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The Atlas Interview in the Age of Its Internet Ubiquity

My comments will be brief. I have no thesis, merely a set of reflections on the striking unity of concentration and dispersal, of recuperation and loss, occasioned both by the conditions under which the original Atlas interviews were conducted and by the re-emergence of Atlas data in this new medium. I plan to reflect briefly on the relation between what I take to be the “national” form of the Atlas project and on its structuralist logic, and also on the tensions in the Atlas between location and ubiquity, between embodiment and fragmentation. In response to more specific aspects of the working paper circulated to participants, I will suggest some illustrations of the ultimately unpredictable but potentially foreseeable new kinds of circulation of signs and memories that the Eydes website enables, such as recuperation of the sound of local Yiddish by local residents (Jewish or not) never privileged to hear the Yiddish of that place before. In sum, I want to suggest that the Atlas interview available on the Internet provides further material for reflection on the politics of memory to be rescued from ruins and fragments, a question that has been central to me since I first began studying Yiddish, and reading Walter Benjamin, almost simultaneously in the late 1970s—and more simply, that the Eydes project is exemplary of the kind of initiative that is conducive to the possibility of continued human existence.

We are all nodal points, each a producer and consumer of anxiety and comfort, each creator and destroyer of meaning, generators of memory and agents of violent oblivion

in form, this is historically a *national* project

--the klal-yiddish provides the form of national identity in unity

--Dovid Malki (before I had ever met him): Zikh lernen yidish in YIVO iz azoy vi geboyrn vern in an incubator

--the Atlas provides the form of national identity in diversity

--example of the Palestinian dinner where women came out dressed in the typical embroidery of the various parts of that imagined homeland

In its logic, this is fundamentally a structuralist project, in which a given item—actually a signifier (“small street”) is actually taken as a signified, and the various Yiddish signifiers that correspond to that “signified” are then mapped out.

--example: “pebblechuk” glossed as (special implement for removing small stones from horses’ hooves)

Perfect postmodern contrast between location and ubiquity, between embodiment and fragmentation

The “germ theory” of Yiddish (the seed metaphor is not quite right, because what grows is not what merely what is genetically programmed; the cultural evolution is much more contingent than that)

“holekresh, holekresh, vi zol dos kind heysn?” “shoshanas yakov, tsehole dos maydl”—the thoughts come together on a Purim morning at the Stanton Street Shul when a Jewish girl is being named.

These diacritics (e.g. the contrasting pair Ashkenaz:Sepharad) are also more particularly characteristic of the constitution of Jewishness:

Jonah’s explanation: Elissa and I speak Yiddish differently, because she’s from Brooklyn and I’m from New Jersey

2 “EYDES at the present”

--2.1 “the original sound” is it possible, without sounding hopelessly artsy, to suggest that this in itself, without any further identifying marks or keys, has a *circulatory value*, first in preservation in any medium, and then how much more so in an accessible medium?

--2.2.1(a) *“the question” provides a paradigm for a vision of differentiation and dispersal (the same signified, different signifiers)*

--2.2.1(b) *“location”—my immediate image (stimulated by the local Polish young woman interested in local Jewish community history, and by the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Poland) of a young person in an East European town or city, fascinated by the legacy of the local Jewish community, hearing—if not being able to learn to speak—Yiddish as “actually” spoken in that place*

--*a renewed emphasis on the significance of place*, University of Minnesota Press image of a suited and plump academic hammering at a monolithic and huge Book and making lots of smaller books fall out.

--*as against the de-location of the normatized klal:*

-- a-z-e-f-f

--*a renewed possibility, at least at the intimate level, of bringing Yiddish back into contact with its coterritorial languages*

--*the way the local stays in memory: akhty herd*

“the end of nature”—analogy to protection of breeding pairs, or to a species reintroduction program

3.1 “expanding archive paths” –

3.2 further user-friendly forms: *it’s not clear to me that it’s possible to just sit down and listen to an entire interview straight through: indeed one desideratum that may not only not be present in the archive as it stands, but unproducable altogether today, would be a simple taped interview of a monologue or a dialogue of Yiddish conversation from a particular location (without, that is, the interviewer’s interjections and questions). This should be ideally seen as a resource not only for specialists in dialectic geography and historical linguistics, but for all those—genealogists, historians, novelists, or simply those interested in more richly inhabiting a given place in the present through its past. Hence the further developments should be thought of not only in terms of greater analytic manipulability, but also in terms of greater holistic integrability.*

3. 3. "Creating archive applications",

3.5 "Including the users" *—is there thought of an online forum or users' group, which would provide both a place for suggestions about the evolution of the website and for discussions of the scientific and cultural resources of the Atlas?*

3.6 "Including further Yiddish archives". *Links to JewishGen.org would be obvious, so that an integration of purely linguistic data with personal reminiscences and other "thick descriptions" of the town would be readily available. The richer our virtual representation of Jewish lieux de memoire the better. At the same time it is no doubt best that this virtual representation retain the traces of its fragmentary and reconstructive nature. I am put in mind of Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico, with three kinds of ruin of the Pueblo Indians who lived there from the 1100s through the 1500s: one excavated and fully reconstructed; one excavated but left as the excavators found it; and one still left under the earth for future archaeologists.*

What are your thoughts about the positioning of the archive within culture studies in general, especially with regard to Europe?

--class differences in pronunciation and glossary?

--a stress, quite productive but which might not be obvious at first, on the relation between place and auralty

--further material for reflection on the politics of memory to be rescued from ruins and fragments, a question that has been central to me since I first began studying Yiddish, and reading Walter Benjamin, almost simultaneously in the late 1970s.

--possibility for using the Atlas as a basis for regularizing (annual?) symposia or other events bringing people together to talk about the specifics of the heritage of local Jewish communities

--just the partial list of place names next to the location index brings home very forcefully the historical (and in that sense "contingent" if not arbitrary) nature of the distinction between East and West Europe, a question that remains of vital, not to say mortal, importance, and a question whose discussion that can only be

--Although I am not so much "af der yidisher gas," I do not think the Atlas is very much in its hearts and minds: I think the promoters of the eydes website have a lot of promotion to do. One area where it might be usefully promoted—though we would have to discuss how—is within the existing (and growing) community of Orthodox speakers of Yiddish, who might have a reverential tie to the specifics of a given Jews place of memory (the rebbe's town, for instance) even if their own ancestors did not come from that place.