university is the main place I can think of where to meet and at least become friends. I'm not even talking romantically—forget about it."

Maor gratefully accepts a refill of his wine. After taking a sip, he continues his monologue:

"I used to know two Arab girls from my university, and later we worked at the same hotel. But they couldn't hang out with us after class or work, because their relatives would be watching. So, for us, it just doesn't work—with women even at the friendship level. It's like a different kind of culture. Don't get me

wrong—I have a few Arab friends, either from the university or from work. One of them actually invited me to his wedding in Jericho, but I couldn't go because for us it's too dangerous… But the chances that you meet someone are low. Think about it this way, Timea: for us, the usual places to meet people are bars or clubs. Yeah, but Muslims don't drink—and definitely not Muslim women, you know. So that's out of the question. Christians are a different story, but the majority of Arabs here are Muslims. When I used to go to bars when I was younger, you would see gay Arabs in some of the Israeli places. But once it gets less Israeli and more mixed, there's a bigger chance that someone will see them—and then they stop coming because it's dangerous to be seen. In general, it is not easy."

Maor needs one more sip to finish his speech:

"Also, the whole position of women is different in the two cultures. Israeli women won't go to a bar if there are a lot of Arab guys from East Jerusalem, because they're more likely to stare at them, you know—say things… It's a different culture. And if they don't come, then you know—people don't meet. It's like a domino effect. To be with an Arab woman can get her into trouble. It's not worth it. It can be a whole mess."

Ishai smoothly follows:

"I have Arab friends, and I share everything with them—we go to events together, and it's a non-issue for me. But for a lot of Jews, it is an issue, because for them it's—quote unquote—'facing the enemy.' So, I don't really see relationships happening or succeeding in more than a few percent of cases, because in most cases, it's unfortunately doomed to fail."

The "doom and gloom" of the conversation is momentarily paused by dessert. Adi brings out *malabi*,[278] a silky pudding topped with rose water and coconut, served in small glass bowls. For a few minutes, people are more focused on its texture than on "taboos" and "domino effects." I take this break as an opportunity to think more deeply about what was just said. What Maor and Ishai shared is less striking

[278] Alternatively spelled also as *muhallebi* or *mahalabiyeh*.

as a "realistic account of the state of affairs" and more revealing as a window into how "Arabs" are perceived, and how the interlocutors feel they themselves are perceived from the other side—as impossible Others. It is not only what they say about potential "Arab" partners that matters, but how they narrate the (im)possibility of meeting them, how they interpret cultural scripts, and where they locate responsibility for the distance.

Maor's and Ishai's near-unison reflections on why Jewish-Arab romantic relationships in Israel "do not happen" point far beyond personal preferences. The responsibility for the distance is located outwards: towards the "different culture" of these Others, including the different gender order and its implications; towards the faceless "society," both Jewish and Arab, which does not approve such unions as Tamar noted earlier, and of which they do not feel as a necessary part; and towards the separation in "space" that precludes meaningful encounters.

While people I spoke with valued the freedom of choice to an extent that nearly equated "being secular" with "having the choice," hence saw themselves as "liberal" and "open" in their choices (*"I see the person as himself or as herself"*), they nevertheless navigate the sedimented feel and knowledge of impossibility and acceptability that no one necessarily explicitly teaches but everyone somehow knows. I understand this sedimented knowledge as the movement, which is at the same time improvisational, but such an improvisation is based on years of practicing different ranges of motion and orientation in the space. One knows, based on the practice, that to suddenly jump a few centimetres further means to end up off the stage.

The "mutual taboo," as Ishai calls it, functions as a genealogical directive passed down through the imaginaries, discourses, and institutions with the knowledge of "boundaries" which delimit the "dancing" stage as a seemingly self-evident fact. Thus, Maor's and Ishai's remarks become an entry point into the next ambivalent movement of inherited legacies, into Schaum's (2020) "inherited worlds" and Povinelli's "intimate event" of a simultaneous pull between the discourse of liberal autonomy and the discourse of genealogical inheritance.

As I noted at the beginning, this movement is not a departure from the previous topics and themes as a distinct container of discrete variables, but their deepening and re-reading in the "thick life." When the first two movements revealed how intimate choices are made and with which potential lovers-dancers,

as improvisation and "contoured" movement, the next movement loops to them with a different set of questions: What is practiced as a given range of motion, and which steps are never danced? What makes certain steps feel more "natural," or even necessary?

Movement III: Inherited Legacies

The dessert Adi prepared for us works like magic: it sweetens the atmosphere, and now everyone is chatting about their favourite toppings, how it is prepared in their families, or if at all. The sweet, familial taste of comfort food brings back to the conversation the desires people have for their own lives: how to make them feel similarly sweet. Tamar, for whom the dancing partner must be Jewish—because only with such a person can the desired imagined future of raising kids as Jewish become possible—continues our conversation along the lines of the "harshness" of life in contrast to the "sweetness" of "tradition" and "continuity":

"There are not many couples who are Jewish and Muslim. Most of the population won't accept it. It's very complicated. My sister has a classmate who is an Arab Christian, and she has a Jewish boyfriend and they have been together for one year. No one knows about it, not even the families. They don't know if it can work. It's really difficult. It's sad. It's not something I would do."

Tamar swallows the last spoon of *malabi*, wipes the corners of her mouth, and continues:

"Even if I had an Arab boyfriend open to raising our kids as Jews, his family would have other beliefs. It will just confuse the child. Plus, I had one patient, and his mother was Jewish and his father was Muslim, and she had to convert. She had a really tough life; her whole family was against her… I don't pray but I'm trying to do the holidays. I want my children to do that also. I think the tradition is super important for the Jewish people because we don't have anything else. It is important because of the history of Jewish people and because of everything we went through to get here, to Israel."

While Sagi takes a breath to answer her, Tamar adds the final piece to her puzzle of desires for the "sweetness" of life:

"You were all criticising Rabbanut and the lack of civil marriage, but for me, civil marriage was never an option. I want to get married, and I want to do it through Rabbanut. It was obvious for me that I will do it even though my parents are divorced and my mom told me not to get married at the Rabbanut, because the divorces are bad there for women. But I like all the ceremonies before, like going to mikveh.[279] *And also all the ceremonies during the wedding with the rabbi. I really like it. Without it, it lacks tradition."*

Tamar does not "plan to be religious," as she previously shared, and she engages with "religious" practice selectively. She sees the "religionization" of Jerusalem as problematic and sad, as we know.[280] The choices she can make are the ones that define her version of "being secular." One such choice is to insist on a Jewish partner, on the "Jewish" upbringing of her children through the "tradition" of holidays, through embodied practices like the ritual bath, and through the "right" wedding ceremony with a rabbi. To make life as "sweet" as the *malabi* we just ate is, for her, to keep the "tradition" alive—because that is what makes a Jew a Jew—with a reference to the history of obstacles and sacrifices brought to the altar of "Israel," where one's "being Jewish," as "a feeling of being haunted,"[281] as Sagi once shared, could be momentarily paused. I understand Tamar's desires and imagined futures as being anchored in the comfort of knowing and accepting the inherited legacies and the genealogical attachments.

The "harsh life" is represented by the weight of trying to navigate one's life outside of these legacies. Tamar is not personally opposed to "transgressive" unions, but she is aware of the complications that come hand-in-hand with even trying them—and so that is not something she would do. After all, I think to myself, here is again the logic of ease: "If there is love, fuck everybody" does not

[279] Ritual, purifying bath.

[280] See the *Dialogical Windows: Jerusalem-Tel Aviv Axis* section in the *Topography of Locations* chapter.

[281] See the *Secularity as Reason and Common Sense* section in the *Tropology: Being a "Secular Jew"* subchapter.

always count as an option when the downside of such a gesture is "too complicated." Sagi has finally an opportunity to respond Tamar:

"So, for me, I don't mind dating a Muslim or Arab girl. But as you said, I don't think it would be wise to get together, to get married, to have children in this country. I think it is gonna be very difficult. Honestly, it is better to avoid it. But I recently met a beautiful, very nice Arab girl,and I wanted to date her, and she did not want to date me. But I would not mind getting into it. But she would because of the religion… Overall, it's a very sensitive topic here because you have this title on your forehead for your entire life. It's exhausting. And I don't want my kids to be exhausted."

Sagi's comment once again echoes what is becoming increasingly obvious: some potential lovers-dancers are not even invited to the "casting" because, "in this country," it is better not to share the stage. While Sagi repeatedly articulates his openness to being with a non-Jewish, even Arab, partner, he is aware of the price such a relationship exacts in the context he inhabits. When the future of children is involved, that openness quickly acquires clear contours: if the partner is a non-Jew, then that status is passed on to the children. Bearing in mind the additional complications this might cause—including feelings of non-belonging, Otherness, and the legal implications of such a status, all together creating the texture of a "harsh life"—it becomes "better to avoid it."

I remember how Sagi once told me—as did many others—that he would "never date a religious person," whether Jewish or not, that he "can't stand it." The turn in the conversation back to weddings, and now also to children, inspires me once again to frame my question through the lens of the "imagined future." I ask him how he envisions his wedding:

"Well, I won't do a religious wedding. But I would love to see my family happy, and they would prefer me to have a Jewish wedding. I don't even know what different weddings look like, I was only at Jewish weddings. So, my future wife does not have to be Jewish but for the wedding, I want some traditional stuff. I would still like to have the whole chuppa[282] *for example."*

[282] A wedding canopy at Jewish weddings under which the couple stands together with a rabbi.

I think for myself that here, Sagi navigates multiple simultaneous pulls: the one of an inherited script out of which he wants to narrate himself, to a certain extent, as an autonomous “secular Jew,” open to “marry out” and critical of the contextual conditions of his landscape; then, finding a “sweetness” in familial knowing what a “Jewish” wedding should consist of as “tradition,” and wanting to please his family; and third, the pull between openness to a non-Jewish partner while simultaneously closing this option when thinking about “exhausted” kids with “a title on the forehead.” The non-Jewish partner is then plausible as a possible lover until the very moment when she becomes a non-Jewish mother, when she becomes the impossible Other.

The future children both Tamar and Sagi mentioned, lead me to another question—one, I already asked Nitzan previously. If you had a son, would you circumcise him? And suddenly, everyone has something to say, but Sagi starts as the eyes are already on him. He laughs:

“Yeah, absolutely, it is disgusting! I find it too funny to keep it. It's about aesthetics. But I think it's also about some normalcy. Again, I don't want my kids to suffer from being different. So, if there is a child who is not circumcised it becomes a joke really fast. Or they will be embarrassed to take showers in the army. So, it's always difficult.”

Lea agrees:

“Absolutely, with my husband we agreed that we will do it. But not for religious reasons, but just so the baby won't be different from his friends. Because if 99% of Jewish people do it, then we don't want him to be different. But we won’t do any event and invite the whole family to a party. We will go to a doctor, do the procedure and that's it. Not do the whole thing in the synagogue. You can just choose to do it low profile.”

For Tamar too, *brit milah*, the circumcision is something she would definitely do:

"Of course, in the army it would be weird for them, they would feel different, someone would laugh at them. So, for me, even as a secular person, there is no other way. And I think it is healthier. Even my friend, who has no attachment to religion at all and is lesbian and pregnant, told me there is no question about doing that."

The "imagined child," in all the reflections, becomes a site of anxiety, a site of projection, and a site of positioning. Tamar's insistence on the meaning of "tradition" would make her unquestionable "yes" to circumcision understandable, and yet, tradition is not what she evokes. What she and others verbalize is the fear of social passing as a marked person: marked by being different, that is, unmarked as a Jew. Tamar also rationalizes her stance as "being healthier," and even expresses a hint of ambivalence when she, "as a secular person," insists on the practice. Sagi negotiates with the inherited script too: for him, as for Lea, it is not about "religion," but about "aesthetics" and imagined laughter in the shared showers which polices the "normalcy" he speaks about. Lea bargains with the imperative of normalcy as well: for her, the religious prescription and ceremony are worthless—what counts is not being different from the crowd.

That makes the body of the "imagined" son a vessel through which normative expectations are transmitted and enforced. There is an underlying logic once again: the fear of difference and consequential exclusion is behind the notions of conformity framed as care for the child. The ritual itself remains almost the same, but the meaning ascribed to it is recalibrated.[283] The future child's body becomes a metaphoric and symbolic site where imagined futures and inherited conditions converge. People might not have chosen these legacies—these inherited conditions but they have to live through them. In doing so, they often reproduce them, even as they simultaneously articulate their openness, freedom, and unburdened choice.

Even those who vocally claim to choose "according to the character" of a partner often find that their "freedom" is already circumscribed by what they have inherited. Sometimes, we come to join the improvisation class, only to find out that the rest of the dancing company has already rehearsed a piece. I understand

[283] As previously noted in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter, Liebman and Yadgar (2009: 31) suggest, "the differences between secular and religious ritual might in many cases be the interpretation given to the ritual rather than the ritual itself."

these inherited legacies as conditions of the aforementioned sedimented knowledge, not as static constraints, but as contextual readings of what *should* and *can* be done: the wish to raise children as Jewish through "tradition" of continuity, given the legacy of "being haunted," while choosing which "tradition" is passed as such, simultaneously refraining from calling it "religion"; the normative feeling of a necessity of circumcision while bargaining with a meaning and procedure of such an act; the choice of partner which is considered through the lens of inherited conditions that one did not choose, but acts accordingly anyway.

These contradictory pulls and their "solutions" are indicative of the intimate infrastructure at work, when the movement through its tethers—where the ambient normativity of inheritance might be seen as precisely one of these tethers—takes the form of Mahmood's (2005: 15) agentival capacity of inhabitation. Some practices are retained but emptied of their prior meaning; others are reframed to fit a new story. Hence, if the inherited legacies are not only accepted but reinhabited with ambivalence, how, then, are the subjects "tweaking" the choreography just enough to feel like it is their own? What kind of movement is it when circumcision is reframed not as a "religious" commandment but as an aesthetic norm? Such a movement is neither a full rejection nor a full embrace: I read them as "bargains" with real and imagined audiences, which gives the inhabitation its creative side. The next movement section explores how subjects creatively inhabit the norms they have inherited, through which means these negotiations become possible, and who is watching.

Movement IV: Bargaining With the Audience

I stare at the empty bowls in front of us with the last few traces of *malabi* at the bottom. Today, I did not have a sweet tooth, but I finished mine because I did not want to offend Adi or make her sad. Maybe, she would not mind if I skipped the dessert, but I had this feeling. I wonder if Adi always prepares *malabi* with rose water or, when her mother comes for a visit, she chooses a different topping to please her. Maybe, her family prepares it differently and cannot understand why anyone would choose otherwise. For now, Adi is both my imagined and real audience. I respond to her presence, but also to the version of her I construct internally: the one who might be hurt, the one who might judge. I act to make her happy by finishing a dessert I did not crave in the first place.

This moment reminds me of how the sociologist Erving Goffman imagined social interaction through his dramaturgical approach (1959 [1956]). Goffman worked with the metaphor of theatre, where the individual curates the impression for the audience of their conducted performance in a given context. I also recall the work of another sociologist, Arlie Russell Hochschild, who coined the term "emotional labour" (1983), to capture the process through which individuals manage and regulate their emotions according to implicit "feeling rules" that shape how we present ourselves and how we keep others comfortable.[284] I do not want to impose these theories on our "table" moment, but to consider them as sensitizing concepts, which partially illuminate what is already unfolding around the table in multiple versions: the movement we follow so far is rarely without an audience, and adjustments are made continually in response to that audience, whether real or imagined.

My question about the circumcision of a potential son was almost an entertaining one for the people around the table. That is where the "creative inhabitation" of norms, which needs to be assessed contextually based on the conditions the subjects live in, become visible as a "responsive" movement. Sagi, who "does not have any religious believes" since the army, "never really thought about being Jewish," and "considers himself being Jewish, because he was circumcised" and because "it is part of his tradition,"[285] understands the question of circumcision as "aesthetics" and "normalcy," not as a religious necessity or commandment derived from *Torah*.[286] The same goes for Lea and Tamar, even though one wants to go "low profile" without a religious ceremony, and the latter with a rabbi and *mohel*.[287] Nevertheless, for both it is again about "normalcy," and for Tamar also about "health." One might ask what circumcision has to do with the politics of intimacy and desire?

At first glance, the ritual or procedure does not seem central to "politics." But when the imagined future of the potential child is invoked in the discussions of partnerships, marriage, and family planning, it becomes a charged symbol. It

---

[284] Hochschild primarily focused on the workers in service-oriented roles.
[285] See the *Secularity as Reason and Common Sense* section in the *Tropology: Being a "Secular Jew"* subchapter.
[286] In the trope of *Secularity as Reason and Common Sense*, Sagi states that "you can't do half of Torah." Nevertheless, the reframing of the practice as aesthetic normalcy allows him to still perform the commandment without seeing or feeling any potential contradiction with his statement.
[287] A Jewish person trained in carrying out the circumcision.

actually stands for deeper questions: What kind of life do we want for our children? Who do we want to raise them with? Hence, it is instructive in a way that shows how the "norm" is reframed and "redone" in order to remain within the symbolic order, and to satisfy the audience, but at the same time to assert one's own autonomy about such a decision. To "bargain" here means to negotiate a conclusion without necessarily performing full resistance or submission, but to occupy one's position with a "tweak" of freedom. Reframing through resignification, then, is one of the means through which this responsive movement becomes possible to sustain the coherence.

Furthermore, as already noted, it is telling about with which possible lovers-dancers such a responsive movement might be rehearsed and performed. In one interview, a non-Jewish partner of a secular Israeli Jew shared that they chose not to circumcise their son, despite the immense pressure from the Jewish side of the family. Here, the responsive movement to "please" the audience of the family was not chosen, but not everybody is ready for such a burden. To satisfy the gaze of the state, however, the father still declared the child as Jewish in the hospital paperwork, even though this was not true by religious law. He attempted to avoid future complications with the child's legal status. This too, I suggest, might be read as an adjustment, a response, and a bargain.

Like Sagi, Maor grew up without thinking much about being "Jewish." For him—as for many others I interviewed— "Judaism" is primarily about "tradition" and "culture," not "religion." He feels disconnected from what "religion has become" in Israel and only began to feel marked as "a Jew" when he traveled abroad, especially in Europe. He felt that people need to define him, based on where he is from. Once people get to know he is from Israel, they presumed he is Jewish. Then, they started to ask him mainly about politics. To get rid of the unwanted attention of the unwanted audience, Maor started to use his second passport claiming he is from that second country. He feels that in Israel, people ask him mainly whether he is religious or not to be able to know how to approach him: Does he watch TV? Does he use the internet? Can he be invited for some event during *Shabbat* or not? Abroad, he felt, people just wanted to know whether he is Jewish—as a totalizing identity ascription. Hence, he opted for a strategy of self-concealment.

Maor says he does what he thinks is best and he does not look for the approval of the audience. The question of potential circumcision feels very far from him, yet he imagines which audience would not be fine with their eventual decision not to do the procedure when he reacts to Tamar:

"Well, I think it depends on which crowd you are around. And it also depends on where you go. I wouldn't live in or go to certain parts of Jerusalem for example. Why would I? There's the whole social thing, different groups, and tensions. I am not even talking about the Arabs, I mean between Jews. And the same thing goes with the fact we didn't get married with a rabbi. I didn't tell some people. They didn't ask. For some people it would be, you know—Oh my God! I did not tell them because it's a complicated world and it would be strange. Because for them, it's their whole existence. And for us, it's just like, —whatever."

I sense that Maor, to be able to stay within his improvisation and claim of freedom, adopted the same strategy he uses abroad to avoid unwanted political conversations. It is the strategy of self-concealment and refraining towards and from multiple audiences: to escape the need to be apologetic for his intimate decisions he cuts ties, he does not tell, and he deliberately tries to avoid certain more "religious" parts of the city. He withholds, not out of shame, but as a way to control the frame of interaction and also, to ease the discomfort his revelation could cause to individuals living a different life.

With Maor's words about a complicated world, the newcomer Ezra enters the flat and it is just the right timing for shots of *Arak*: as people say, it is for a good digestion. *L'chaim*—cheers! Ezra, in contrast to others present here, lives in a gay marriage. His husband is a Palestinian Arab with Israeli citizenship, having Muslim father and Christian mother. Actually, it was me who invited Ezra to join us today—others are unaware of his situation and background. Ezra is not a shy guy, and he elegantly blends to the group, and even starts to speak immediately:

"I only caught the last sentences of what you just said. But I guess you talked about the relationships here and how it is complicated? Tell me about it… Many times, the fact that I'm Jewish and my husband is not raises questions. It's

an issue. And the fact that it's not only that he's not Jewish, he's Arab as well. And that, you know, creates issues for itself."

Everyone has an understanding face now, because that is exactly what we spoke about earlier. Someone notes that this will need more shots. Ezra smiles and continues:

"It would be different if I would date a Polish or German or in general, European Christian, than dating an Arab Palestinian. I think in the eyes of Israelis, it's even worse than dating a European Christian. During the recent war, it was really difficult for both of us. A lot of people were inquisitive about our relationship and how we are living with the contradiction of what's going on politically in Israel and having a relationship."

Even those reluctant at first to have more *Arak* now happily accept. This one is heavy: so far, we were just discussing the potential difficulties of a "transgressive" relationship and suddenly, there is actually someone living through it:

"I didn't think of it as a conflict until they told me it was. Nor did he. I think neither of us thought it was… There are some mixed couples, but it is rather rare. So we married abroad, because we couldn't do it here, even if we wanted to. That's the good part of having a Supreme Court that is disconnected from religion. So, they can determine things that the government doesn't agree with and say: what you decided is not democratic."

For some, it might seem that I am obsessed with the kids, but as in previous cases, I find it a useful heuristic tool to better understand how people make sense of their lives. Hence, I ask whether they want children and if yes, if there is any particular way they want to raise them:

"We both know that we want the kids. But part of that conversation is also about whether here or abroad. And regarding your question: we don't value religion or nationality that much. So, in both of our eyes, our kids will be Arab,

Jewish, Palestinian, Israeli, Catholic, American, Iraqi, Italian, whatever. All the backgrounds we come from."

I wonder, how their families reacted to their relationship, given the fact that they "live with the contradiction," as they were informed by the others externally:

> *"Everybody's amazing, except for my dad. He was civil and polite until the last war. And then, something flipped. It's sad. He's the guy that watches the news a lot and the media is very anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab. For him, it's hard to disconnect between the image and a real person… My husband's parents don't speak with him because he's gay. So, it's not even because of me being involved. He's outcasted, which happens a lot in the Arab community, so it's not anything weird."*

Ezra is the only one this evening[288] who currently lives in a serious long-term relationship of this kind, so everyone listens very carefully. What others—like Nitzan, with her "if there is love, fuck everybody"—consider and contemplate about mostly hypothetically, Ezra lives. After all, he is not negotiating the possibility of a "transgressive relationship," but actually living one on multiple levels: with a husband, who is usually framed and understood as "impossible Other" rather than a "possible lover," and as a gay person, who cannot marry in Israel. Their marriage is, though, registered as valid, thanks to the civil Israeli Supreme Court disconnected from "religion," and which, in Ezra's understanding, preserves the democratic character of the country.

It may seem that Ezra's story stands out too much from the rhythm of the responsive movement. Where others negotiate and bargain both with the audiences and with the inherited legacies to find liveable adjustments, Ezra and his partner navigate through something closer to rupture. Where others pre-emptively manage potential judgment and social sanctioning, Ezra and his husband are already living through its aftermath. The judgments of their respective audiences have already landed: Ezra's father does not want to engage with his husband; the husband's family turned their backs to him because he is

[288] That is, the only person among the interlocutors who currently lived in a long-term relationship and got married to an "Arab." Among other interlocutors, few had shorter relationships previously, or would potentially consider such a person for a "one night stand," but not for a serious relationship.

gay; others "informed" them that their relationship is a contradiction and an issue; and they could not get married through a legally binding ceremony inside Israel. The room for negotiation has narrowed, but the question of response remains. Only now it is not a question of anticipation, concealment, or resignification, but about living with the consequences.

For Ezra, having a multinational background and having an "impossible Other" as a "real lover," means a necessity to "write" one's self out of the mutually exclusive categories. Once again, the potential child of the couple (regardless of the means they use for "getting" there) serves as a place of entanglement: their imagined child will be *"Arab, Jewish, Palestinian, Israeli, Catholic, American, Iraqi, Italian."* It is through this child, a condensation of seemingly irreconcilable continuities, that the imagined future takes the shape of radical inclusion, so troubling for the coherence of the nation-state where multiple social anxieties collapse into one relationship.[289]

The negotiating responsive movements, so far, vary in form and verbalized motivation. We have seen Maor's strategy of self-concealment, Sagi's, Lea's and Tamar's reframing and resignification of circumcision, and the bureaucratic misstep as a "strategic compliance" of reporting one's child as Jewish for a higher chance to have a "liveable" life.

Furthermore, even Sagi's earlier wish to have a "Jewish wedding," but not the "religious" one, might be read as a symbolic accommodation of affective ties with family, "tradition," and continuity. This brief summarization, though, raises a question: if the earlier stories illustrated responsive movements within or around norms, Ezra's points to moments when the very possibility of responsiveness through inhabitation appears to be exhausted.

The ethnographic material here compels me to revisit and expand the theoretical categories with which I arrived to the "field," in order to account not only for creative inhabitation but also for its breakdown. What Ezra further shares this evening helps:

"I didn't choose to be born in Israel or to be a man. I'm Israeli but I'm not Israel. There are many things you don't choose. We inherit many more things that

[289] See the discussion in the opening part of the whole chapter *Infrastructure of Intimacy: Thick Life, Thin Lines.*

are not just hair and a skin tone. We inherit traumas as well. It guides a lot of our leaders, and it sucks. We have inherited the fear of being kicked out as well as the necessity to protect ourselves… Also Arabs, it's a multi-generational fear of being kicked out from their territories. There are many legitimate reasons to fear living as an Arab in Israel… But you know, you make it work. That's how it works: you don't hate each other. And I always think that with our children ... you won't be able to hate them, not the Arabs and not the Israelis would be able to hate our children because they belong to both of them."

Ezra does not seem blind or disinterested: he is very much aware of the inherited legacies he and his husband are living with, those mutual and interconnected fears of being "kicked out" and persecuted. Such inheritances are, in his case, not refused or rendered illegitimate, but explicitly acknowledged and even cherished as the very reason to come together in order to break through binary genealogies and to be used as a resource for new "world-making." Yet, Ezra does not fantasize that the figure of the child resolves the living contradiction imposed on the couple, but that it disarms the inherited fears and hostility because "they belong to both of them."

In this sense, it would be too soon to read the imagined child as redemptive or healing (since the audiences might have a different idea), but their very existence complicates which side of the norm should be inhabited. I, then, do not understand their movement as resistance, subversion, or inhabitation, but as an endurance in synthesis: what appears as a rupture, as I noted above, is rather synthetic "world-making."

Instead of abandoning the genealogies, Ezra actually takes them seriously enough to transform their directions. In terms of movement, then, I understand Ezra and his husband as moving outside the stage: not because they do not want to "dance," but because the conditions of the casting call do not make much sense to them. In doing so, their choreography is made up of familiar steps, but in a new sequence that is still not fully understandable to the rest of the ensemble, nor to the audiences.

As Ezra's story exemplifies, the outcomes of inherent pulls between autonomy and normativity, between freedom and constraint, can take new directions in a generative manner. The subjects do not necessarily reject the

symbolic order into which they are interpellated. Instead, by acknowledging its inherited conditions, they recreate it in a synthetic way that reveals the limits of how fully norms can occupy the subject. This, I suggest, is also one of the agentive and creative forms of responsiveness, alongside resistance, subversion, resignification, and inhabitation. One, where the subjects do not "dance" within the already delimited stage, and thus exposes the moments of vulnerability of power, where unintended consequences emerge, open to "not-yet-known."[290] One such unintended consequence might be the figure of the imagined child, who does not stop being "Jewish," "Israeli," "Palestinian," "Arab," "Muslim," and "Christian" as in mutually exclusive categories, but where all these categories are tenderly held together as meaningful.

Such a creative, tender synthesis in a new "world-making" contains within itself the envisioning of an alternative intimate landscape. This leads me to the final movement, and to a question that has already surfaced on multiple occasions when interlocutors articulated the possibilities of a "liveable" life and of its contextual anchoring envisioned elsewhere and/or otherwise.

The final movement thus explores what it means to imagine intimacy and its conditions *elsewhere* or *otherwise*? Which lives feel out of reach? Here, *elsewhere* and *otherwise* serve as tools to understand how people "measure," relate to, or speculate about liveability beyond current confines. Across the previous movements, I traced how intimacy and desires are lived as movements through inherited scripts, negotiated norms, and structural constraints. The following movement is oriented further beyond, towards what is imagined, feared, or hoped for.

Movement V: Imagined Elsewheres, Otherwise

After Ezra said, "*with our children ... you won't be able to hate them, not the Arabs and not the Israelis would be able to hate our children because they belong to both of them,"* most of the hands around the table automatically raise to toast the vision, as if following an invisible command. Nir slips into a brief, dreamy mood and responds:

[290] See the *Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories* chapter in the *Theoretical Terrain* part.

“Well, maybe in 20, 30 years, this country will be for everyone. Not just for Jews.”

Ezra smiles at Nir, but his eyes suddenly dim:

“Unfortunately, I’m very concerned. If I have to guess what will happen, I don’t see anything good. Usually, I’m very optimistic in general in my life, but with politics here, I'm very pessimistic. I think it’s just going to get worse and worse to a degree where a lot of people are going to suffer. Politically, Israel is really in a bad situation and we’re gonna feel it. It’s going to become more religious and limiting for the people that don’t agree with the system. There is less and less pluralism… and the system which doesn’t enable going against it or criticizing it—it’s a problem. Everything is more and more polarized. I just don’t see how it suddenly gets connected and everybody lives happily ever after. But not that in the US or anywhere it’s getting any better… The evil horses are taking over slowly everywhere. You can have any passport on the planet, but you know all the ends are bad.”[291]

Ezra’s and Nir’s exchange, positioned somewhere between a toast and a lament, opens into a speculative horizon. Nir’s “maybe” gestures towards a future where the state is no longer structured as what Smooha terms “ethnic democracy,” or Yiftachel calls an “ethnocracy”[292] and where Ezra’s synthetic “world-making” might find its stage and conditions to flourish. Yet it is Ezra who sees that future as increasingly unlikely. The future is no longer only a space for synthetic “becoming” but also one of a worry and perhaps, even impossibility. Here, the nature of this constructed exchange signals something important: it is not always just hope that feeds the imagination and wishful thinking, but also the exhaustion with the current situation and fear of the future. It seems that in this room, hope and despair coexist and make the “here” and “now” visible in its limitations.

These “maybes” were present in many conducted interviews, as for example in Tamar’s remark: “*Maybe if I lived in a different country [...], no one would care if I went out with a Christian or a Muslim. It’s Israeli society that doesn’t approve of it. That’s the hard part.”* As we know, for her personally—for

[291] The interview was conducted in November 2022.
[292] See the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter.

her "contoured" movement—it is very important to have a Jewish partner, since only with such a person can she further pass the "tradition" she sees herself be a part of. However, she wishes for others the possibility to choose differently without a pressure of ambient normativity imposed by the faceless society. That, for Tamar, is the meaning of being "secular."

The "different country" she imagines is not necessarily a concrete destination or place. Rather, I understand it as a speculative tool: as a way of assessing the present by imagining what intimacy might look like under different conditions and organized otherwise. Hence, it diagnostically reveals the friction between what is and what could (or cannot) be. The future projections, the speculations of *the maybes* and *the ifs*, serve here as a culmination of the previous movements not because they represent a final step or a closing bow after the performance, but precisely because the movement is not occurring in reality. In that way, the speculations and projections become among the most revealing expressions of the density of "thick life," where desire, constraint, and possibility are held in an unresolved tension.

As all these thoughts swirl in my head, another newcomer, Ori, who arrived after Ezra, joins the conversation:

"You are right Ezra. My feelings are complicated at the moment because some days I feel like everything is super crazy and super good and everything is going in a very good direction and some days I'm just depressed. I feel like we are doomed… Israel is a very intense place, a lot of tensions are happening underground all the time because it is so small, so full of different people. They came from all parts of the world with so many perspectives and so many ways of life. And then, the people who were here before us were very different, they had very different opinions about everything… We're very good at sweeping things under the table. But now I think that we can really see the rifts in society which is a very good opportunity to solve things and understand how we could live here together in the long run. I think now the main rift that we're seeing today is between secular Jews and religious, messianic Jews. But the general rift is the one between us and the Palestinians."

I wonder what would be the "worst case scenario" for the current situation:

"The worst scenario, in my opinion, is that nothing changes. We continue occupying the Palestinians, continuing the violent circle, the circle of violence between us and them, and most of the people who are like me, who serve in the army, pay taxes, and who see themselves as Israelis, Jews and citizens of the world, would probably move out. And if we leave because we see no future here, I think everything will deteriorate really fast…"

And the "best-case" scenario?

"That is hard… I think the best-case scenario is that we move past this conflict. We manage to construct a constitution that strengthens democratic principles and the democratic institutions—like the government, the Knesset, and the Supreme Court—while also maintaining certain Jewish principles and values. At the same time, the separation of the religious and state is very important. In my opinion, combining these two conditions could secure Israel's future in the long run, while also preserving the possibility for people to live together with mutual respect and an understanding that there is no single majority in Israel. We're all different minorities living together."

Is there any other solution vision, I ask:

"Another solution could be separation into different states—cantons maybe—with one federal government, and then smaller governments that could ensure each minority can live according to its own values, so we could fulfil our way of life. It's sad, because it feels like the falling apart of the big idea we had for so many generations. But on the other hand, maybe it's for the best—like a divorce. Sometimes divorces are better than just staying together, once you understand it."

And in the best-case scenario, what do you mean by "maintaining certain Jewish principles and values," as you said, Ori? What such a vision encompasses? How is it different from the separation between the "religious" and the state?

"I'm struggling with my Jewishness. When I was young, I was very detached from that. Also because of my family: I was very much a cultural Jew, but the foundation wasn't very strong. And now, I'm connecting to the roots that I have. It doesn't matter if I want them or not, I have them. And I'm starting to get to know them better… If you look in the Torah, you can find all the values that you want… I think that a lot of the things that are written and said over and over again—the Jewish values that I value, that I like—are the ones that come from the understanding that the Jews, for most of history, were a minority. And when we were in Egypt, we were slaves, and then we managed to get out. Every Pesach, we say: remember that once we were slaves. We remember that once we didn't have a home. And that's very important, you know? Because as people who were a minority for so long—who were massacred and enslaved and very poor—we should know best how to treat minorities within us. It should be about social justice. It's really powerful stuff you read in the Torah. There were no Jewish tycoons in the Torah—and when we had them, we fell apart. So, equality is very important. Freedom, equality, and treating others how you want to be treated. It's very powerful. We have a beautiful history and beautiful values, and I see myself as being Jewish as being a small part of a very, very long chain…"

As I did many times before, I ask also Ori, if he actually considered to live abroad:

"Well, we just had this conversation yesterday with another student from my college. He asked me, if I am preparing myself for a situation when this place doesn't feel like home anymore. Because of the situation with the current government and society in general. I think every country changes in the course of decades and sometimes the country leaves you before you leave the country in a sense. And I told him that there is a good chance that I won't want to raise my children here. And maybe that day will come and I will decide that I don't want to live here anymore. But getting used to the fact that I won't have a place to go back to, that's harsh. My whole family is here, my friends, my life. I really love this place. Like, I'm really connected to nature, to the people, to the places. I dream in Hebrew."

Ishai laughs when Ori mentions dreaming, because through dreams he realized he actually wants to go back to Israel after few years he spent in the U.S.:

"It's funny Ori, because in the U.S., hummus started to appear in my dreams. I'm not kidding. And I realized I'm homesick. I was just dreaming about the local food, and that was a trigger that made me understand that the United States is not my actual home. So, I decided to come back and live with the consequences. And that is that you go back to living with the same people that made me decide to move away in the beginning and try to deal with them in a more mature way. Because the immature way is to run away. It's also accepting the fact that it is what it is and you're not going to be able to change that."

Lior, who is rather an introvert and has not spoken almost since the beginning of the dinner, seems to be suddenly interested with the conversational turn which just happened, and abruptly joins in:

"To be honest, I am afraid that we will have a dictatorship here. And in that case, I just have to leave immediately to a more liberal place, a more liberal country, where I can live my life in my own lifestyle. I think the divisions in the society were always here, but some governments support the divisions and others try to find some common ground. And currently, the situation is not good. We have a variety of people here. We have Muslims, we have Christians, we have religious Jews and the seculars, and I think it's not represented in the government… I try not to put people into boxes, I have a very good friend from the university who is a Muslim Arab, I have religious friends and secular friends from the army too… So, when we were talking about relationships before, I think that the most liberal woman will be the best for me —someone that is open to me and I will be open to her and she will be open also to other people. Of course, I don't mean sexually."

I think for myself that Lior actually shares a lot of similarities with Sagi: they both come from fully *Mizrahi* families from both sides, they both "stopped being religious" during the military service where they were faced with the diversity of the people and literature, and as I know, they both (with multiple others)—when looking back—would rather not join the army, especially not the combat units. Before I can finish this internal comparison, Lea is also drawn back to the flow of

the conversation, especially now when it circled back to the question of relationships. With an apologetic face intended for Ezra, yet with the firm tone, she remarks:

> *"Look, I don't want to sound racist... I know that most of you are very fond of that idea of not putting people into boxes. But for example, if I saw a profile of a Muslim guy on the dating app, I would not start the conversation because everything is different: their background, beliefs, families. It has lower chances to succeed. It is just hard to date a Muslim guy."*

Lea pauses for a moment, inhales and adds:

> *"Maybe if we met under different circumstances..."*

What just happened around the table? Are we still talking about intimacy and desire, and their "politics"? And maybe more importantly, I ask even myself, why should any of this be of our interest? Why circle back, again, to the question of what "secular" might mean to those who narrate and gesture themselves as such? Why revisit who counts as the "Other" for the people gathered here, when we have already heard their versions before? Why listen to the ways people speak of the *worst*- and *best*-case scenarios for the country, when these speculations do not appear to speak directly to intimacy? Why attend to individual reckonings with "Jewishness," or with Judaism as a value, not just an identity and "religion"? Why give space to fears, frustrations, or even stories of army years? And finally, why to pause, again, over Lea's saying: *"maybe if we met under different circumstances..."*?

And so, in what follows, I offer my interpretive unpacking of these questions as a way to trace how these seemingly peripheral concerns in fact return us, again and again, to the heart of the inquiry: the conditions of intimacy, the politics of desire, and the limits of liveable life.

With the exception of Lea's closing remark and Lior's articulation of a desire for the "most liberal woman," the opinions voiced around the table may not seem immediately connected to the politics of intimacy. The conversation revolves around personal assessments of the political moment in Israel (August

2022–May 2023)[293]: about the perceived "evil horses" preventing plurality, heightened social polarization, about concerns, about the rise of the "religious," about the social rifts between the "seculars" and the "religious," and the general rift between "Us" and "Palestinians."

These "gloomy" and scary conditions are at the same time discussed as an opportunity to consider an alternative future: one, where Israel becomes a country for "everyone," where the differences are acknowledged and not suppressed, and the conflictual nature of existence is overcome through the realization of "*we're all different minorities living here together.*" The other version is to "divorce" according to the motto "each to their own," framed as a sad, but maybe inevitable end of a big "dream." In this sense, I read the present inner distancing from the current version of Israel, with perceived rising illiberal tendencies and polarization, as a heartbreak rather than refusal all together: as a heartbreak over the felt betrayal when "*the country leaves you before you leave the country.*"

If the darkest scenario happens, if the violent circle of hostility will not be cut apart, then, the "imagined future" must happen somewhere else: in a more liberal country. But one would have to leave behind everything dear to the heart: all the emotional attachments towards what one's sense of "home" consists of. Still, there is a chance to reverse the current situation and to also deal with the inheritance of conflict: that is where the "Jewish" values found in *Torah* are evoked by Ori.

When I asked Ori what he meant by those "Jewish values and principles" he wishes to see as foundational for the state—alongside democratic institutions disentangled from "the religious"—he responded by recalling the inherited attachment, the roots, the "struggle with Jewishness." Those roots one does not choose, but that *"doesn't matter if I want or not—I have it.*" Then, he turned towards *Torah* which provides the framework of values around which he wants to build the state: freedom, equality, social justice, and *"treating others how you want to be treated,"* based on the diasporic knowledge, experience, and memory of being minority, being slaves, and being homeless. Here, Ori does not relate to "Jewishness" or "Judaism" as a "religion" and/or "identity," which can be claimed, performed, and thus also disavowed, but as a value, and inherited moral and ethical horizon, one cannot fully refuse or escape.

[293] For the context, see the *Time Frame and Ruptures* section in the *Field and Subjects* (*Methodological Foundations*).

Reading it through the intertextuality of the interviews, it becomes clear: one has only a narrow field of escape from the category of a "Jew." Abroad, someone will remind you of it, as Maor previously noted.[294] In Israel, being a Jew is not a preference: it's a legal status and category, and also, an administrative fact.[295] Furthermore, to fully renounce that category would mean leaving behind the painful legacies of one's ancestors, the traumas inherited across generations, and the "beauty" of which one is a "small part in a long chain."

Even those who attempt to narrate themselves out of it, who speak of their "Jewishness" as accidental, or irrelevant, find themselves dialogically returned to it anyway. In moments of hesitation (around circumcision), in preferences that seem to negate it (like Joni's desire for a non-Jewish, atheist partner), or in an affection for "tradition," the Althusser's interpellation is still heard.[296] And again, one turns towards it: *Yes, that's me.*

Ori's dialogue with "Judaism," "Jewishness," and *Torah* as scriptural epicentre of "being Jewish" does not appear as a singularity: I think about Nir's affection towards Hebrew, *Torah* and its symbolic language,[297] and Daniel's vision of "secular Judaism" as a school of thought, philosophy, and ongoing conversation.[298] Also, I think about Liri, who was not invited for today's dinner but who once told me:

"If you read the Jewish texts, you understand it's written in the language of gratitude. It's been proven that when you're grateful towards your life, towards your surroundings, towards whatever you've been given, your quality of life improves. If you look at the prayers, that's exactly that: be grateful. Be grateful for God. Being grateful for whatever God has given us. It's just a way to keep people mentally healthy, in the same way that washing your hands keeps you healthy. This is what religion is built around. And when I understood this, it made me realize that I think of faith as something more inclusive… If people weren't so

[294] See *Movement IV: Bargaining With the Audience.*
[295] See the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter.
[296] See the *Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories* in the *Theoretical Terrain* part.
[297] See the *Secularity as Personal Autonomy* section in the *Tropology: Being a "Secular Jew"* subchapter.
[298] See the *Secularity as Judaism* section in the *Tropology: Being a "Secular Jew"* subchapter.

segregated as they are, they would understand that faith is the same as love. It's not two different things. It contains everything in this very special way."[299]

When Ori invokes the *Torah* as a source of social justice, equality, and mutual care, he is not only outlining a political vision for the state but he co-construct and participates in the infrastructure of intimacy: where and how to feel at home, and with whom and under which conditions is inextricable from such a political vision. This, too, is the politics of intimacy. Because for Ori, as for others around the table, the shape of the collective future—what kind of state will exist, what values it will enshrine, who will feel at home—bears directly on whom one can love, how one can form a family, whether one can imagine raising children in this place. Thus, Lea's remark about a Muslim partner as being an impossible Other for her, loosens its tightness when imagined "under different circumstances," in a different political vision and reality, which might turn towards "properly Jewish" values.

This should be of our interest, because "intimacy" may be seen both as a site of world-making and as a place where political structures live inside everyday life and become visible. Being a "secular Jew" then is not a mere linguistic "decoration" but it is also telling about which visions for collective future are wished for. To understand what "secular" means to people who identify as such is to grasp what kinds of partnerships they perceive as possible or impossible. To revisit the figure of the "Other" is to ask where desire is permitted to travel, and what needs to be changed in order to recast the "Other" from such a category.

To listen to fears about the country's trajectory is to tune into the fragility of future-oriented imagination, and hence the conditions under which people envision a liveable life. To attend to retrospectives on military service (although this issue was not explicitly mentioned in the excerpts I have selected) is to hear many more things: just as when people talked about the cities in which they live and, through their imaginaries, talked about themselves and the "Others," so too do retrospectives on military service speak, for example, of desires for a new state structure and order, and perhaps of a gradual abandonment of the glorification of the military as a building block of society associated with prestige.

[299] I use Liri's narration here as an example of what was said previously: "secularity," in the case of the subjects of this dissertation, does not necessarily imply a lack of affective or appreciative relationship to "tradition" or to what is usually understood as "religion."

Precisely this type of listening reveals the potential of intimacy to be diagnostic of political possibility. And thus, to be attuned to *the ifs* and *the maybes* is to hear not only the currents of the present, but also a future not yet happening, whose contours are already, however shakily, beginning to take shape—one way, or another. The speculative movement present here is not only that of the people around the table—the subjects—but includes my own speculations as well. In this sense, it points to the "yet-not-known,"[300] opening the horizon for possible future research that would consider which future was, after all, danced.

The energetic conversation we just had begins to fade. Someone puts on a vinyl of Daklon's music.[301] As *Arak* warms our bodies and Nir drums his fingers to the rhythm, people start to sing with and dance. They remember Daklon's songs from childhood. I do not know the words, but I try to follow the melody. I start to dance too.

Conclusion: No Clear Endings

In this chapter, I worked with the concept of "intimate infrastructure," to be able to trace and interpret the negotiations, decisions, hesitations, acts, and choices of the subjects of the dissertation in the terrain of their intimate, "private" lives. I borrowed the term "infrastructure" from Lauren Berlant, for whom the infrastructure is not "is not identical to system or structure," since "infrastructure is defined by the movement or patterning of social form. It is the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure" (Berlant, 2016: 393).

Berlant's poetic language allows me to approach the realm of "intimacy and desire" in a way that remains (as far as I am able) both loyal to the intellectual tradition that has shaped my academic identity, and responsive to the concerns I laid out at the beginning of this chapter: how to reflect the "thick life" (Povinelli 2006) in a form of ethnographic writing that can "traverse comfortably between the personal and political" (Mody, 2022: 276).

Such a "living mediation of what organizes life" contains within itself the presupposition of instability, ambiguity, incoherence, and multivocality as qualities that resist locking the world into binary, closed, and fixed categories. With a dose of a necessary simplification, this sensibility might be seen as

[300] See the *Post-theories: Discourse and Power* in the *Theoretical Terrain* part.

[301] Popular Israeli singer.

characteristic of the heterogeneous field of post-theories discussed in the *Theoretical Terrain.* At the same time, the term "infrastructure" makes it possible to conceive of "intimacy and desire" as both personal, "freely" chosen, autonomous, and affective, and as also political, public, and materially, legally, and discursively conditioned. Neither side of the coin necessarily takes precedence, and there is no need to choose between either/or.

Infrastructure, as I understand it, unlike a system or structure, does not rigidly determine which of its constituent tethers can be navigated, or how. It is woven and continually reshaped by the movement of subjects through it. The resulting "embroidery" of infrastructure is therefore also the product of the subjects' own lives. This reflects the agentive capacity of subjects to creatively inhabit and reshape the norms and conditions through which they have been constituted.[302] It also reflects their capacity to bring forth something new, through unintended consequences in which new conditions of life emerge.

Berlant's note that "infrastructure is defined by the movement" inspired me to organize the ethnographic material through a set of five conceptual and metaphorical movements, namely: *Claim of Freedom, Possible Lovers and Impossible Others, Inherited Legacies, Bargaining With the Audience,* and *Imagined Elsewheres, Otherwise.* Once again, I deployed the device of a constructed ethnographic scene. This time, it was an ongoing conversation around the table of Friday dinner, where I brought interlocutors' voices to the proximity and juxtapositions. Such a methodological decision of "materiality" of the writing echoes Visweswaran's observation that "ethnography, like fiction, constructs existing or possible worlds [...]" (Visweswaran, 1994: 1) and Coffey's assertion that ethnography "is not only a way of seeing or hearing, but also a way of telling" (Coffey, 2018: 12).

Following movement rather than strict analytical containers allowed me to highlight the processuality and dialogical character of the "politics" of everyday life. It also enabled me to remain attuned to both possibilities and constraints, to unexpectedness and surprise, while holding space for autonomy and embeddedness at once, without insistence on resolution.

I began with the *Movement I: Claim of Freedom*, the demand and assertion of personal autonomy, as the first analytical step. However, as I noted, this

[302] That is, interpellated in the Althusser's sense. See the *Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories* chapter.

movement served only as a provisional starting point, since all the movements necessarily oscillated between “freedom” and “constraint,” between “autonomy” and “inheritance,” and between “improvisation” and “rehearsed muscle memory.” Because “autonomy” and freedom of choice appeared to be so central for the subjects, one might even equate “secularity,” to a certain extent, with the notion of “choice,” where “autonomy” as a self-declared value enables such a choice. The first step thus focused on narrations that claimed freedom and autonomy in the realm of “love” and intimate partnerships as both possible and of utmost importance—where love, character, and connection between individuals play the most crucial role in forming intimate relationships.

I metaphorically described such a movement through the tethers of intimate infrastructure in the language of contemporary dance as an “improvisation”: such a free movement appears to lack the need for “rehearsal” and does not wait for the approval of the audience. Furthermore, it suggests that the next movement of improvisation could take any direction in the form of real or potential partners, with seemingly endless possibilities. That means that the subjects claimed a non-preference for a certain type of a partner, especially following the ethnic, religious, or national, or other social axes of identification. “Love” and romance are what one should be oriented towards without any constraint.

To complicate things, to show the variety of approaches and preferences, and to reveal where else—besides the claim of endless possibilities—we might look for autonomy and agency, I brought to the table the voices of Tamar and Joni and their opposing preferences: while Tamar insists on a Jewish partner, preferably the one with whom she can do “tradition,” Joni strongly prefers non-Jewish and atheist partner. What counts as “freedom” and for whom, then, differs: one’s choice to be only with Jewish partners is no less an autonomous decision and desire than the stance of those for whom “Jewishness” does not matter, or for whom “Jewishness” of a partner might be even repulsive.

Once again, since “secularity” of the subjects is inherently connected with choice, it also reflects itself into a decision made in accordance with *what feels right.* I described the strict preference, but one which is nevertheless still rooted in “freedom,” as a “contoured movement.” Since such a “contoured movement” involved in itself the hierarchy of preferences and acceptability of potential

"lovers-dancers," that is, intimate partners, I focused the next analytical step on who might be such individuals, and who are impossible, or even unimaginable.

The *Movement II: Possible Lovers, Impossible Others* asked how interlocutors decide who can potentially become their lover—partner in the metaphorical dance movement. Already in the first movement it became obvious that a "dance casting," in the case of *hilonim*, will not be successful for a "religious" partner, whether Jewish or not.[303] As we already know from the tropes of secularity and partially also from the "rooftop scene," to be "religious" in Israel, for secular Israeli Jews, means a very specific, Orthodox, mode of being—being *haredi*—and everything that, in symbolic construction, comes with such a label. That is why it is important, as the postsecular approaches remind us, to examine "religion" and "secularity" in their contextuality and not as self-evident categories.[304]

The reasons for framing the "religious" Jews as impossible Others varied, but most prominently they appear to be the following: for women, it was often the gendered aspect of being forced to modesty interfering with their right to bodily autonomy, reflected also through the limited movement through certain parts of the city, and the unequal treatment during the process of a divorce. For Jews in Israel, the divorce proceedings fall under the rabbinical jurisdiction, which interlocutors prevalently viewed as a patriarchal institution treating women unequally.

Another recurring criticism of the "religious" was directed at their perceived dependence and thus exploitation of "secular taxpayers" who work and serve the country through the military, while the "religious" are exempted from such a duty. The last important connotation, especially after the last governmental elections at the end of 2022,[305] was a perceived increasing political influence the religious parties have in the country, which, in the eyes of the "seculars," fosters illiberal tendencies. When this "religious" influence is coupled with right-wing Zionism (as in Religious Zionism),[306] the interlocutors specifically criticized its harsh stance to Palestinians and the occupied territories, viewing these positions

[303] When asked specifically about a very "religious" Christian, interlocutors expressed the same "no-go" stance.
[304] See the *Postsecular Search for Secular Subject* chapter.
[305] See the *Time Frame and Ruptures* section in the *Field and Subjects*, in the *Methodological Foundations* part.
[306] I.e., *dati leumi.*

as a threat to the preservation of the state and a factor worsening the current security situation. Hence, it is not only the different “lifestyle” of the “religious,” which is seen as incompatible with “freedom and choice” as “secular” values, that casts a “religious” subject as an impossible partner, but—maybe even more importantly—the ideological, and thus political, misalignment.

The question of alignment led me to consider homogamy—a term used in sociology to describe “sameness” as a factor of either causality or correlation upon which the researchers “measure” the predictability of “happiness” in partnerships and marriages, and in psychology to describe the tendency to form partnerships with individuals who are similar to us—as a perhaps unsurprising explanation for the high rates of both *inter-* and *intra-* endogamy across the different segments of the Israeli society.

I concluded that considering homogamy is a fruitful way to look at the issue, as it might help to dilute the “politics” of intimacy and desire, and also the “politics” of academic writing itself in this case. Since “sameness” in political views, in “traditions,” in language, in daily routines, or dietary preferences comes in hand with a logic of ease, the interlocutor’s claim of freedom, woven into the sentence *“I do what I think is best,”* might also express the wish for a partner with whom the life feels possible, easy, and not exhausting because of the differences. Such a preference, then, is not exclusive to the “secular Israeli Jews” just because they are subjects of the scholarly inquiry, and because they live “there,” in Israel.

At the same time, the rate of “secular” endogamy in Israel is significantly higher than in other countries. As Staetsky (2023: 8) reports, “nearly 70% of secular Jews in the USA and almost 50% in Europe are married to non-Jews,” whereas in Israel, 93% of married or cohabiting *hilonim* have a *hiloni* (i.e., secular and Jewish) spouse or partner (Pew Research Center, 2016). Given that approximately 45% of the world’s Jewish population lives in Israel (Staetsky, 2023: 3), and that Jews constitute the demographic majority there, the chances of meeting a non-Jewish partner are generally much lower than in other parts of the world, which translates itself into a high rate of endogamy among Jews in general. So far, nothing really “surprising.” Yet percentual chances of a meaningful encounter—further shaped by structural and spatial segregation—and homogamy as a smoothing effect for the everyday cannot fully account for how subjects navigate intimacy, especially in the question of sorting potential “lovers-dancers.”

What else, then, affects the subjects' partnership choices, practices and hierarchies of acceptability in a given context?

The logic of ease here partially explains but also complicates the picture: that is where it leads us, paradoxically, back to "politics." In other words, the logic of ease both "dilutes" the "politics" and simultaneously highlights the "politics" of intimacy and desire. In the first of these parallel effects, it helps us perceive the subjects not as exceptional cases or something "exotic." What, after all, is remarkable about wanting to make our lives, especially intimate lives, easier and more livable? In the second effect, though, it illuminates the ways in which intimacy and desire are political, stratified, and delimited—and thus, less free than we would wish.

To have a non-Jewish partner does not come without a cost in Israel, *"because of the difficulties that come with it,"* as Sagi described it, since *"this country can be not nice if you are not Jewish."* Precisely at this point, the illumination of "politics" within the logic of ease comes into play. The difficulties are multiple: there are familial expectations from parents, driven either by a preference for a Jewish spouse to ensure the passing on of "tradition" and the preservation of "Jewish" continuity through potential children, and/or by an awareness of the challenges associated with having a non-Jewish partner or a child who is not Jewish according to religious law.

Then, there was the "whispering" pressure of ambient normativity. As discussed earlier, the literature on the topic repeatedly shows how demographic anxieties over maintaining a Jewish majority (or, more precisely, a majority of Jews) in Israel run deep, since such a majority is seen as a prerequisite for defining Israel as a "Jewish state." It was therefore surprising to me that the Jewish/non-Jewish demographic axis was only rarely verbalized by the interlocutors. Instead, their main anxiety focused on the high birth rates of the "religious," which they perceived as a threat to the country. Hence, the "whispering" pressure of ambient normativity was felt mostly around the question of how one—the non-Jewish spouse, or a non-Jewish child—would "fit" into the dominant society, and not around the preservation of the "Jewish" state.

More importantly, though, there are difficulties that are a direct outcome of the legal system that governs the very terms of possibility in choosing a partner. Sagi's frustration became clearer: even if he personally does not necessarily prefer

a Jewish partner, the state's legal architecture entwined with the Orthodox monopoly in Israel ensures that his "improvisation," in the end, most likely becomes a "contoured movement" in one direction anyway. Because otherwise, it brings with it too much of a burden, *"the impact,"* as Sagi put it, and not everyone is ready to carry it.

The question of the absence of civil marriage in Israel—which interlocutors repeatedly criticized as one of the symptoms of the "religious" coercion—marked a revealing turning point in the *Movement II.* Since the absence of civil marriage was seen as a problem primarily for the "seculars" and for gay people, it made me realize who was not being spoken about. Sometimes, silence is the loudest clarification.

Most people I spoke with talked about the freedom to love "whoever they want," including non-Jews in general. But very few mentioned "Arabs," unless I explicitly brought up this category of non-Jews. I realized that "non-Jewish" can be an open category, but only as long as certain groups remain unnamed or unimagined within it. It showed that "improvisation," with its seemingly endless options for the next movement in the form of a potential partner, does in fact have limits for most of the interlocutors.

Here, my positionality proved analytically insightful and telling. The imagined "non-Jewish" partner, the abstract "Other" whom people referred to as a "possible lover," looked, more or less, like me. As I discussed in *Researching Desire, Creating Desire*,[307] I was, on more than one occasion, "asked out" after the interviews, and sometimes, interlocutors appeared to forget that the interview itself is not a date. I was also asked whether I would consider being with a Jewish partner. Friends and informants also repeatedly tried to "match" me with some of their single friends. I am a non-Jew, and I am also not "religious" in the sense in which that label is typically used in the given context of the interlocutors. My presence was not seen as something disrupting or troubling. But most importantly, I am not only a "non-Jew", I am also a "non-Arab," which would, in most cases, move me from "possible lover" to the category of "impossible Other." Here, the improvisation again, took the shape of a "contoured" movement.

Even though a few of the interlocutors had, in the past, an experience of being in an intimate relationship with an "Arab" partner, or would, at least

[307] See the *Researching Desire, Creating Desire* section in *Limitations, Challenges and Side Effects*, *Methodological Foundations* part.

theoretically, consider dating or a "one-night stand" with such a person, in most cases this possibility was viewed as a "mutual taboo." I argued that the interlocutor's reflections on the "impossibility" of such relationships are less interesting as realistic accounts of the actual state of affairs and more revealing as a window into how "Arabs" are perceived—and how the interlocutors feel they themselves are perceived from the other side, as also impossible Others. What matters is not only what was said about potential "Arab" partners specifically, but how the interlocutors narrated the (im)possibility of meeting them, how they interpreted cultural scripts of normativity, and where they located responsibility for the distance.

The responsibility for this distance was located outwards: towards the "different culture" of these Others, including a different gender order and its implications; towards the faceless "society," both Jewish and Arab, which does not approve of such unions and of which the interlocutors do not feel themselves to be a necessary part; and towards separation in "space" that precludes meaningful encounters. While the interlocutors did not necessarily agree with such a social arrangement and often referred to it as "sad," and some even actively tried to challenge it (like Nitzan, who sent her children to a joint Jewish-Arab school for this purpose), they still took it, at the same time, as a clear matter of fact.

I referred to this state, in which the interlocutors were more or less resigned to the situation and acknowledged its factuality, as "sedimented knowledge." In the language of movement, it might be still improvisational, but such improvisation is based on years of practicing specific ranges of motion and orientations in space. One knows, based on that practice, that to suddenly jump a few centimetres further means to end up off the stage, resulting in the "mutual taboo." The knowledge of boundaries that delimit the dancing stage retroactively creates the appearance of a self-evident fact.[308] "Sedimented knowledge," then, became an entry point to *Movement III: Inherited Legacies*, and marked the place where the discourse of liberal autonomy in love—"to be free to love whoever one

[308] See the discussion on a reverse effect of power in the *Subject and Subjectivity in Post-theories* chapter, *Theoretical Terrain,* specifically Fulka's (2016: 324) interpretation of Butler: "Ideology [...] retrospectively creates an image of a 'pre-existing' reality that is untouched by ideological interpellation, an image of reality as non-ideological and pre-ideological, while this construct is always already symbolic and linguistic. In other words, ideology obscures its action as ideology by presenting itself as something quite self-evident, obvious, and natural."

wants"—converged with the simultaneous pull of "genealogical inheritance" (Povinelli 2006) and "inherited worlds" (Schaum 2020).

Movement III: Inherited Legacies deepened the previous ones and offered their horizontal re-reading in the "thick life." While the first two movements explored how intimate choices are made and with which potential lovers-dancers, through improvisation, contoured movement, and the "casting" of acceptable candidates, the third movement returned with a different question: What is practiced as a given range of motion, and which steps are never danced? What makes certain steps feel more "natural" or even necessary? I argued that intimate life is never just improvised or confined to the present. It is shaped by inherited legacies (pasts) and oriented towards imagined futures.

People may not have chosen these legacies, and they might even resent them, but they live through them, nonetheless. In doing so, they often reproduce them, even while declaring their choices to be autonomous. Those who claimed to choose partners "according to character" often found that their freedom was already circumscribed by what they had inherited. As I put it metaphorically: one may come to join a class of improvisation only to find that the rest of the company has already rehearsed a piece. One must then adjust in some way, often by "tweaking" the choreography just enough to make it feel like their own.

This "what was already rehearsed," as the conditions upon which intimate life might unfold, is not necessarily a static constraint, but rather a subject's contextual reading of those conditions, informed by an understanding of what *should* and *can* be done.

At the constructed "table" scene, people first discussed what distinguishes a "liveable" life, a sweet one, from a harsh one under given conditions. Their narrations suggest that there are legacies which are cherished, others accepted with resignation, and still others that invite creative solutions or strategies to remain within the framework of inheritance while changing it just enough to still feel free and autonomous. These creative adjustments preserve a sense of agency without requiring full rejection.

Through the figure of Tamar, I showed that because, for her, "being secular" equates with having a choice, such a choice can also encompass an insistence on a Jewish partner, on the "Jewish" upbringing of her children through the "tradition" of holidays, through embodied practices like the ritual bath, and

through the "right" wedding ceremony with a rabbi. While this might seem counterintuitive at first, it becomes clearer when we consider the deep contextuality of one's narration as "secular," as I argued in *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* and *Postsecular Search for Secular Subject* chapters. For Tamar, to live a "liveable," sweet life, is to keep the "tradition" alive, because that is what makes a Jew a Jew, with a reference to the history of obstacles and sacrifices made for the State of Israel, where one's "being Jewish," as "a feeling of being haunted" could be momentarily paused. This is an example of a legacy which should be cherished.

By contrast, the texture of "harsh life" was associated with the weight of trying to navigate one's life outside of these legacies, and to form, for example, the "transgressive" unions, trying to pass through the "mutual taboo." Some potential lovers-dancers are not even invited to the "casting" because it is better not to share the stage, given the complications (whether legal or social), exhaustion, or stigma that such a life might entail. Especially when the potential children, who would be considered as non-Jewish, were discussed. These legacies are not celebrated, but they are still accepted, often with resignation, as if to say, "this is just how it is."

Since I, during the process of "ethnographing," realized that certain topics and dynamics are better approachable without addressing them directly, but rather through the questions of "imagined futures" and "potential pasts," I asked interlocutors whether they wished to marry, how they envisioned that moment, and whether they would circumcise a son. These questions may not seem, at first, to speak directly to the politics of intimacy and desire. But actually, they proved to be productive as they pointed to several important aspects, including the creative strategies and solutions people develop in response to their inherited legacies as "tweaking" of the choreography.

Sagi's voice offered a compelling example as he navigated multiple competing pulls: the one of inherited scripts out of which he wanted to narrate himself as an autonomous "secular Jew," open to "marry out" and critical of the contextual conditions of his landscape; then, the pull of a certain sweetness found in knowing what a "Jewish" wedding should consist of as "tradition," and wanting to please his family; and third, the tension between openness to a non-Jewish partner while simultaneously closing this option when imagining "exhausted" kids

with “a title on the forehead.” The non-Jewish partner was plausible as a “possible lover” until the very moment she became a non-Jewish mother. Then, she became the “impossible Other.” This tension between openness and closure, between autonomy and inheritance, is precisely where the ambivalence of the movement lies.

How do the interlocutors navigate and “solve” such ambivalent moments of intersecting, simultaneous pulls? The “imagined child,” in this case a son, became a site of anxiety, a site of projection, and a site of positioning. On the example of tensions around circumcision, I showed how specific legacies of a “religious” commandment, but also the normativity of the surrounding majority, operating as an ambient force within the particular discursive order, are reframed and resignified to be able to stay within the “already rehearsed piece.”

Thus, interlocutors did not evoke neither “religion,” nor “tradition,” but health benefits, aesthetic side, and fear of social exclusion as reasons to circumcise the child. The practice then remains, but it is emptied of its original meaning and reframed. That made the body of the “imagined” son a vessel through which normative expectations are transmitted and enforced in a convergence of “inherited past” and “imagined future.”

These examples show that inherited scripts as legacies, are not simply just accepted or fully rejected, but crafted also as variations which allow for a sense of agency while still staying in recognizable bounds. In this sense, I read it as “bargains” with real or imagined audiences and I asked: How subjects creatively inhabit the norms they have inherited, through which means these negotiations become possible, and who is watching?

In *Movement IV: Bargaining With the Audience*, it became apparent that intimate life is not lived in isolation from the gaze, whether physically present or imagined internally, or whether that gaze belongs to the state, to parents, to communities, or to strangers. The audiences and their gaze were already present in the previous movements, as well as the responses to that gaze. What I traced specifically in *Movement IV* was a certain repertoire of “responsive” movements, ranging from reframing through resignification (as in the question of circumcision), through strategic self-concealment (as in case of Maor’s refraining from certain places and people, and strategic silence in their presence), to the reluctant compliance with bureaucratic forms (declaring a non-Jewish child as

Jewish). But the responsive moment did not end with these and previously mentioned strategies, and that is where Ezra's presence at the table became relevant.

Ezra, a secular Israeli Jew with an international and multifaith background, lives in a gay marriage with an Arab/Palestinian husband with Israeli citizenship, with Christian and Muslim parents. Until I brought his voice to the table scene, the rest, so far, negotiated and "bargained" both with the audiences and with the inherited legacies to find livable adjustments. But Ezra and his partner navigated something closer to rupture where the responsiveness reached its limits, and the choreography could not contain the lived reality anymore.

Where others pre-emptively managed potential judgment and social sanctioning, Ezra and his husband were already living through its aftermath since the judgments of their respective audiences already landed, considering the situation where the "real lover" is mutually an "impossible Other."

That was the moment where the ethnographic material compelled me to revisit and expand the theoretical categories with which I arrived to the "field," in order to account not only for creative inhabitation in responsiveness but also for its breakdown. I claimed that what is powerful about the figure of Ezra and his husband might be found not in their exceptionality and "defiance," because they would search for resistance against the legacies they face, but actually in their insistence of them.

I concluded that Ezra's "imagined child" as being simultaneously "Arab, Jewish, Palestinian, Israeli, Catholic, American, Iraqi, Italian" functions as a condensation of seemingly irreconcilable continuities, and asks for radical inclusion, so troubling for the coherence of the nation-state where multiple social anxieties collapse into one relationship.

Instead of abandoning the genealogies, Ezra takes them seriously enough to transform their directions and, in doing so, shows that the outcomes of inherent pulls can take new routes in a generative manner. I suggested that, in terms of movement, the subjects do not "dance" within the already delimited stage, and thus exposes the moments of vulnerability of power, where unintended consequences emerge, open to "not-yet-known." Such a creative, tender synthesis in a new "world-making" contains within itself the envisioning of an alternative

intimate landscape. This "seed" of an alternative led me to the last, speculative *Movement V: Imagined Elsewheres, Otherwise*.

Across the previous movements, I traced how intimacy and desire are lived as movements through inherited scripts, negotiated norms, and structural constraints. The last movement was oriented further beyond, towards what is imagined, feared, or hoped for. *Movement V* opened itself into a speculative horizon. The future projections, the interlocutor's speculations of *the maybes* and *the ifs*, served as a culmination of the previous movements not because they represented a final step, but precisely because the movement was not occurring in reality.

In that way, the speculations and projections became among the most revealing expressions of the density of "thick life." In *Movement V*, I moved with the interlocutors into speculative terrain too, allowing myself to stand on the "shaky ground" of constructing a common understanding between researcher and interlocutors, one that is, as Rabinow (1977: 39) describes, "fragile and thin." As such, I thought with the interlocutors how we can imagine something else, elsewhere, and otherwise.

If earlier movements traced how intimacy and desire were improvised, contoured, casted, negotiated, or bargained with different kinds of audiences, this final movement asked: *what if things were different?* And what might that mean for intimate relationships? The speculative "maybes" voiced around the table, whether hopeful or despairing, served as diagnostic tools.

It revealed the friction between what is and what could (or cannot) be. The conversation spiralled into best- and worst-case scenarios for the future of the country as a whole. These seemingly peripheral concerns, which appear to not address intimate relationships directly, in fact return us, again and again, to the heart of it: the conditions of intimacy, the politics of desire, and the limits of liveable life.

When interlocutors discussed the situation in their country (mid-2022 to mid-2023), they verbalized personal distancing from the current version of Israel, with perceived rising illiberal tendencies and polarization. When Ori invoked the *Torah* as a source of social justice, equality, and mutual care, he was not only outlining a political vision for the state, but he co-constructed the infrastructure of intimacy, because where and how to feel at home, and with whom and under

which conditions is inextricable from such a political vision. The shape of the collective future—what kind of state will exist, what values it will enshrine, who will feel at home—bears directly on whom one can love, how one can form a family, whether one can imagine raising children in this place. Thus, Lea's remark about a Muslim partner as being an "impossible Other" for her, loosened its strictness when imagined "under different circumstances," in a different political vision and reality, which might turn towards "properly Jewish" values.

I argued that precisely these moments and their contextual reading should be of our interest, because "intimacy" may be seen both as a site of world-making and as a place where political structures live inside everyday life and become visible. In this sense, being a "secular Jew," then, is not a mere linguistic "decoration" but it is also telling about which visions for collective future are wished for. To understand what "secular" means to people who identify as such is to grasp what kinds of partnerships they perceive as possible or impossible. To revisit the figure of the "Other" is to ask where desire is permitted to travel, and what needs to be changed in order to recast the "Other" from such a category.

To listen to fears about the country's trajectory is to tune into the fragility of future-oriented imagination, and hence the conditions under which people envision a liveable life. I concluded that this type of active listening reveals the potential of intimacy to be diagnostic of political possibility. And thus, to be attuned to *the ifs* and *the maybes* is to hear not only the currents of the present, but also a future not yet happening, whose contours are already, however shakily, beginning to take shape—one way, or another. The final movement did not offer a clear conclusion but rather extended an invitation to think, hope, and hesitate together around the table about what kind of world might allow for different forms of connection to emerge.

Final Discussion: If There Is Love, Then What?

In *Journeys Through Ethnography*, Anette Lareau writes that the critical question we should ask about our research should be *"So what?"* (Lareau, 1996: 221–225). Why should the topic matter to anyone beyond ourselves? What did I find out? And what to do with the findings? For Nitzan, the answer was easy: "If there is love, fuck everybody." But then, it got more complicated. For us, as researchers, the complications usually come first, and we can rarely provide such a fierce statement about our academic interests. As the final discussion, then, I would like to address the question of this "so what" more thoroughly.

In the beginning of this ethnographic part, I quoted Adrienne Rich's poem: "*this we were, this is how we tried to love, and these are the forces they had ranged against us, and these are the forces we had ranged within us, within us and against us, against us and within us.*" I stated that my text is precisely about the forces Rich writes about: the forces that, while we are trying to love and relate to others, range not only against us (externally) but also within us (internally), in an interconnected cycle of negotiating our own being with others through certain forms of intimacy. Now, at the end of the textual journey, these lines still resonate, and maybe more clearly.

I understand Rich's almost mantric repetition of *"within us and against us, against us and within us"* as symptomatic for the infrastructure of intimacy, since it describes the unfinished processuality of one's being in the world. It also shows that "private," that is the intimate, and "public," that is the political, merge at the point when we try to love. At the same time, it captures the recursive tension between autonomy and embeddedness, between the competing demands of free choice and pull of inherited legacies.

The external forces might be understood also as the state which delineates the conditions for the intimate relationships and thus fortifies the categories of "possible lovers" and "impossible Others." The internal forces ranging within us might, in parallel, be understood as the hesitations over how to "handle" the external forces, which position to take while facing them, which of the competing loyalties to honour, and, consequently, which path—which movement—to choose.

The forces ranging "within us" and "against us," which occur simultaneously, compel one to participate in a dialogue with, alongside and

against the very conditions of one's being. Thus, conversation and dialogue became central throughout the chapters and functioned on multiple levels. First, the constructed ethnographic scenes "on the roof" and "around the table," based on the in-depth interviews I conducted, used the imagined proximity and juxtaposition of interlocutors' voices, alongside my own presence, as a conversational device for presenting the data, but also as a deliberate regime of ethnographic representation. The same applies to the tropes of secularity, as they too were presented through dialogue. This time, as a dialogue between a particular interlocutor and myself as a researcher. At the same time, even though the interlocutors' voices were not "staged" in conversation with each other, I allowed the tropes to respond to, build upon, and enter into dialogue with one another.

Second, the dialogical character was prominent especially in the second chapter, during the rooftop scene, where it also functioned as a method of knowledge production. It opened the possibility for the "dialogical windows of mirror images," where the axis of mutual reference between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv served as a tool for deeper understanding of how people speak about themselves and "Others," and how these narrations reflect whose presence is taken as the norm, whose goes unnoticed, and whose is troubling, although it seems they speak mostly "just" about the cities they live in.

Furthermore, I showed that instead of "measuring" secularity—as one of the discursively available modes of Jewish subjectivity in Israel—through "observance" or its lack, as many of the sociological surveys tend to do, I find it more productive to ask with whom and with what the claimed "secularity" is in a dialogue. By tracing how secularity is narrated and gestured, and to whom or what these narrations and gestures are directed, I argued that "secularity" does not function as a stable or static point of reference. Rather, being *hiloni* is a relational practice of dialectical positioning and recalibration.

In this sense, "secularity," much like ethnicity, may be understood as an "aspect of a relationship" (Eriksen, 2023: 267).[309] In the conclusion of the *Topography of Locations: Shabbat Shalom, Ramadan Kareem* chapter, I also suggested that "secularity," in this regard, can be read as a kind of relational "situationship" where one relates to the available category, but the relationship is based on a particular situation and set of conditions.

[309] See *Ethnic Jews: Beyond Ontological Jewishness*, in the theoretical part of dissertation.

Therefore, the version of Jewish "secularity" as present in the ethnographic material can be seen as both distinctively "Jewish" and distinctively Israeli. If we approach Judaism, together with one of the interlocutors, Daniel, as an ongoing conversation,[310] then the present secularity can also be read as part of this ongoing, unfinished "Jewish" conversation. At the same time, I view this type of "secularity" also as specifically Israeli, because Israel is the only state in which, as Hila[311] said, *"the rhythm of life here is the rhythm of my people,"* and as Nir[312] described, *"when you live around Jews, you feel the holidays, you feel Shabbat, you feel it outside on the streets. You are part of it."* This, paradoxically, makes Nir feel less Jewish than he would if he lived abroad, where he would have to "do" Jewishness and achieve Jewishness in order to claim it.

The very system that the interlocutors are part of paradoxically enables their possible distancing from Judaism, precisely because it is the broader environment that sustains it without requiring active performance or effort. I understand this process of enabling, with its unexpected consequences and effects, as a result of the ideological ethnicization of Jewishness within the framework of Zionist nation-building, which I address further below.

From a small comparative perspective, it can be said that the "secularity" described by the interlocutors is of a different character and holds a distinct quality from what might be present, for example, in the Czech Republic, because the conditions of the landscape and the "audiences" towards which such narrations and gestures are directed are necessarily different. As I noted in the *Introduction* to this dissertation, in the Czech context I have never heard anyone identify as a "secular" Jew. The distinction is mostly drawn between practicing Judaism or non-practicing Judaism, which then affects the way how one, in textual form of Czech grammar rules, is written: a Jew (Žid) or jew (žid).

I am sure that an attentive reader will be able to locate further layers of the dialogical character that is present in this dissertation. For example, the dialogical use of my positionality served as a heuristic tool for knowledge production.[313]

[310] See *Secularity as Judaism*, in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter.
[311] Ibid.
[312] See Secularity as *Personal Autonomy*, in the *Secular Subjectivity in Postsecular Condition* chapter.
[313] See *Ethnographic Ground*, in the methodological part of the dissertation. There, I refer to Fetterman (2010: 33): "the ethnographer is a human instrument [...] relying on all senses, thoughts and feelings" (2010: 33), and in the same vein to Ortner (1995: 173), for whom the ethnographer is "an instrument of knowing."

However, at this point, I want to bring the ethnographic chapters themselves into a dialogue. I will refrain from offering descriptive summaries of the findings, since these are already provided in the conclusions of the respective chapters. This new line of dialogue may be helpful in addressing the "so what" and "then what" questions. And since to critique is to care (Fernando 2019),[314] I must now, as the final step of the interpretative enterprise, also consider the "less so nice" aspects of the findings.

In the tropes of secularity, the strongest trope which served also as a precondition to all other tropes, was the trope of secularity as personal autonomy. I suggested that in this sense I read the claimed "secularity" as being synonymous or equated with a claim and sense of autonomous, free choice, which, in turn, reflected itself in the intimate relationships. The ability to insist on personal autonomy, or self-determination—to "do whatever I want"—is itself shaped by the privileges afforded to the subjects within Jewish-Israeli society. These privileges are embedded in the very structures the subjects imagine themselves as moving beyond.

In *Ethnic Jews: Beyond Ontological Jewishness*, I argued, building on the work of Yaacov Yadgar, that the Zionist ideological "ethnicization" of Jewishness can be understood as a historically conditioned reconfiguration of Jewish consciousness. This reconfiguration shifted Jewish identity from a religious and communal framework towards an ethno-national and political one. This shift carries with it normative, disciplinary, but also productive effects and dimensions.

It allowed for a mode of being in which the "ethnic" definition of a Jew is reduced to a matter of ancestry (that is, a matter of "blood"), and through civil legal mechanisms, a "Jew" becomes a legal category and status that is simultaneously divorced from "religion" as a total way of life, while still remaining dependent on the religious, *halachic* definition of a Jew.

When interlocutors criticized the state and the conditions it provides and delimits—even in moments when they explicitly condemned ideas of "Jewish superiority" grounded in what they referred to as "Nuremberg laws," or expressed willingness to renounce their "Jewish privileges" in order to finally live in

[314] See *Introduction*, where I quote Mahmood: "[...] to critique a particular normative regime is not to reject or condemn it; rather, by analysing its regulatory and productive dimensions, one only deprives it of innocence and neutrality so as to craft, perhaps, a different future" (Mahmood 2016 in Fernando 2019: 17).

peace—they did not reflect on the fact that it is precisely these conditions that enable them to function as subjects in the first place.

This mechanism was particularly evident in the second ethnographic chapter. Jerusalem emerged as a symbol of "religion" where one needs to take into consideration the "Others" and the city itself, and Tel Aviv as a symbol of "secularity" where one can be free and temporarily forget about the rest of the country and about the conflict. The claimed freedom, however, contained within self the implicit notion of "asymptomatic" existence, where the "secular" norm was invisible. In this way, to be "free" is contingent on one's positionality, and such a "luxury" is not available to everyone.

Therefore, for many secular Israeli Jews, the field of intimacy unfolds within an interesting paradox: while being tethered to histories of Jewish continuity, state-mandated religious authority, and ethno-nationalist imaginaries, the act of refusing any of these elements becomes an assertion of autonomy, yet one that is nevertheless shaped by the very system it seeks to resist. This is where intimacy and desire functioned as a diagnostic lens of political possibility.

The diagnostic quality of "intimacy" was, for me, something I carried into the "field," informed by the scholarly literature on the "politics of love." Focusing on the personal negotiation of intimate life within specific political and legal conditions points, as Amia Srinivasan argues, to "more general patterns of domination and exclusion" (Srinivasan, 2021: 90), even though "no one is obliged to desire anyone else, [and] no one has a right to be desired" (Ibid). Or as Rich states in the opening poem, "no one's fated or doomed to love anyone." What surprised me, though, was that such a diagnostic lens might open the door to the speculative horizon of the future, rather than merely providing a "snapshot"[315] of the current state of affairs.

I conducted my fieldwork throughout 2022 and 2023. All interviews took place before October 7, 2023, a date that marks a serious and painful point of instability, following the large-scale Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent, still ongoing, destructive war in Gaza. Most of the interlocutors I spoke to were not blind towards a "circle of violence"[316] that already existed prior to the war. On the contrary, since the year preceding the attack in Israel could be described as

[315] However, it needs to be repeated that even a "snapshot" of the current contains within itself the past (Eriksen, 2023: 44, as discussed in *Process of Analysis and Notes on Writing* in the methodological part), as also "inherited world" (Schaum 2020).

[316] The term used by interlocutor Ori in *Movement V.*

anything but calm.[317] The research thus offers both a window into the state of the infrastructure of intimacy at a particular moment in time (as a "snapshot"), and also contains seeds of alternative imagination, particularly in *Movement V: Imagined Elsewheres, Otherwise*.

Since the "mutual taboo" between "Jews" and "Arabs" of being each other's possible lover was prevalently seen as a "sad fact," the vision for the collective future, where all the competing continuities, legacies and loyalties could be softened through the "properly Jewish" values of social justice, equality and care, becomes even more significant. As I said in the *Conclusion: No Clear Endings* of the last chapter, the shape of the potential collective future—what kind of state will exist, what values it will enshrine, who will feel at home—bears directly on whom one can love, how one can form a family, and whether one can imagine raising children in this place.

The answer to "so what" must be: because it matters. Through the currents of the present, we heard that, at least for a certain part of the society,[318] the existing situation is perceived as unsustainable in the long term. This might be seen, finally, as exactly the "glitch," the "hiccup" at the whole infrastructure: what was supposed to move smoothly as something "natural," and self-evident, is exposed as something open to change, as far as the creative imagination of subjects dares to reach.

The "then what" question needs to be addressed in the future, and it needs to take into account the effects October 7, 2023, and its aftermath on the region and its inhabitants. I cannot provide, at this moment, this retrospective assessment and interpretation of how the war has altered and rewrote the context I focused on. That remains one of the directions for future research. However, for such research, it will be important to acknowledge that before the ongoing war, there were the seeds, however fragile, of alternative landscapes and visions of the world that would allow for new forms of connection to emerge, that is, the seeds of the "country for everyone."[319] Such seeds are not always welcomed since they carry the disruptive potential for the coherence of the nation-state unity.[320]

[317] See the *Time Frame and Ruptures* section in *Field and Subjects*, methodological part.
[318] It is important to repeat here that I do not claim this study to be a representative sample of the entire secular Jewish segment of Israeli society. However, in my approach, every voice, even the smallest one, matters and has its value.
[319] See *Movement V: Imagined Elsewheres, Otherwise*, in the *Infrastructure of Intimacy* chapter.
[320] See the discussion in the *Infrastructure of Intimacy: Thick Life, Thin Lines* chapter.

Rich writes in the opening poem: “this we were, this is how we tried to love.” Perhaps this also suggests that while we are loving, we are not perfect, our autonomy, as we like to claim, is not perfect, nor the love itself. Hence, “love” is not the answer to everything, even though I am very tempted to replicate Nitzan’s romantic worldview. Maybe, since love cannot overcome all the differences and constraints, and since love is not the answer, then love is a question. A question that, nevertheless, keeps reopening what kind of world might be possible—one “not-yet-know” (Davies and Gannon, 2005: 312).[321]

[321] I have referred to the“not-yet-known” multiple times throughout the dissertation in relation to the subject. But how is the subject connected with the “world” here? The authors explicitly refer to Deleuze (2004) and his concept of openness to “not-yet-known” as part of a feminist poststructuralist framework they discuss. They draw on Deleuzian-oriented inspiration to describe the “subject-in-relation,” as being in a continual process of becoming. Since there is no ideology without the subject (Althusser, [1970] 2002: 115), and the “subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process” (Butler, 1992: 13 in Davies and Gannon, 2005: 313), I conclude there is no “world” without the subject either. Therefore, what is plausible for the subject, is plausible for the futures of the world as well. See the discussion in the *Subject and Subjectivity* chapter, in the *Theoretical Terrain* part.

Epilogue: And Then The War Came

She says: When are we gonna meet?
I say: after a year and a war
She says: when does the war end?
I say: the time we meet

— Mahmoud Darwish[322]

I have always had the impression that anthropological, and more specifically ethnographic, texts can—and arguably should be able to—bear more than texts from other fields and disciplines: longer passages of internal conflict, stories, depictions of pitfalls, unpolished descriptions of contact, and raw emotions. This is because the multiplicity of layers of human experience successfully resist simplification, making it difficult to dispute or engage with them in any reductive manner. And sometimes, I think, we just deserve to hear the whole story.

On October 7, 2023, the day Hamas attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip, I was in Tel Aviv, on the way to a conference at Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Beersheba. I spent most of Saturday in a shelter and, quite miraculously, managed to secure a direct flight back to Prague the following day. I returned feeling heavily dissociated, but it was clear to me what devastating consequences the inevitable war will have for all the people of the region.

I could not bring myself to finish the dissertation. I tried to hide behind the words of others—their respected, seminal works—so no one could accuse me of misunderstanding, distorting or omitting anything crucial. Writing about Israel became, quite literally, explosive after October 7. I weighed every word: should I write Israel, Israel and Palestine, Israel-Palestine, or perhaps Israel/Palestine? And what about Palestine/Israel?[323] As if a hyphen or a slash could hold the weight of

[322] Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) was a famous Palestinian poet whose works explore themes of loss, exile, longing, land, love, and identity. He is viewed as the Palestinian national poet and symbol of resistance through poetry. When I visited Nablus in the West Bank in 2009, Darwish's poems, displayed as street art on the walls across the city, were among the first things locals showed me as they explained his significance to their sense of collective. The author of the poem's translation is unknown.

[323] The linguistic struggle and terminology used to express political beliefs and ideological orientations in labeling Israel and Palestine have long been present. A recent example is the emergence of *Palestine/Israel Review* in 2024. The editors open the first issue with the article *Carving Out a New Intellectual Space*, going to great lengths to explain what "Palestine/Israel"

all the stories, nuances, sorrows, hopes, humanity, history, and futures contained within the particular region. I feared my words might be seized upon and turned into a weapon. And the words themselves, as I stared to the screen of my laptop, appeared to be just empty. How many footnotes should I add to provide a complex picture?

I chose to close the entire work with a poem of Mahmoud Darwish, a Palestinian poet, because it perfectly depicts what is at stake throughout the pages of this dissertation: Darwish's poem is not only about war but also about love, about encounters, their boundaries and conditions, about the normalization of war as ever-present in some lives, and about the power of connection to bring an end to war—even if only for a single moment, for two particular people.

My work is not about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict *per se*, because I did not want to "write" someone else through a one-dimensional perspective that would strip them of their own lives. And their lives are much more than that. However, at the same time, it is one of the serious and defining conditions of the whole infrastructure of intimacy, the "inherited world" (Schaum 2020) which influences and shapes which movement through the tethers of the infrastructure is taken by its subjects, which one is skipped, and which one stays only its potentiality. Therefore, Darwish's personal story illustrates both the complexity and (im)possibility of the matter.

Darwish was in a relationship with a Jewish woman, dancer Tamar Ben Ami,[324] for two years. Allegedly, the two met at a rally of the Communist Party of Israel. Certain aspects of their love story are partly shrouded in speculation, but most sources agree that Tamar is Darwish's "Rita" from the poem *Rita and the Rifle* (or *Rita's Winter*). Although "mixed" partnerships between "Arabs" and "Jews" have existed in the region, they always entail a specific kind of difficulty: ranging from social stigma and misunderstandings within the families, to legal obstacles and the need to negotiate one's own desires, aspirations, identity, multiple loyalties, and collective belonging, which are recurring themes throughout the interviews I conducted and talks I hold. Their life stories, as well

---

means, what it does not mean, and the significance they associate with the visual choice of such a notation (Sorek and Ghanim 2024).

[324] As far as I have been able to track down, Tamar's identity was revealed in a 2014 documentary by Ibtisam Mara'ana called *Write Down, I'm an Arab*. The documentary shows the love letters which Darwish wrote to Tamar in Hebrew, and which she kept for all those years. The documentary also recognizes Tamar as Rita.

as the stories of their "own people," are inextricably tied together and also constitutive of each other; that is, they will never be the same as if they had never met. Love can symbolically stop the war, at least for a while. But can love ever emerge *from* war?

I do not have the answer. Most importantly because, I am in the privileged position of not knowing what war means, and what it means to be in its ever-present shadow. As a partial closure for this, I want to mention the work of postmodern urban theorist and interpretive geographer Edward W. Soja. He, drawing from Buber, Heidegger, and Sartre, challenges the prevalent emphasis on distance—on "othering" in anthropological writing—as the principal mode of identity formation. "To be human," he writes, "is not only to create distances but to cross them. [...] Human spatiality is thus more than the product of our capacity to separate ourselves [...]; the primal setting at a distance is meaningless [...] without its negation: the creation of meaning through relations with the world" (Soja 2010:133). To borrow Soja's own invocation of Martin Buber (1970 [1923]), the emergence of both "I" and "Thou," is meaningful precisely in Darwish's moment of "meeting," or in Liri's metaphor of molecule,[325] where the separate atoms became one as a unit. Since distance is meaningless without its negation, then, something shared may still arise. Maybe not resolution or peace, but relation. And in that relation, perhaps, a trace of hope.

After the initial obsessive paralysis about the words, another concern arrived: Is my work redundant now? Does my voice add anything new? Who will care about anything that happened before, now that many things, both tangible and intangible, have been reduced to rubble? How can one write something in the shadow of the all-encompassing pain and internal divisions that currently grip the region? But then, I remembered the very essence of ethnography: it is the lived experiences of individuals that matter. So, after a year and a war (which is still ongoing as I am writing this Epilogue), I, too, met with my work again.

In 2016, Sherry Ortner wrote about thematic developments in anthropology,[326] focusing on the question of what she calls "dark anthropology" and positioning it in contrast to the "anthropology of good". The former addresses "the harsh dimensions of social life" (Ortner, 2016: 47), and thematizes oppression, domination, exploitation, power, and inequality. The latter, in turn,

[325] See *Dialogical Windows: Jerusalem-Tel Aviv Axis*.

[326] She writes from the perspective of anthropology in the USA.

responds to this dark disciplinary turn in an unsurprising manner: attention is drawn to themes of optimism, questions of happiness, the good life, and well-being. My work attempts to synthesize both perspectives: not to be blind to the darkness but to also allow space for the light, of which darkness is a necessary condition. This, moreover, aligns with a positive (not positivist) rethinking of the subject's agency: considering structural predetermination does not cast the subject in a state of infinite and inevitable docility, as the action of power has always unintended (and productive) consequences.

References

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1986. “The Romance of Resistance: Tracking Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women.” *American Ethnologist* 17 (1): 44–55.

Ahmed, Sara. 2000. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London: Routledge.

Ahmed, Sara. 2002. “Racialized Bodies.” In *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction*, edited by Mary Evans and Ellie Lee, 46–63. New York: Palgrave.

Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. London: Duke University Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2008. “Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Gestures on the Founding Gestures of the New Materialism.” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 15 (1): 23–39.

Ahmed, Sara. 2014 [2004]. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Altbach, Philip G. 2007. “The Imperial Tongue: English as the Dominating Academic Language.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42 (36): 3608–3611.

Althusser, Louis. 2002. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. London: Monthly Review Press. Chapter “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation). Originally published in French, “Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État (Notes pour une recherche),” 1970.

Altork, Kate. 1995. “Walking the Fire Line: The Erotic Dimension of the Fieldwork Experience. In *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, edited by Don Kulick and Margaret Willson, 107–139. London: Routledge.

Aly, Ramy M. K. 2015. *Becoming Arab in London: Performativity and the Undoing of Identity*. London: Pluto Press.

Amano, Tatsuya, et al. 2023. “The Manifold Costs of Being a Non-Native English Speaker in Science.” *PLoS Biology* 21 (7): e3002184.

Amin, Ash. 2014. “Lively Infrastructure.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 31 (7–8): 137–161.

Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso Books.

Anderson, Victor. 1995. *Beyond Ontological Blackness*. New York: Continuum.

Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Arian, Asher, and Ayala Keissar-Sugarmen. 2009. *A Portrait of Israeli Jews: Beliefs, Observance, and Values of Israeli Jews*. Jerusalem: The Guttman Center for Surveys of the Israel Democracy Institute.

Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Atkinson, Robert. 1998. *The Life Story Interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Atkinson, Paul, and Martyn Hammersley. 2007. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

Balaš, Nikola. 2016. “Čím vším může být sociokulturní antropologie [All That Sociocultural Anthropology Can Be].” *Český lid* [*The Czech Ethnological Journal*] 103 (3): 473–490.

Barad, Karen. 2003. “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.” *Signs* 28 (3): 801–831.

Barak-Gorodetsky, David, and Ofer Zalzberg. 2023. “Israel's Secular-Religious Cleavage: Postsecular Genealogies and Remedies.” In *Polarization and Consensus-Building in Israel: The Center Cannot Hold*, edited by Emanuel Friedman, Moran Neubauer-Shani, and Paul Scham, 159–172.

Barša, Pavel. 2006. "Konstruktivismus a politika identity [Constructivism and Identity Politics]." *AntropoWebzin* 1–2: 21–35. Available at: http://www.antropoweb.cz/webzin/achive_old/webzin_1-2_2006/AntropoWEBZIN%201,2_06.pdf. Last accessed May 7, 2025.

Barth, Fredrik, ed. 1969. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.

Barthes, Roland. 1977. "The Death of the Author." In *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, 142–148. London: Fontana Press. Originally published as *La mort de l'auteur*, *Mantéia V*, 1968.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1998. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1998. "Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern." In *Modernity, Culture and "the Jew"*, edited by Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus, 143–156. London: Polity Press.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*. Cambridge: Polity, 2003.

Baxter, Judith. 2002. "Competing Discourses in the Classroom: A Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis of Girls' and Boys' Speech in Public Contexts." *Discourse & Society* 13 (6): 827–842.

Baxter, Judith. 2008. "Feminist Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis: A New Theoretical and Methodological Approach?" Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/41231669_Feminist_Post-structuralist_discourse_analysis_a_new_theoretical_and_methodological_approach. Accessed June 14, 2025.

Behar, Ruth. 1996. *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Behar, Moshe. 2009. “What's in a Name? Socio-Terminological Formations and the Case for ‘Arabized-Jews’.” *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 15 (6): 747–771.

Behar, Moshe. 2021. “Were There—And Can There Be—Arab Jews?” *Contending Modernities: Exploring How Religious and Secular Forces Interact in the Modern World*. Available at: https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/theorizing-modernities/were-there-arab-jews/. Last accessed February 12, 2025.

Beit-Hallahmi, Benjamin. 2007. “The Secular Israeli (Jewish) Identity: An Impossible Dream?” In *Secularism and Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives*, edited by Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, 157–168. Hartford, CT: Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture.

Bell, Diane, Pat Caplan, and Wazir Jahan Karim, eds. 1993. *Gendered Fields: Women, Men and Ethnography*. 1st ed. London: Routledge.

Bell, Vikki. 1999. “Performativity and Belonging: An Introduction.” *Theory, Culture and Society* 16 (2): 1–10.

Ben-Israel, Hedva. 2003. “Zionism and European Nationalisms: Comparative Aspects.” *Israel Studies* 8 (1): 91–104.

Ben-Porat, Guy. 2003. *Between State and Synagogue: The Secularization of Contemporary Israel.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Benjamin, Orit, and Talia Barash. 2004. “‘He Thought I Would Be Like My Mother’: The Silencing of Mizrachi Women in Israeli Inter- and Intra-Marriages.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27 (2): 266–289.

Bergson, Henri. 1938. *La pensée et le mouvant.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Berlant, Lauren. 1997. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Berlant, Lauren, and Michael Warner. 1998. “Sex in Public.” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (2): 547–566.

Berlant, Lauren. 1998. “Intimacy: A Special Issue.” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (2): 281–288.

Berlant, Lauren. 2011. “A Properly Political Concept of Love.” *Cultural Anthropology* 26 (4): 683–691.

Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Berlant, Lauren. 2012. *Desire/Love*. Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books.

Berlant, Lauren. 2016. “The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times.” *Critical Inquiry* 42 (2): 393–409.

Bessire, Lucas. 2021. *Running Out: In Search of Water on the High Plains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Biale, David. 1992. *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America*. New York: Basic Books.

Boellstorff, Tom. 2004. “Playing Back the Nation: Waria, Indonesian Transvestites.” *Cultural Anthropology* 19 (2): 159–195.

Bordo, Susan, ed. 1999. *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. “The Forms of Capital.” In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson, 241–258. New York: Greenwood Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Boyarin, Jonathan. 1991. “Jewish Ethnography and the Question of the Book.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 64 (1): 14–29.

Boyarin, Daniel. 1997. *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Braidotti, Rosi. 2003. *2003 Summer School: New European Identities and Mediated Cultures: Revisiting The Politics of Location*. Utrecht: Noise Central Coordination, Utrecht University.

Braidotti, Rosi. 2008. “In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 (6): 1–24.

Britzman, Deborah P. 1995. “The Question of Belief: Writing Poststructural Ethnography.” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 8 (3): 229–238.

Brinkmann, Svend, and Steinar Kvale. 2008. *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Brinkmann, Svend, and Steinar Kvale. 2018. *Doing Interviews*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Brubaker, Rogers. 2004. *Ethnicity Without Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brubaker, Rogers, Mara Loveman, and Peter Stamatov. 2004. “Ethnicity as Cognition.” *Theory and Society* 33 (1): 31–64.

Brubaker, Rogers. 2013. “Categories of Analysis and Categories of Practice: A Note on the Study of Muslims in European Countries of Immigration.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36 (1): 1–8.

Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970. Originally published 1923.

Buch, Elana, and Karen Staller. 2007. “The Feminist Practice of Ethnography.” In *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, edited by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia L. Leavy, 187–221. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Burgess, Robert G. 1984. *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge.

Burlyuk, Olga, and Ladan Rahbari, eds. 2023. *Migrant Academics’ Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers.

Burton, Elise K. 2015. “An Assimilating Majority? Israeli Marriage Law and Identity in the Jewish State.” *Journal of Jewish Identities* 8 (1): 73–94.

Butler, Judith. 1987. *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 1992. “Contingent Foundations.” In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, 3–21. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 1997. *The Psychic Life of Power*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Canaday, Margot, Nancy F. Cott, and Robert O. Self, eds. 2021. *Intimate States: Gender, Sexuality, and Governance in Modern US History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Casanova, José. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Casanova, José. 2009. “The Secular and Secularisms.” *Social Research* 76 (4): 1049–1066.

Castor, Laura. 1991. "Did She or Didn't She? The Discourse of Scandal in the 1988 U.S. Presidential Campaign." *Genders* 12: 62–76.

Cavanaugh, William T. 2009. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Čermák, Ivo, Lucie Chalupníčková, Vladimír Chrz, and Veronika Plachá. 2013. "Narativní analýza [Narrative Analysis]." In *Kvalitativní analýza textů: čtyři přístupy [Qualitative Text Analysis: Four Approaches]*, edited by Tomáš Řiháček, Ivo Čermák, and Radek Hytych, 75–104. Brno: Masaryk University.

Chrz, Vladimír, and Ivo Čermák. 2011. "Interpretace v narativním přístupu [Interpretation in the Narrative Approach]." *Teorie vědy / Theory of Science* 33 (3): 415–443.

Çinar, Alev, and Thomas Bender, eds. 2007. *Urban Imaginaries: Locating the Modern City*. New ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Churchill, Christian J. 2005. "Ethnography as Translation." *Qualitative Sociology* 28: 3–24.

Clifford, James. 1983. "On Ethnographic Authority." *Representations* 2 (Spring): 118–146.

Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus, eds. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Clifford, James. 1996. "Anthropology and/as Travel." *Etnofoor* 9 (2): 5–15.

Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Coffey, Amanda. 1999. *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. London: SAGE Publications.

Coffey, Amanda. 2018. *Doing Ethnography*. London: SAGE Publications.

Cohen, Daniel H. 2001. *Arguing with God*. Conference paper presented at the OSSA Conference Archive 16, University of Windsor. Available at https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/72768418.pdf. Last accessed June 12, 2025.

Coleman, Rebecca, Tara Page, and Helen Palmer, eds. 2019. *Feminist New Materialist Practice: The Mattering of Methods*. Special issue of *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*, Summer (4).

Constable, Nicole. 2009. "The Commodification of Intimacy: Marriage, Sex and Reproductive Labor." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 38: 49–64.

Coole, Diana, and Samantha Frost. 2010. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Coontz, Stephanie. 2005. *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*. New York, NY: Viking.

Cooper, Davina. 1995. *Power in Struggle: Feminism, Sexuality and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Colen, Shellee. 1986. "'With Respect and Feelings': Voices of West Indian Child Care Workers in New York City." In *All American Women: Lines That Divide, Ties That Bind*, edited by Johnetta Cole, 46–70. New York: Free Press.

Comaroff, Jean, and John Comaroff. 1992. *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989 (1): 139–167.

Crofony, Timea. 2020. "Mechitza jako metafora, separace nebo jednota? [Mechitza as a Metaphor: Separation or Unity?]" Master's thesis, Charles University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Gender Studies. Supervisor: Věra Sokolová.

Cupples, Julie. 2003. "The Field as a Landscape of Desire: Sex and Sexuality in Geographical Fieldwork." *Area* 34 (4): 382–390.

Dalley, Cameo. 2015. "Love and the Stranger: Intimate Relationships between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal People in a Very Remote Aboriginal Town, Northern Australia." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 26 (1): 38–54.

Dalsheim, Joyce. 2019. *Israel Has a Jewish Problem: Self-Determination as Self-Elimination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dalsheim, Joyce. 2021. "The False Promises of Sovereignty: Enclaves, Exclaves, and Impossible Politics in the Jewish State." In *The Everyday Lives of Sovereignty: Political Imagination beyond the State*, edited by Rebecca Bryant and Madeleine Reeves, 197–216. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Davies, Bronwyn, and Susanne Gannon. 2005. "Feminism/Poststructuralism." In *Theory and Methods in Social Research*, edited by Cathy Lewin and Bridget Somekh, 312–319. London: SAGE.

Day, Abby, and Lois Lee. 2014. "Making Sense of Surveys and Censuses: Issues in Religious Self-Identification." *Religion* 44 (3): 345–356.

Denzin, Norman K. 1997. *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Denzin, Norman K., and Yvonna S. Lincoln. 2011. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1972. *L'Anti-Oedipe*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

Deleuze, Gilles. 2004. *Difference and Repetition*. London: Continuum.

Diemling, Maria, and Larry Ray, eds. 2015. *Boundaries, Identity and Belonging in Modern Judaism*. 1st ed. London: Routledge.

Dikeç, Mustafa. 2001. "Justice and the Spatial Imagination." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 33 (10): 1785–1805.

Dikova, Silvia, William McMahon, and Jane Savage, eds. 2023. *Love and the Politics of Intimacy: Bodies, Boundaries, Liberation*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Don-Yehiya, Eliezer. 1999. *Religion and Political Accommodation in Israel*. Jerusalem: The Floersheimer Institute for Policy Studies.

Dreyfus, Hubert L., and Paul Rabinow. 1983. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dubuisson, Darlène. 2025. "Kin-Work among Black Transit Migrants in Tapachula, Mexico: Tracing Acts of Love against Anti-Black Immigration Governmentality." *Current Anthropology* 66 (1): 135–140.

Du Gay, Paul, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman, eds. 2000. *Identity: A Reader*. London: SAGE Publications.

Egorova, Yulia. 2011. "From Dalits to Bene Ephraim: Judaism in Andhra Pradesh." In *The Jews of Andhra Pradesh: Contesting Caste and Religion in South India*, edited by Yulia Egorova and Shahid Perwez. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eisenberg, Avigail, and Will Kymlicka. 2011. *Identity Politics in the Public Realm: Bringing Institutions Back In*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd ed. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Engelberg, Ari. 2017. "Fighting Intermarriage in the Holy Land: Lehava and Israeli Ethnonationalism." *Journal of Israeli History* 36 (2): 229–247.

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 1994. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press.

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 2010 [2023]. *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*. 5th ed. London: Pluto Press.

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 2019. "The Epistemological Status of the Concept of Ethnicity." *Anthropological Notebooks* 25 (1): 27–36.

Farnell, Brenda. 1996. "Metaphors We Move By." *Visual Anthropology* 8 (2–4): 311–335.

Fatková, Gabriela. 2013. "O čem se nemluví: Příspěvek k problematice sexuality terénního výzkumníka [What We Usually Don't Discuss: An Account of the Researcher's Sexuality]." *Gender, rovné příležitosti, výzkum* 4 (1): 36–48.

Fausto-Sterling, Anne. 1997. "How to Build a Man." In *Science and Homosexualities*, edited by Victoria A. Rosari, 219–225. New York: Routledge.

Fenster, Tovi. 2006. "The Right to the Gendered City: Different Formations of Belonging in Everyday Life." *Journal of Gender Studies* 14 (3): 217–231.

Ferguson, Ann, and Mary E. Toye. 2017. "Feminist Love Studies—Editors' Introduction." *Hypatia* 32 (1): 5–18.

Fernando, Mayanthi L. 2019. "Critique as Care." *Critical Times* 2 (1): 13–22.

Fetterman, David M. 2010. *Ethnography: Step-by-Step*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Finkelstein, Anat, Anat Goldberg, and Sarit Ravitsky Tur-Paz. 2023. *Statistical Report on Religion and State in Israel – New Chapters*. The Israel Democracy Institute. Available at https://en.idi.org.il/articles/49002. Last accessed May 17, 2025.

Finkelstein, Anat, and Anat Goldberg. 2024. "Jewish Public Opinion Regarding the Chief Rabbinate and the Elections for the Chief Rabbis." The Israel Democracy Institute. Available at https://en.idi.org.il/articles/54586. Last accessed May 17, 2025.

Fischer, Michael M. J. 2018. *Anthropology in the Meantime: Experimental Ethnography, Theory, and Method for the Twenty-First Century*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Fischer, Yochi. 2013. "The Concepts of 'Religion' and 'Secularism' in the Hebrew Language and Their Manifestations in Israel's Socio-Political Dynamics." In *Religion and Secularity: Transformations and Transfers of Religious Discourses in Europe and Asia*, edited by Marion Eggert and Lucian Hölscher, 109–130. Leiden: Brill.

Fisher, Cass. 2012. *Contemplative Nation: A Philosophical Account of Jewish Theological Language*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Fogiel-Bijaoui, Sylvie. 2017. "A Rising Tide? Mixed Families in Israel." *Journal of Israeli History* 36 (2): 103–123.

Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Harper and Row.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Edited by Donald F. Bouchard. Oxford: Blackwell.

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books. Originally published in French as *La volonté de savoir* in 1976.

Foucault, Michel. 1980. "Truth and Power." In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, edited and translated by Colin Gordon, 109–133. New York: Pantheon Books.

Friedgut, Theodore H. 2004. "Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union: Their Influence and Identity." In *Israeli Identity in Transition*, edited by Anita Shapira. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Friedman, Sara L. 2005. "The Intimacy of State Power: Marriage, Liberation, and Socialist Subjects in Southeastern China." *American Ethnologist* 32: 312–327.

Friedman, Tammar, Shlomo Guzmen-Carmeli, and Rachel Werczberger. 2024. "Faithful Atheists: The Paradox of Jewish Nonbelievers in Israel." *Religion* 55 (1): 300–320.

Friesel, Evyatar. 2006. “Zionism and Jewish Nationalism: An Inquiry into an Ideological Relationship.” *Journal of Israeli History* 25 (2): 285–312.

Fulka, Josef. 2016. “Od konstrukce k etice: závažná těla a jejich kontext [From Construction to Ethics: Bodies That Matter and Their Context].” In *Závažná těla. O materialitě a diskursivních mezích „pohlaví“ [Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’]*, by Judith Butler, 317–338. Praha: Nakladatelství Karolinum.

Furani, Khaled. 2015. “Is There a Postsecular?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83 (1): 1–26.

Furani, Khaled, and Joel Robbins. 2021. “Introduction: Anthropology Within and Without the Secular Condition.” *Religion* 51 (4): 501–517.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2013. *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. Revised 2nd ed. London: Bloomsbury Academic. Originally published in 1960.

Gafter, Roey J., and Tommaso M. Milani. 2020. “Affective Trouble: A Jewish/Palestinian Heterosexual Wedding Threatening the Israeli Nation-State?” *Social Semiotics* 31 (5): 710–723. 2020. “Affective Trouble: A Jewish/Palestinian Heterosexual Wedding Threatening the Israeli Nation-State?” *Social Semiotics* 31 (5): 710–723.

Gannon, Susanne, and Bronwyn Davies. 2012. “Postmodern, Poststructural, and Critical Theories.” In *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, 2nd ed., edited by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, 65–91. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. Originally published in 2007.

Gavison, Ruth. 2010. *The Law of Return at Sixty Years: History, Ideology, Justification*. Jerusalem: The Metzilah Center for Zionist, Jewish, Liberal and Humanist Thought.

Du Gay, Paul, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman. 2000. *Identity: A Reader*. London: SAGE Publications.

Gay y Blasco, Paloma, and Huon Wardle. 2007. *How to Read Ethnography*. London: Routledge.

Gaya, Alice. 2022. "Identity Formation Among Mixed Families in a Conflictual Society: The Case of Jewish–Muslim Families in Israel." *Social Compass* 69 (3): 312–328.

Geertz, Clifford. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1998. "Deep Hanging Out: Review of James Clifford, *Routes, Travel, and Translation in the Late 20th Century* and Pierre Clastres, *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians*." *The New York Review of Books* 45 (1): 69–72.

Gell, Alfred. 2011 [1996]. "On Love." *Anthropology of This Century* 2. Available at: https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/39003/1/On_love_(lsero).pdf

Getzoff, Jonathan F. 2020. "Start-up Nationalism: The Rationalities of Neoliberal Zionism." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38 (5): 811–828.

Ghosh Abu, Yasar, Jakub Grygar, and Marek Skovajsa. 2007. "Zaostřeno na etnografický výzkum. Úvodem k monotematickému číslu 'Sociální antropologie v postsocialismu' [Focused on Ethnographic Research: Introduction to the Monothematic Issue 'Social Anthropology in Postsocialism']." In *Sociální antropologie v postsocialismu [Social Anthropology in Postsocialism]*, edited by Yasar Abu Ghosh, Jakub Grygar, and Marek Skovajsa. *Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review* 43 (1): 9–12.

Giddens, Anthony. 1992. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Ginsburg, Faye, and Rayna Rapp. 1991. "The Politics of Reproduction." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20: 311–343.

Ginsburg, Faye, and Rayna Rapp, eds. 1995. *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Goffman, Erving. 1959 [1956]. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

Goldberg, Harvey E., ed. 1987. *Judaism Viewed from Within and from Without: Anthropological Studies*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers.

Grenz, Sabine. 2023. "Post-secular Feminist Research: The Concept of 'Lived' Religion and Double Critique." *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 9 (2): 467–490.

Grgurinović, Ivana. 2012. "Anthropology and Travel: Practice and Text." *Studia Ethnologica Croatica* 24: 45–60.

Grof, Stanislav. 2020. *Cesta psychonauta [The Way of the Psychonaut: Encyclopedia for Inner Journeys]*. Vol. 2. Holos.

Gubrium, Jaber F., and James A. Holstein. 2008. "Narrative Ethnography." In *Handbook of Emergent Methods*, edited by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy, 241–64. New York: Guilford Press.

Gubrium, Jaber F., James A. Holstein, Amir B. Marvasti, and Karyn D. McKinney. 2012. *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson. 1988. "Discipline and Practice: 'The Field' as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology." In *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, edited by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, 1–46. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hacker, Daphna. 2009. "From the Moabite Ruth to Norly the Filipino: Intermarriage and Conversion in the Jewish Nation State." In *Gendering Religion and Politics*, edited by Hanna Herzog and Ann Braude, 101–124. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hakak, Yohai. 2016. “Battling Against Interfaith Relations in Israel: Religion, Therapy, and Social Services.” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 42 (1): 45–57.

Hakak, Yohai. 2016a. “The ‘Undesirable Relationships’ between Jewish Women and Arab Men: Representation and Discourse in Contemporary Israel.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (6): 976–993.

Hakak, Yohai. 2022. “Representations of Inter-Faith Couples: ‘Inevitable Violence’ and the Israeli Arab Conflict.” *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 7 (1): 121–136.

Handelman, Don. 1994. “Contradictions between Citizenship and Nationality: Their Consequences for Ethnicity and Inequality in Israel.” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 7 (3): 441–459.

Hall, Stuart, and Paul du Gay, eds. 1996. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage.

Hall, Stuart. 2000. “Who Needs ‘Identity’?” In *Identity: A Reader*, edited by Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Halperin, David M. 1989. “Is There a History of Sexuality?” *History and Theory* 28 (3): 257–274.

Halperin-Kaddari, Ruth, and Yaacov Yadgar. 2010. “Between Universal Feminism and Particular Nationalism: Politics, Religion and Gender (In)Equality in Israel.” *Third World Quarterly* 31 (6): 905–920.

Haraway, Donna J. 1988. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” *Feminist Studies* 14: 575–599.

Haraway, Donna J. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.

Haraway, Donna J. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Haraway, Donna J. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Harding, Sandra. 1986. *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Hardt, Michael. 2011. "For Love or Money." *Cultural Anthropology* 26 (4): 676–682.

Havelková, Hana. 1996. "Abstract Citizenship? Women and Power in the Czech Republic." *Social Politics* 3 (2–3): 243–260.

Havelková, Hana, and Libora Oates-Indruchová, eds. 2014. *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism: An Expropriated Voice*. London: Routledge.

Herzfeld, Michael. 2005. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Herzog, Ben. 2018. "The Ethics of Citizenship in Israel." *Israel Studies Review* 33 (3): 79–98.

Herzog, Hanna. 2012. "Interview Location and Its Social Meaning." In *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*, 2nd ed., edited by Jaber F. Gubrium et al., 207–218. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Hesse-Biber, Sharlene. 2007. "The Practice of Feminist In-Depth Interviewing." In *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, edited by Sharlene N. Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy, 110–148. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Heyl, Barbara S. 2001. "Ethnographic Interviewing." In *Handbook of Ethnography*, edited by Paul Atkinson et al., 369–383. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Hewitt, Andrew. 2005. *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hirsch, Jennifer S., and Holly Wardlow, eds. 2006. *Modern Loves: The Anthropology of Romantic Courtship and Companionate Marriage*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hodes, Joseph R. 2014. "The Bene Israel and the 'Who Is a Jew' Controversy in Israel." In *Who Is a Jew?: Reflections on History, Religion, and Culture*, edited by Leonard J. Greenspoon, 169–192. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.

hooks, bell. 2000. *All About Love: New Visions*. New York: Harper.

Horálek, Aleš. 2012. "Tři přístupy k pupkům národů: primordialisticko-modernistický diskurz prizmatem aktivity a objektivity etnicity." [Three Approaches to the Navel Points of the Nations: Primordialist-Modernist Discourse Seen through the Prism of Activity and Objectivity of Ethnicity.] *Český Lid* 99 (1): 23–43.

Illouz, Eva. 1997. *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Illouz, Eva. 2012. *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Illouz, Eva. 2018. *Unloving: A Sociology of Negative Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Illouz, Eva. 2023. *The Emotional Life of Populism: How Fear, Disgust, Resentment, and Love Undermine Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ingold, Tim. 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London: Routledge.

Irshai, Ronit. 2010. "Toward a Gender Critical Approach to the Philosophy of Jewish Law (Halakhah)." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26 (2): 55–77.

Jackson, Rebecca, and Marguerite Kelly, eds. 2019. *Women Researching in Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jakobsen, Janet R., and Ann Pellegrini. 2008. *Secularisms*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Jakoubek, Marek, ed. 2016. *Teorie etnicity: Čítanka textů* [*Theories of Ethnicity: A Reader*]. Praha: SLON.

Janeček, Petr. 2014. "Etnografický výzkum." [Ethnographic Research.] In *Úvod do etnologického výzkumu* [*Introduction to Ethnology Research*], edited by Roman Doušek, Petr Holub, Zuzana Holubová, Petr Janeček, and Jan Obrovský, 11–119. Brno: Masaryk University.

Jankowiak, William R., and Edward F. Fischer. 1992. "A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Romantic Love." *Ethnology* 31 (2): 149–155.

Jankowiak, William, and Alex J. Nelson. 2021. "The State of Ethnological Research on Love: A Critical Review." In *International Handbook of Love*, edited by Claude-Hélène Mayer and Elisabeth Vanderheiden, 23–39. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature.

Johnson, John M., and Timothy Rowlands. 2012. "The Interpersonal Dynamics of In-Depth Interviewing." In *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*, edited by Jaber F. Gubrium, James A. Holstein, Amir B. Marvasti, and Karyn D. McKinney, 99–114. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Jónasdóttir, Anna, and Ann Ferguson, eds. 2014. *Love: A Question for Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Routledge.

Joskowicz, Ari, and Ethan B. Katz, eds. 2015. *Secularism in Question: Jews and Judaism in Modern Times*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Kahn, Susan Martha. 2000. *Reproducing Jews: A Cultural Account of Assisted Conception in Israel*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kalhousová, Irena, and Emmanuelle Blanc. 2024. "Conceptualizing the Foreign Policy Roles of States Dealing with Historical Trauma: The Case of Israel." *European Journal of International Relations*. https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661241278305.

Kaminer, Matan. 2024. *Capitalist Colonial: The Migrant Workers in Israeli Agriculture*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Kanaaneh, Rhoda Ann. 2002. *Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Kaplan, Amit, and Avital Herbst-Debby. 2017. "Mixed-Ethnicity Marriages and Marital Dissolution in Israel." *Journal of Israeli History* 36 (2): 291–312.

Katz, Gideon. 2011. *Pale God: Israeli Secularism and Spinoza's Philosophy of Culture*. Brighton: Academic Studies Press.

Katz, Gideon. 2024. "Judaeophobia: Fear of Judaism in Israeli Culture." *Israel Affairs* 30 (4): 624–643.

Katz, Jacob. 1986. "Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective." In *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 2: *The Challenge of Modernity and Jewish Orthodoxy*, edited by Peter Y. Medding, 3–17. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Katz, Jonathan N. 1995. *The Invention of Heterosexuality*. New York: Dutton

Katz, Nathan. 2000. *Who Are the Jews of India?* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kedar, Nir. 2019. *Law and Identity in Israel: A Century of Debate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kimmerling, Baruch. 2005. *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Kipnis, Laura. 2003. *Against Love: A Polemic*. New York: Vintage Books.

Knesset. 2024. “Knesset Plenum Approves Government's Request to Extend Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law by One Year.” May 13, 2024. Available at: https://main.knesset.gov.il/en/news/pressreleases/pages/press5324w.aspx. Last accessed May 28, 2025.

Kobová, Ľubica 2014. “Medzi nepoddajnosťou poriadku a jeho každodenným překračováním.” [Between the Intractability of Order and Its Everyday Transgression.] In *Trampoty s rodom. Feminizmus a podrývanie identity* [*Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*], by Judith Butler (1990, 2014). Bratislava: ASPEKT, 236–260.

Kranz, Dani. 2016. “Probing the Boundaries of Jewishness and Israeli Identity: The Situation of Non-Jewish Partners and Spouses of Israeli Jews.” In *Boundaries, Identities and Belonging in Modern Judaism*, edited by Maria Diemling and Larry Ray, 177–192. London: Routledge.

Kranz, Dani. 2024. “The Quest for Jewish Anthropology in Germany Post-1945.” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 23 (1): 65–89.

Kravel-Tovi, Michal. 2012. “‘National Mission’: Biopolitics, Non-Jewish Immigration and Jewish Conversion Policy in Contemporary Israel.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35 (4): 737–756.

Kravel-Tovi, Michal. 2017. *When the State Winks: The Performance of Jewish Conversion in Israel*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kravel-Tovi, Michal. 2018. “As If It Was Ours All Along: Precarious Belonging, Jewish Habitus and the Materialisation of Conversion in Israel.” *Ethnos* 83 (5): 949–967.

Krieger, Susan. 1991. *Social Science and the Self: Personal Essays on an Art Form*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Kristeva, Julia. 1980. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kulick, Don, and Margaret Willson, eds. 1995. *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*. 1st ed. London: Routledge.

Lahav, Hagar 2017. “Jewish Secular-Believer Women in Israel: A Complex and Ambivalent Identity.” *Israel Studies Review* 32 (2): 66–88.

Lancaster, Brian. 1993. *The Elements of Judaism*. Shaftesbury: Element Books Ltd.

Lareau, Annette. 1996. “Common Problems in Field Work: A Personal Essay.” In *Journeys Through Ethnography: Realistic Accounts of Fieldwork*, edited by Annette Lareau and Jeffrey Shultz, 195–236. Boulder: Westview Press.

Lather, Patti. 2007. *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Layosh, Bella, Beth G. Zalcman, and Keren-Miriam Adam. 2024. “Homophily in Interfaith Marriages in Israel Between Jewish Israeli Men and Arab Israeli Women.” *Marriage & Family Review* 60 (6): 370–393.

Laytner, Anson H. 1977. *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition*. New Jersey: Jason Aronson Publishers.

Leavy, Patricia L. 2007. “Feminist Postmodernism and Poststructuralism.” In *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, edited by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia L. Leavy, 83–110. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lefebvre, Henri. 1968. *Le Droit à la ville*. Paris: Anthropos.

Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lerum, Kari. 2001. “Subjects of Desire: Academic Armor, Intimate Ethnography, and the Production of Critical Knowledge.” *Qualitative Inquiry* 7 (4): 466–483.

Letherby, Gayle. 2003. *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Levy, Gideon. 2011. “Secularism, Religion and the Status Quo.” In *Religion and the State: A Comparative Sociology*, edited by Jack Barbalet, Adam Possamai, and Bryan S. Turner, 93–120. London: Anthem Press.

Levy, Natalie. 2023. “Arabs in Segregated vs. Mixed Jewish–Arab Schools in Israel: Their Identities and Attitudes towards Jews.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46 (12): 2720–2746.

Levy, Shlomit, Hanna Levinsohn, and Elihu Katz. 1993. *Beliefs, Observances and Social Interaction among Israeli Jews*. Jerusalem: Louis Guttman Israel Institute of Applied Social Research.

Levy, Shlomit, Hanna Levinsohn, and Elihu Katz. 2002. *A Portrait of Israeli Jewry: Beliefs, Observances and Values among Israeli Jews 2000*. Jerusalem: Louis Guttman Israel Institute of Applied Social Research.

Liebman, Charles S., and Eliezer Don-Yehiya. 1983. *Civil Religion in Israel: Traditional Judaism and Political Culture in the Jewish State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Liebman, Charles S., and Elihu Katz, eds. 1997. *The Jewishness of Israelis: Responses to the Guttman Report*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Liebman, Charles S. 1998. “Secular Judaism and Its Prospects.” *Israel Affairs* 4 (3–4): 29–48.

Liebman, Charles S., and Yaacov Yadgar. 2009. “Secular-Jewish Identity and the Condition of Secular Judaism in Israel.” In *Religion or Ethnicity? Jewish Identities in Evolution*, edited by Zvi Gitelman, 149–170. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Lorenz-Meyer, Dagmar. 2005. “O politice lokace: strategie používané ve feministické epistemologii a jejich význam pro výzkum prováděný z feministické perspektivy.” [On the Politics of Location: Strategies Used in Feminist Epistemology and Their Relevance for Research Conducted from a Feminist Perspective.]” In *Myšlení hranic: genderové pohledy na racionalitu, objektivitu a vědoucí subjekt* [*Thinking Boundaries: Gender Perspectives on Rationality,*

Objectivity and the Knowing Subject], edited by Alice Červinková and Marcela Linková, 75–96. Praha: Sociologický ústav AV ČR.

Lykke, Nina. 2010. *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing*. New York & London: Routledge.

Lyotard, Jean-François. 1979. *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1981. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Mahmood, Saba. 2016. *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Marcus, George E., and Dick Cushman. 1982. "Ethnographies as Texts." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11: 25–69.

Marcus, George, and Michael Fischer. 1986. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the History of the Human Sciences*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Marcus, George E. 1994. "What Comes (Just) After 'Post'? The Case of Ethnography." In *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 563–574. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Marcus, George E. 1995. "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95–117.

Marhánková Hasmanová, Jaroslava. 2013. "(Ne)jistá spojenectví kulturní antropologie a feministického myšlení. [The (Un)certain Alliance Between Cultural Anthropology and Feminist Thought.]" *Český Lid* 100 (2): 205–221.

Markowitz, Fran, and Michael Ashkenazi, eds. 1999. *Sex, Sexuality, and the Anthropologist*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Markowitz, Fran. 2006. “Blood, Soul, Race, and Suffering: Full-Bodied Ethnography and Expressions of Jewish Belonging.” *Anthropology and Humanism* 31 (1): 41–56.

Marzano, Marco. 2012. “Informed Consent.” In *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*, edited by Jaber F. Gubrium, James A. Holstein, Amir B. Marvasti, and Karyn D. McKinney, 443–456. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Meler, Tal, and Shlomit Oryan. 2024. “‘It Is Endless … It Is Definitely Challenging … But We Experience Growth out of It’: Negotiation Patterns of Jewish Israeli Women Living in Mixed Families.” *Social Identities* 30 (4): 352–368.

Mikdashi, Maya. 2022. *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, Secularism, and the State in Lebanon*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Mills, Sara. 2004. *Discourse*. 2nd ed. Milton: Routledge.

Mizrachi, Nissim. 2022. “Transcending the Liberal Grammar of Critical Sociology: The Theoretical Turn in Israeli Sociology.” *The American Sociologist* 53: 492–511.

Mody, Perveez. 2008. *The Intimate State: Love-Marriage and the Law in Delhi*. New Delhi: Routledge.

Mody, Perveez. 2013. “Love Jurisdiction.” *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 31 (2): 44–59.

Mody, Perveez. 2022. “Intimacy and the Politics of Love.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 51: 271–288.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1988. “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse.” *Feminist Review*30: 61–88.

Moore, Henrietta L. 2014. “If Intimacy Is the Answer, Then What Is the Question?” Paper presented at the workshop *Probing the Intimate: Cross-Cultural Queries of Proximity and Beyond*, University of Cambridge, May 2014.

Mor, Sagit. 2005. *Imagining the Law: The Construction of Disability in the Domains of Rights and Welfare – The Case of Israeli Disability Policy*. Doctoral dissertation, New York University School of Law.

Morton, Helen. 1995. “My Chastity Belt: Avoiding Seduction in Tonga.” In *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, edited by Don Kulick and Margaret Willson, 1st ed., London: Routledge.

Murphy, Elizabeth, and Robert Dingwall. 2007. “The Ethics of Ethnography.” In *Handbook of Ethnography*, edited by Paul Atkinson et al., 339–351. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Narayan, Kirin. 1993. “How Native Is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?” *American Anthropologist* 95 (3): 671–686.

Newton, Esther. 2000. *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Nilsson, Mats, and Mekonnen Tesfahuney. 2019. “What Space for Female Subjectivity in the Post-Secular?” *Theory, Culture & Society* 36 (7–8): 173–192.

Nosková, Jana. 2000. “Narativní metody v současné etnologii [Narrative Methods in Contemporary Ethnology].” *Národopisná revue* 10: 27–29.

Novotná, Hedvika, et al. 2019. *Metody výzkumu ve společenských vědách* [*Research Methods in Social Sciences*]. Prague: Faculty of Humanities, Charles University.

Oakley, Ann. 1981. “Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms.” In *Doing Feminist Research*, edited by Helen Roberts, 30–62. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Okun, Barbara S., and Orna Khait-Marelly. 2010. “The Impact of Intermarriage on Ethnic Stratification: Jews in Israel.” *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 28 (4): 375–394.

Ort, Jakub. 2023. “Za hranice sekulární autonomie? Pojetí emancipace u Saby Mahmood a Judith Butler [Beyond Secular Autonomy? The Concept of

Emancipation According to Saba Mahmood and Judith Butler].” *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research* 24 (2): 146–170.

Ortner, Sherry B. 1972. “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” *Feminist Studies* 1 (2): 5–31.

Ortner, Sherry B. 1995. “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37 (1): 173–193.

Ortner, Sherry B. 2016. “Dark Anthropology and Its Others: Theory Since the Eighties.” *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6 (1): 47–73.

Ortner, Sherry B. 2017. “More Thoughts on Resistance and Refusal: A Conversation with Sherry Ortner.” Interview by Andrew Shryock. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, June 12, 2017. Available at: https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/cssh/2017/06/12/more-thoughts-on-resistance-and-refusal-a-conversation-with-sherry-ortner/. Last accessed June 12, 2025.

Osella, Filippo, and Benjamin Soares, eds. 2010. *Islam, Politics, Anthropology*. London: Royal Anthropological Institute.

Pavlásek, Michal, and Jana Nosková. 2014. “Výzkumník v poli kvalitativního terénního výzkumu – dilemata a otázky.” [The Researcher in the Field of Qualitative Fieldwork – Dilemmas and Questions.].” In *Když výzkum, tak kvalitativní. Serpentinami bádání v terénu* [*If Research, Then Qualitative. Through the Serpentines of the Fieldwork*], edited by Michal Pavlásek and Jana Nosková, 7–20. Brno: Masaryk University, Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences.

Peled, Yoav. 2008. “The Evolution of Israeli Citizenship: An Overview.” *Citizenship Studies* 12 (3): 335–345.

Peled, Yoav, and Horit H. Peled. 2018. *The Religionization of Israeli Society*. London: Routledge.

Peleg, Yaron. 2006. *Heroic Conduct: Homoeroticism and the Creation of Modern Jewish Masculinities*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Pellegrini, Ann. 2009. “Feeling Secular.” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19 (2): 205–218.

Penslar, Derek. 2023. *Zionism: An Emotional State*. Rutgers University Press.

Petříček, Miroslav. 2003. “Ženské psaní: pragmatický rozpor.” [Women’s Writing: A Pragmatic Contradiction.] In *Ponořena do Léthé* [*Immersed in Léthé*], edited by Eva. Kalivodová and Blanka Knotková-Čapková, 12–15. Prague: Charles University.

Pew Research Center. 2016. *Israel’s Religiously Divided Society*. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2016/03/Israel-Survey-Full-Report.pdf. Last accessed February 14, 2025.

Plummer, Ken. 2001. “The Square of Intimate Citizenship: Some Preliminary Proposals.” *Citizenship Studies* 5 (3): 237–253.

Plummer, Ken. 2003. *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Porkertová, Hana. 2013. “Potíže s hmotou: Judith Butler a/nebo nový materialismus?” [“Matter Trouble: Judith Butler and/or the New Materialism?”]. *Gender, rovné příležitosti, výzkum* 14 (2): 41–51.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A. 2006. *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Pratt, Mary L. 1986. “Fieldwork in Common Places.” In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, 27–50. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Preisslová Krejčí, Alena. 2013. “Narativní analýza [Narrative Analysis].” In *Výzkumné metody v pedagogické praxi [Research Methods in Pedagogical Practice]*, edited by Lenka Gulová and Radim Šíp, 117–138. Prague: Grada.

Presner, Todd Samuel. 2007. *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration*. New York: Routledge.

Rabinow, Paul. 1977. *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rabinow, Paul. 1986. "Representations Are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology." In *Writing Culture*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, 234–261. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rabinowitz, Dan. 2001. "The Palestinian Citizens of Israel, the Concept of Trapped Minority and the Discourse of Transnationalism in Anthropology." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24 (1): 64–85.

Rabkin, Yakov M. 2016. *What Is Modern Israel?* London: Pluto Press.

Racin, Limore, and Simon Dein. 2010. "Jewish-Arab Couple Relationships in Israel: Underlying Motives for Entering and Engaging in Intermarriage." *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 5 (3): 278–300.

Ram, Uri. 2010. *Israeli Nationalism: Social Conflicts and the Politics of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.

Ramazanoglu, Caroline, and Janet Holland. 2002. *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*. London: SAGE Publications.

Reinharz, Shulamit. 1992. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reinharz, Shulamit. 2011. *Observing the Observer: Understanding Our Selves in Field Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rich, Adrienne. 1977. *Twenty-One Love Poems*. Emeryville, CA: Effie's Press.

Rich, Adrienne. 1984/2003. "Notes Towards a Politics of Location." In *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, 29–42. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Rosaldo, Renato. 1989. *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Rosner, Shmuel, and Camil Fuchs. 2019. *IsraeliJudaism: Portrait of a Cultural Revolution*. Jerusalem: Jewish People Policy Institute.

Rotbard, Sharon. 2015. *White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa*. London: Pluto Press.

Roth, Leon. 1968. *Judaism: A Portrait*. New York: Viking Press.

Rubin, Herbert J., and Irene S. Rubin. 1995. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rupp, Leila J. 1999. *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sabbah-Karkabi, Maha. 2017. "Ethnoreligious Mixed Marriages among Palestinian Women and Jewish Men in Israel: Negotiating the Breaking of Barriers." *Journal of Israeli History* 36 (2): 189–211.

Sabbah-Karkabi, Maha. 2022. "'Marriage Was Not an Option': Ethnoreligious Mixed Marriage in Israel." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45 (1): 47–68.

Sadeh, Keren. 2022. "The Border Within: Examining the Role of Group Boundaries in Mixed-Observance Families in Israel." *The American Sociologist* 53: 580–603.

Sanjek, Roger, ed. 2019. *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Šatava, Leoš. 2009. *Jazyk a identita etnických menšin. Možnosti zachování a revitalizace* [*Language and Identity of Ethnic Minorities. Possibilities for Preservation and Revitalization*]. Praha: SLON.

Schaum, Ina. 2020. *Being Jewish (and) in Love: Two and a Half Stories about Jews, Germans and Love*. Leipzig: Hentrich & Hentrich.

Scott, Joan Wallach. 2018. *Sex and Secularism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sehlikoglu, Sertaç, and Asli Zengin. 2015. “Introduction: Why Revisit Intimacy?” *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 33 (2): 20–25.

Sehlikoglu, Sertaç. 2021. *Working Out Desire: Women, Sport, and Self-Making in Istanbul*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Sehnahev, Yehouda. 2006. *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Senor, Dan, and Saul Singer. 2009. *Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle*. New York: Twelve.

Seth, Sanjay 2022. “Beyond Belief: Secularism, Religion and Our Muddled Modernity.” *Postcolonial Studies* 27 (3): 301–316.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Nadera. 2015. *Security Theology, Surveillance and the Politics of Fear*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shapira, Anita, ed. 2004. *Israeli Identity in Transition*. Westport: Praeger Publishers.

Shapira, Assaf. 2018. “Israel’s Politics of Citizenship.” *Israel Studies Review* 33 (3): 99–120.

Sharma, Aradhana. 2006. “Crossbreeding Institutions, Breeding Struggle: Women’s Empowerment, Neoliberal Governmentality, and State (Re)formation in India.” *Cultural Anthropology* 21 (1): 60–95.

Sharma, Aradhana, and Akhil Gupta, eds. 2006. *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Shenhav, Yehouda. 2008. “Invitation to a Post-secular Outline for the Study of the Society in Israel.” *Israeli Sociology (Sociologia Israelit)* 10 (1): 161–188.

Shlaim, Avi. 2023. *Three Worlds: Memoir of an Arab-Jew*. London: OneWorld Publications.

Shohat, Ella. 2017. *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements: Selected Writings*. London: Pluto Press.

Silberman, Charles E. 1985. *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today*. New York: Summit.

Šmausová, Gerlinda. 1999. "Rasa jako rasistická konstrukce." [Race as a Racist Construction.] *Sociologický časopis* 35 (4): 433–446.

Šmausová, Gerlinda. 2002. "Proti tvrdošíjné představě o ontické povaze gender a pohlaví." [Against the Stubborn Notion of the Ontic Nature of Gender and Sex.] *Sociální studia* 7: 15–27.

Smith, Sara. 2016. "Intimacy and Angst in the Field." *Gender, Place & Culture* 23 (1): 134–146.

Smooha, Sammy. 1997. "Ethnic Democracy: Israel as an Archetype." *Israel Studies* 2 (2): 198–241.

Smooha, Sammy. 2002. "The Model of Ethnic Democracy: Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State." *Nations and Nationalism* 8 (4): 475–503.

Soja, Edward W. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London: Verso, 2010. Originally published 1989.

Sokolová, Věra. 2020. "In Memoriam: Hana Havelková." *Gender a Výzkum* [*Gender and Research*] 21 (2): 118–123.

Sokolová, Věra. 2021. *Queer Encounters with Communist Power: Non-Heterosexual Lives and the State in Czechoslovakia, 1948–1989*. Prague: Karolinum.

Sorek, Tamir, and Honaida Ghanim. 2024. "Palestine/Israel Review: Carving Out a New Intellectual Space." *Palestine/Israel Review* 1 (1): 1–20.

Soukup, Václav. 2011. *Antropologie: teorie člověka a kultury / Anthropology: Theory of Human and Culture*. Praha: Portál.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary. Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Srinivasan, Amia. 2021. *The Right to Sex*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Staetsky, Daniel. 2023. *Intermarriage of Jews and Non-Jews: The Global Situation and Its Meaning*. Institute for Jewish Policy Research. https://www.jpr.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Intermarriage%20report.August%202023.pdf. Last accessed May 1, 2025.

Stanislawski, Michael. 2001. *Zionism and the Fin de Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Stanley, Liz. 1990. *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory, and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology*. London: Routledge.

Star, Susan Leigh. 1999. "The Ethnography of Infrastructure." *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 (3): 377–391.

Sternhell, Zeev. 1998. *The Founding Myths of Israel: Nationalism, Socialism, and the Making of the Jewish State*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Stöckelová, Tereza, and Yasar Abu Ghosh, eds. 2013. *Etnografie: Improvizace v teorii a terénní praxi* [*Ethnography: Improvisation in Theory and Fieldwork Practice*]. Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství.

Stoler, Ann Laura. 1995. *Race and the Education of Desire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Stoler, Ann Laura. 2002. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Strizower, Schifra 1966. "The 'Bene Israel' in Israel." *Middle Eastern Studies* 2 (2): 123–143.

Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51: 273–286.

Swidler, Ann. 2001. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Taragin-Zeller, Lea. 2023. *The State of Desire: Religion and Reproductive Politics in The Promised Land*. New York: New York University Press.

Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Taylor, Charles. 2009. "The Polysemy of the Secular." *Social Research* 76 (4): 1143–1166.

Tercatin, Raffi. 2025. "Avoiding the Rabbinate: 3,000 Israeli Couples Married Last Year in Utah's 'Zoom Weddings'." *The Times of Israel*. Available at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/avoiding-the-rabbinate-3000-israeli-couples-married-last-year-in-utahs-zoom-weddings/. Last accessed May 17, 2025.

Theodorou, Angelina E. 2016. "5 Facts About Israeli Druze, a Unique Religious and Ethnic Group." *Pew Research Center*. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/03/21/5-facts-about-israeli-druze-a-unique-religious-and-ethnic-group/. Last accessed May 7, 2015.

Thompson, Charis. 2005. *Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Tilly, Charles. 1998. *Durable Inequality*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tonkin, Elisabeth, et al. 1996. "History and Ethnicity." In *Ethnicity*, edited by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, 18–24. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Triger, Zvi H. 2009. "The Gendered Racial Formation: Foreign Men, Our Women, and the Law." *Women's Rights Law Reporter* 30 (3–4): 479–525.

Trower, Shelley. 2023. *Sound Writing: Voices, Authors, and Readers of Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Truman, Sarah E. 2019. "Feminist New Materialisms." In *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*, edited by Paul Atkinson, Sara Delamont, Alexandru Cernat, Joseph W. Sakshaug, and Richard A. Williams. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Tsolidis, Georgina 2008. "The (Im)Possibility of Poststructuralist Ethnography – Researching Identities in Borrowed Spaces." *Ethnography and Education* 3 (3): 271–281.

Visweswaran, Kamala. 1994. *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Vohralík Šternová, Marina. 2022. "Krajanská komunita v Izraeli z antropologické perspektivy; integrace do místní společnosti a její vztah k původní domovině [The Expatriate Community in Israel from an Anthropological Perspective: Integration into the Local Society and Its Relationship to the Country of Origin]." PhD diss., Charles University, Faculty of Arts, Department of Ethnology. Supervisor: Zdeněk Uherek.

Webber, Jonathan. 1997. "Jews and Judaism in Contemporary Europe: Religion or Ethnic Group?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 20 (2): 257–279.

Wedeen, Lisa. 2002. "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science." *American Political Science Review* 96 (4): 713–728.

Wedeen, Lisa. 2008. "Ethnography as Interpretive Enterprise." In *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, edited by Edward Schatz, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Weedon, Chris. 1997. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. New York: Basil Blackwell Inc.

Weiss, Margot D. 2011. "The Epistemology of Ethnography: Method in Queer Anthropology." *Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17 (4): 649–664.

Williams, James. 2005. *Understanding Poststructuralism*. Chesham, Bucks: Acumen Publishing.

Williams, Raymond. 1958. "Culture Is Ordinary." In *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, 3–14. London: Verso, 1989.

Wills, Emily R. 2016. "Constructing a 'Wall': Discursive Fields, Social Movements, and the Politics of the [Wall/Barrier/Fence]." *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 31 (3): 305–318.

Wilson, Ara. 2016. "The Infrastructure of Intimacy." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41 (2): 247–280.

Wright, Fiona. 2016. "Palestine, My Love: The Ethico-Politics of Love and Mourning in Jewish Israeli Solidarity Activism." *American Anthropologist* 43 (1): 130–143.

Wynn, Lisa L. 2015. "Writing Affect, Love, and Desire into Ethnography." In *Phenomenology in Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective*, edited by Kalpana Ram and Christopher Houston, 224–247. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Yadgar, Yaacov. 2010. "Maintaining Ambivalence: Religious Practice and Jewish Identity among Israeli Traditionists. Post-Secular Perspective." *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9 (3): 397–419.

Yadgar, Yaacov. 2011. "A Post-Secular Look at Tradition: Toward a Definition of 'Traditionism.'" *Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary* 156: 77–98.

Yadgar, Yaacov. 2011b. *Secularism and Religion in Jewish-Israeli Politics*. New York: Routledge.

Yadgar, Yaacov. 2017. *Sovereign Jews: Israel, Zionism, and Judaism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Yadgar, Yaacov. 2020. *Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis: State and Politics in the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yadgar, Yaacov. 2024. *To Be a Jewish State: Zionism as the New Judaism*. New York: New York University Press.

Yiftachel, Oren. 2006. *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2006. “Belonging and the Politics of Belonging.” *Patterns of Prejudice* 40 (3): 197–214.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1993. “Gender and Nation.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16 (4): 621–632.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1997. *Gender and Nation*. London: Sage Publications.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2011. *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Zaban, Hila. 2016. “City of Go(l)d: Spatial and Cultural Effects of High-Status Jewish Immigration from Western Countries on the Baka Neighbourhood of Jerusalem.” *Urban Studies* 54 (7): 1539–1558.

Zábrodská, Kateřina. 2009. *Variace na gender. Poststrukturalismus, diskurzivní analýza a genderová identita* [*Variations on Gender. Poststructuralism, Discursive Analysis and Gender Identity*]. Prague: Academia.

Záhora, Jakub. 2021. “Occupation, Sight, Landscape: Visibility and Normalization of the Israeli Settlements.” *International Political Sociology* 15 (4): 460–481.

Záhora, Jakub. 2023. “‘When You Come to Ariel, You Come to Serenity’: Affect, Aesthetics and Normalisation of Colonial Domination in Israeli Settlements.” *Geopolitics* 29 (1): 1–29.

Zoufalá Menachem, Marcela. 2012a. “Judaism and Divorce Practices in the Modern State of Israel.” *Culturologia* 1 (2): 33–37.

Zoufalá Menachem, Marcela. 2012b. *Judaismus a ženy v Izraeli* [*Judaism and Women in Israel*]. Prague: Karolinum University Press.

Zoufalá Menachem, Marcela. 2020. “Ethno-Religious Othering as a Reason Behind the Central European Jewish Distancing from Israel.” In *Being Jewish in*

21st Century Central Europe, edited by Haim Fireberg, Olaf Glöckner, and Marcela Menachem Zoufalá, 186–206. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg.