

Introduction

SAVAGE JEWS

“Looked at precisely, it was something like a savage African tribe,” commented Franz Kafka after visiting a Hasidic Jewish gathering in Prague in 1915.¹ The statement is startling. Kafka seems at first to disparage Jews by combining a flatly racist estimation of Africans with a condescending attitude toward Jewish migrants from eastern Europe. But we also know that Kafka actually viewed Hasidim in an admiring light. He participated in what Gershom Scholem would later call a “cult of Eastern Jews” that lay at the heart of a contemporary cultural renaissance among German-speaking Jews.² This positive valuation of eastern European Jews and their language, Yiddish, led Kafka, for example, to declare that “Yiddish is everything” and is something one can “feel the true unity of.”³ In this light, the tribal “savagery” Kafka saw in these Yiddish-speaking Jews, with their superstitions, circle dances, and repetitive chanting, presented an exciting repudiation of the hollowed-out, Westernized Judaism that Kafka identified with his father.⁴ This is Jewish primitivism; in fact, this is primitivism across European modernism: a critique of modernity activated by the positive evaluation of a purportedly premodern society. Primitivist critique typically takes an object that is distinctly “other”—and definitively not European. Hence the people generally enlisted, whether by force or by fantasy, to play the role of primitives are defined as everything Europeans are supposedly not: dark-skinned, illiterate, uncivilized, superstitious, prelogical.⁵ Jewish primitivism—by Jews, of Jews—should therefore have been impossible: European Jews were often stereotyped—by themselves and others—as too modern, too urban,

too political, too literate. And even if Hasidic and other eastern European Jews superficially resembled more distant so-called primitives, why would European Jews valorize as vital and free a people actually among the most vulnerable in Europe? After all, neither Jews nor so-called primitive peoples had a place as equals in modern, civilized Europe, and Jewish primitivists were certainly not arguing for the exclusion or subjugation of Jews. On the contrary—Jewish primitivism was a product of the effort to create and consolidate identity and nationhood through Jewish culture.⁶ European modernity depended, however, on the creation of ineradicable difference—between the Jew and the Christian, between the *Volk* and everyone else, between the civilized and the primitive. In imagining European Jews as primitive savages, European Jewish writers and artists used Jewish primitivism to undermine the idea of ineradicable difference by blurring the border between savage and civilized. Jews turned the ethnographic lens on themselves not so much to salvage or study the premodern vestiges of their own culture,⁷ and certainly not to denigrate themselves, but instead to critique the distinction, so starkly drawn in modern ethnography and aesthetic primitivism, between subject and object.

Jewish primitivism exposed the fixed poles of identity holding in place Europe's political and aesthetic regimes. Only in this inherently destabilizing manner could the impossible situation of European Jews be analyzed and reimagined. The result was a discourse that recognized its own impossibility: a powerful critique of the necessity of Jewish inclusion that began from the premise of inclusion. This meant that it was a broader critique, too—of European modernity and its claims regarding collective identity and individual subjectivity. It was also a critique of the aesthetics that emerged from the binary construction of identity in European ethnographic modernity. In other words, Jewish primitivism generated an aesthetic paradox by interrogating the vulnerability of the Jewish subject—the literary and visual conflation of subject and object. This aesthetic paradox was a pointed critique of continental European modernist primitivism.

Jewish primitivism is found in an idiosyncratic array of works of art and literature. Else Lasker-Schüler, the German-Jewish poet and artist, introduced herself and signed her correspondence as Prince Jussuf, chief of the “Bund der wilden Juden,” the Society of Savage Jews. These fearless warriors featured in her poetry, prose, and visual art, narrowing the gaps between genres and media and bridging the chasm between art and life. Although Lasker-Schüler was a

bohemian and famously claimed to be “unpolitical,”⁸ her fantasy of unfettered primitivity revealed that the politics of Jewish primitivism were not only emancipatory; they could also be about domination, as in the Hebrew and Yiddish poetry of Lasker-Schüler’s onetime friend Uri Zvi Grinberg. While Prince Jusuf wore a dagger in his belt inscribed with the word “ve’ahavta”—and thou shalt love—Grinberg’s radical right-wing Zionism sharpened the sword of the “Society of Savage Jews,” turning it into a poetic vision for the settlement of Palestine.

Despite its immediate communal and political resonance, Jewish primitivism was also always about the self—the Jewish self, the European self, the human self. In 1914, Kafka asked in his diary, “What do I have in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself; I should stand quietly in a corner, happy that I can breathe.”⁹ Here he rejects the premise of an exoticizing, ethnographic gaze and turns the lens on himself. Relative to the distance he feels from himself, the primitiveness of the Hasidim he would later compare to Africans is beside the point. Kafka understands that true difference can lie much closer to home. Asking what he has in common with himself does not mean that he no longer seeks commonality with Jews, with Hasidim, or, indeed, with African tribesmen; it shows, rather, that in relation to a primitive other, Kafka becomes other himself. Kafka’s primitivism and his radical self-alienation exist in relation to one another, oscillating continuously between looking outward and looking inward.¹⁰

Another example of Jewish primitivism brings Kafka’s two elements together: when the leading Yiddish literary critic Bal Makhshoves described his encounter with the Jews of Warsaw, he remarked that he felt “like someone from a foreign people with a more elevated culture. . . . I studied them like Aztecs; but they were close to me, like children from one father.”¹¹ Bal Makhshoves turned what may seem like an ordinary instance of exoticizing objectification into something more intimate and more complicated.¹² He pushed the object of his commentary as far as exoticism would allow but then undercut the chasm of difference with a claim of similitude. But not just a claim: he himself was a Jew from Warsaw. Here we see a recalibration of primitivism’s distancing effect: the “other” is not placed across an unbridgeable civilizational chasm but is a sibling. Rather than turning the alienation onto himself, as Kafka does, Bal Makhshoves emphasizes a kinship and closeness that complicate—without renouncing—his own primitivism.

In the examples of Lasker-Schüler and Grinberg, we see that Jewish primitivism shared a purpose with primitivism more broadly: it was a search for vitality and immediacy. In the examples from Kafka and Bal Makhshoves, we see clearly the primary distinction of Jewish primitivism and why it is that all of the above examples may seem so strange and self-contradictory. Unlike European primitivism more broadly, which sought to replace the European subject with the primitive object, Jewish primitivism was the struggle to be both at once—European and foreign, subject and object, savage and civilized.

While Jewish primitivism's currency was determined by its social relevance, it was above all, as Ben Etherington argues regarding all primitivism, an aesthetic project.¹³ The connection between the two aspects emerges in a 1910 speech by Y. L. Peretz, the dominant figure of turn-of-the-century Yiddish literature in eastern Europe: "Two paths lie before us, one path to Europe where Jewish form will be destroyed, the second path back."¹⁴ By Jewish form, Peretz meant specifically, recognizably Jewish art and literature. But where was back? His answer: the "Bible" (*bibl*); "Hasidic" (*khsidish*); "folklorism" (*folkstimlekhkeyt*). Forward and backward were not the only directions Peretz used to orient his thinking on art; he also went up and down: "Art is a staircase, and the ground floor is the primitive of the folk."¹⁵ Peretz's compass of Jewish art pointed back (to the folk) and down (to the primitive): the cardinal points of primitivism. *Bible*, *Hasidic*, *folklorism*—translation flattens the strangeness of this trio in the original Yiddish, particularly the middle word, Hasidic. *Bibl* is a European Christian word; the Yiddish word is *toyre*, from the Hebrew *torah*. *Folkstimlekhkeyt* is another strange word, derived from an eighteenth-century German neologism and meaning something like "folkishness"; why not simply say "folklore"?¹⁶ *Khsidish* is the strangest of all—it is an adjective, nominalized not grammatically but by the force of Peretz's literary vision. But what is the noun this adjective replaces? "Hasidic" . . . what? These odd and ambiguous words, chosen over more typical and grammatical alternatives, betray the ambiguity of Peretz's aesthetic project, which had a direction—back or down—but no destination, a process without a fixed method or goal.

The lack of fixity was shared across the various versions of Jewish primitivism. It allowed for ideological flexibility: it could be assimilationist or Zionist, revolutionary or reactionary. It allowed for linguistic flexibility: written in German, ostensibly the language of modern civilized Jews; in Yiddish, ostensibly the primitive language of benighted, backward Jews; and in Hebrew, a language creating a present between a biblical past and a still-to-be-determined future.

And it allowed for aesthetic flexibility: neo-Romantic and modernist; literary, graphic, and photographic; based on models of orality and visuality; realist and abstract.¹⁷

On the varied map of Jewish primitivism I will draw in the coming chapters, two landmarks are unmistakable. First, by turning primitivism on its head and reversing its direction toward the self, Jewish primitivism recalibrated one of modernism's central elements. This was so destabilizing and so counterintuitive that it has been excluded from the story usually told about primitivism.¹⁸ A new assessment of the place and function of primitivism in general within European modernism is called for.¹⁹ The second major contribution of Jewish primitivism was its radical challenge to the central cultural project of European Jewish modernity. Romantic nationalism—the effort to create a Jewish *Volk*—has been seen as the basis of modern Jewish culture. In this view, Jewish culture was meant to reflect the Jewish *Volksgeist* and to substantiate the social and political claims of a Jewish nation in the modern, European sense. But Jewish primitivism, which emerged from the Herderian aesthetics of the Jewish cultural project, issued a profound challenge to this project. It did so because its object—European Jews—did not fit the model of a *Volk* promoted by Romantic nationalism and the associated discipline of folklore studies.²⁰

I will elaborate on each of these aspects in turn—first, the place of Jewish primitivism in European modernism, and second, the place of Jewish primitivism in modern Jewish culture.

The Difference of Jewish Primitivism

Primitivism in European modernism was the belief that a better way of making art and a better way of living were to be found among those people considered by Europeans to lack civilization. Before humans were corrupted by modernity, so the line of thinking goes—indeed, before they were corrupted by any civilization at all—they were truly free, truly creative, and truly alive. For civilized (read: white, Christian, European) peoples, this time of freedom, creativity, and vitality ended before recorded history. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, many European ethnographers and artists believed that such a state could still be found among “primitive savages” who lived in a permanent state of prehistory.²¹

In the first scholarly study of primitivism, George Boas and Arthur Lovejoy sought to account for all the varieties of primitivism from antiquity to the

present and found that it was everywhere: “The unending revolt of the civilized against something, or everything, characteristic of civilization, has been prompted by diverse tempers or impulses, and it has been directed against diverse objectives; and this diversity compels us to recognize a number of significantly distinct primitivisms.”²² Despite their recognition that primitivism is protean, they reduce it to two types: chronological primitivism (“a kind of philosophy of history, a theory, or a customary assumption, as to the time—past or present or future—at which the most excellent condition of human life, or the best state of the world in general, must be supposed to occur”)²³ and cultural primitivism (“the discontent of the civilized with civilization”).²⁴ Each type has numerous subcategories; most interesting, cultural primitivism is divided into “soft” and “hard” primitivisms. Soft primitivism is the adulation of primitives for the leisurely simplicity of their lives; hard primitivism admires the contentment of primitives with brutal lives of struggle and scarcity.²⁵

Robert Goldwater’s *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1938) identified primitivism’s most hospitable terrain and set the terms for a sympathetic scholarly assessment of primitivism that would last close to fifty years. Like Boas and Lovejoy, Goldwater sought to impose a schema on the manifold varieties of primitivism he saw even in his drastically reduced time frame. He proposed that modern art featured the following types of primitivism: romantic, emotional, intellectual, and subconscious. Goldwater likewise understood that primitivism was variable in essence but pushed further by insisting that primitivism had no particular object, that it was “more psychological than formal, it was a quality read into the objects rather than objectively observed, and so it was bound to vary with the orientation of each group.”²⁶ For Boas and Lovejoy, primitivism had been an idea; Goldwater argued that it was no longer just an idea in European modernism, becoming instead a question of perspective or orientation. Among his definitions of primitivism, Goldwater maintained that primitivism depended on “the fact that the primitives of the twentieth century are not part of the artist’s own tradition.”²⁷ Yet he also noted that the trajectory of primitivism was toward “endemization,” wherein “children’s art and folk art were at first mixed with the African and the Oceanic and similarities were found between them; and then, with the addition of subconscious art considered under its primitive aspects, they entirely replaced the aboriginal productions.”²⁸

Goldwater’s insight about the trajectory of primitivism toward the endemic prompts a comparison of Jewish primitivism to other forms of primitivism as practiced by artists belonging to ethnic and religious minorities on the

European continent and in the Americas or who were subjects of European empires in the first half of the twentieth century. Some of these primitivisms were distinct from Jewish primitivism because they still operated on the assumption of binaries of distance and otherness. For example, the valorization of Gaelic culture in Ireland opposed the center to the periphery, the urban to the rural, dominant language to dying language, the ascendant to the declining.²⁹ These binaries were often organized around the contrast of English dominance—political and linguistic—with the forms of Irish social, political, and aesthetic expression possible in Great Britain’s shadow.³⁰ A further important distinction between the Celtic revival and Jewish primitivism is the fact that the former was undertaken, according to Gregory Castle, “by intellectuals who were not, strictly speaking, ‘native.’”³¹

Gauging the similarities and differences between the primitivisms deployed by writers and artists of the African diaspora (and indeed African colonial subjects) and by Jewish writers and artists requires more nuance. A century’s worth of scholarship on European primitivist modernism, largely focused on European painting (mostly on Pablo Picasso and German expressionism), has taught that the critique of Western modernity offered by primitivism stemmed from the purported discovery of alternative aesthetic and epistemological models in the art of so-called primitive peoples.³² The reinterpretation of this history in the last generation has shown that European primitivism is also an aesthetic ideology of domination of non-European others by means of the appropriation of non-Western art as source material and the objectification of the people who produced it.³³ Both versions are true.

Paul Gauguin, arguably the first artist of modern primitivism, is a good example of both accounts. He wrote of “two kinds of beauty: one that results from instinct and another which would come from studying.”³⁴ He traveled all the way to Tahiti to find people he viewed as sufficiently uncivilized to know the kind of beauty that comes from instinct. But studying this instinct was not enough for him; to produce the kind of art he admired, he needed to become “savage-in-spite-of-myself.”³⁵ Only then would he “forget all the misfortunes of the past” and be “free from all artistic jealousies and with no need whatsoever of lowly trade.”³⁶ And only then could he become an artist by instinct. His paintings show a world of unfettered sexuality and spirituality and a lack of material want. The composition and subjects of his paintings also reveal that he wished to possess—the bodies and the freedom—perhaps more than he wished to belong. What’s more, he was never able to free himself from his “lowly trade”

as a painter, and he depended on the modern machinery of colonialism to subsist.³⁷ His critique of Western art and society was based on a fantasy and was fed by his exploitation of Tahitian people and art. The European primitivists after him, including Picasso, followed suit, deploying one or all of the following, regardless of the particularities of their project: prurient and often racist depictions of “primitive” people, facile representations of their society and beliefs, and interpretations of their art only within Western models and for Western purposes.

While the goal of most European primitivism was, as Gauguin put it, to become “savage in spite of myself,” Jewish primitivism asserted a savage identity for Jews not in spite of themselves but because of themselves. Jewish primitivism was therefore much closer to the primitivisms that flowered in the shadow of Europe’s empires, like that of Négritude at the fringes of the Francophonie and that of the Irish revival off the continent’s coast. Such valorizations of primitiveness, produced by people who belonged to groups objectified by “major” primitivism, challenged European dominance over identity formation, artistic creativity, and political identification. Jewish primitivism brought this challenge to the heart of metropolitan Europe and into the midst of European modernism.³⁸

There can be no doubt that primitivism’s colonial context determined its aesthetic agenda and possibilities: the inspiration claimed by white European artists, in the light of its material and social underpinnings, is clearly also appropriation.³⁹ But this important realization has made it difficult to appreciate that other primitivisms, like those of Négritude and the Harlem Renaissance, could be something other than an internalization and replication of the racist terms of primitivism more generally. Sieglinde Lemke has argued that “black primitivism”⁴⁰ is obscured by seeing primitivism as a binary matter, with Black art always objectified and subordinate.⁴¹ In clearing a space for the examination of Black primitivism, Lemke and others have revealed the ways it diverged politically, and indeed aesthetically, from “white” primitivism.⁴² For example, Claude McKay, Jamaican-born and a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance, could write a character in *Home to Harlem* (1928) who, according to Tracy McCabe, “attempts to repress the ‘savage’ image of Africa and Haiti” only to have it “surface when he contemplates his own educated, civilized self.”⁴³ The binary opposition in “white” primitivism of civilized and savage is taken apart in McKay’s primitivism. Lemke further argues that “black primitivist modernism”⁴⁴ stages a “double encounter, with European primitivist modernism and African

design,” by which an African American artist could discover “the legacy of her ancestors through her cultural other.”⁴⁵ This observation reminds us that although Black primitivism shared an object with white primitivism⁴⁶—African art and African people—it had drastically different political meanings and social consequences.

This was possible because, contrary to most understandings of primitivism in the last generation, primitivism was not created by hegemonic voices only. As Ben Etherington has argued, the framework of major versus minor identity and the idea that primitivism had a stable object can lead to a misunderstanding of how primitivism actually worked.⁴⁷ Etherington notes that *what* primitivism wanted is far less important than the wanting: “‘The primitive’ is more like a dialectical principle of aesthetic exploration than something that can be nailed to any particular conception.”⁴⁸ This is why, argues Etherington, primitivism could be a major part of the literature of Black colonial subjects who were themselves already objects of primitivism.⁴⁹ This insight is also crucial for understanding Jewish primitivism, a phenomenon of metropolitan Europe, not the colonial hinterland.

Yet the inconsistency and seeming impossibility of an ever-shifting object and identity did not mean that identity was unimportant. For European Jews, as for African Americans, identity could be a matter of life and death. However vaguely construed, it was central to culture, society, and politics and accordingly introduced a set of pressing social questions to an aesthetic discourse that was otherwise concerned, as Robert Goldwater puts it in his foundational definition of primitivism, with “the basic elements of human experience” (which precede or obviate identity) or “the fundamental factors of external form.”⁵⁰ The precariousness of the safety and status of European Jews, together with the unification of subject and object, did not change the orientation of aesthetic primitivism but raised its stakes: Jewish primitivism was no longer an abstract critique of modernity but an urgent response to the urgent challenges of European Jewish life.

The scholarly assessment of primitivism as an aesthetic mode that envisioned the infiltration of Europe by the savage other is therefore inadequate. In Jewish primitivism, the savage was already there, and so too was the capacity to turn primitivism against the aesthetic order and ideological regime that generated it. In other words, while primitivism was grounded in difference, Jewish primitivism disassembled that difference, because, from the perspective of European art and society, Jews were plausibly primitive but also plausibly

European. This was the source of Jewish primitivism's ability to expose and critique the presuppositions undergirding modernism at large.

Jewish Primitivism and Modern Jewish Culture

Jewish primitivism has similar confounding consequences for the understanding of modern European Jewish culture. The central project of European Jews in the last decades of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth was the reinvention and elaboration of Jewish peoplehood, centered around the modern discourses of the folk and the nation. Jewish art, literature, and music operated under the terms of this social and political project. Primitivism posed two related challenges to the project of modern Jewish culture. First, if primitivism emphasized the gap between savage and civilized, wouldn't the savage Jew compromise Jewish claims to European identity? Second, by interrogating the self, Jewish primitivism disassembled the collective that was so painstakingly created in the notion of the Jewish folk.

The idea of the Jewish folk was meant to solve the problem that despite the fact that Ashkenazic Jews and their language, Yiddish, were as old and as European as the Germans or French and their languages, the possibility of being European—whatever its definition—was always denied them. The Jews could solve this problem by substantiating their claims to rights, status, and nationhood with folklore, the glue that binds together a folk and is the basis for a folk's most significant product—culture. For Herder, the Jews had already accomplished this: he maintained that Hebrew poetry (i.e. the Bible) was the greatest proof of the essential nationhood of the Jewish people.⁵¹ The modern Jewish culture project attempted to offer an updated proof in the face of new definitions of culture in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The first was Matthew Arnold's famous definition of culture as "the best knowledge and thought of the time," which worked seamlessly with a nationalism centered on folklore—a folk simply required a lore that met those standards.⁵² The other central definition of culture challenged the syllogism of folk-culture-nation. In his seminal work *Primitive Culture* (1871), Edward Tylor proposed that culture was a "complex whole" and was manifest in "the lower tribes" just as it was in "the higher nations."⁵³ This definition was crucial for the formation of primitivism but inimical to the project of Jewish culture, which pivoted on the Jewish claim to belonging among the "higher" nations.

There were many ideological and aesthetic versions of the modern Jewish culture project. Yiddishists, who claimed that the Yiddish language was the glue that held together the Jewish nation and proved Jewish belonging in Europe, argued that folklore was a manifestation of the Jews' deep roots on the continent.⁵⁴ Cultural Zionists claimed Jewish folklore as proof of Jewish nationhood.⁵⁵ It was a tool of the Jewish "culturists," as Kenneth Moss has called them, in the early Soviet Union, whose project to create a "new Jewish culture" drew unabashedly on the nineteenth-century notion of high culture.⁵⁶ These ideologies all saw folklore as the "ground floor," in Peretz's words, of national creativity and accordingly as the linchpin of national identity. As Marc Nichanian memorably put it in his discussion of similar processes in Armenian culture, "nationalization is an aestheticization."⁵⁷ What else could it be, after all, when there was no possibility of self-government? The creation of folklore, of a national literature, is thus a type of what Stathis Gourgouris calls autoscopic mimicry,⁵⁸ which Nichanian sees as central to the formation of the "ethnographic nation" and leads inevitably to "self-colonization."⁵⁹

But since, in Tylor's terms, folklore belonged as much to the lower as to the higher nations, not only was it a tool of nationalization—as it was, for example, among cultural Zionists—but it was also a gateway to primitivism, that is, the subversion of nationalization. If autoscopic mimicry results in self-colonization, then Jewish primitivism is a technique of decolonization.⁶⁰ And so the practices of collecting and of narrating the folk generated by Romantic nationalism laid the groundwork for a discourse that would undermine it.

Primitivism worked against the nationalizing aesthetics of folklorism and orientalism because it rejects a stable national or folk identity and consequently rejects a stable archive of artistic themes, texts, or subjects. Without a folk, there is no canon; without a collective other, there is no collective self. This distinction between folklorism/orientalism and primitivism is important: the former category is essentially concerned with the creation of a group defined through folk culture, while the latter engages primitive culture for the refinement of individual subjectivity. It is important to note that when Jewish primitivism makes use of folk culture, it does so *as* primitive culture: primitivism can draw on the domestic as much as the exotic. In fact, the Yiddish word most often used to identify these sources is *folks-primitiv*.⁶¹

To characterize the aesthetic ramifications of this distinction, it is useful to distinguish between exoticism and primitivism. According to Klaus Kiefer,

an exoticist work is one that incorporates the source material into one's own representational aesthetic.⁶² This is, as Carlo Severi argues, not a new style but a kind of quotation, in contradistinction to primitivism, which generates "a reciprocal tension between two styles of representation. Through this tension, one of the two visual languages becomes definable through the other."⁶³ This is the essential dividing line between the exoticist and the primitivist engagement with ethnographic or folkloric material: exoticism (of which folklorism is therefore the domestic form and orientalism the form pointed toward the Near East, North Africa, central Asia, and India) quotes and incorporates; primitivism seeks synthesis and produces tension. To be clear, since the preexisting terminology overlaps: primitivism can draw on domestic and foreign sources, and exoticism can do the same. To avoid terminological confusion, when exoticism draws on domestic sources, I refer to it as folklorism.

Finally, though it may seem obvious, it is important to distinguish Jewish primitivism from primitivisms practiced by Jews looking to Slavic peoples, Siberian peoples, African Americans, or Native Americans.⁶⁴ It is the self-directed element of Jewish primitivism that renders it so richly complicated: the effort to synthesize a subject and object that are impossible to distinguish fully and, in fact, are inextricably joined.

Media of Jewish Primitivism

Since my treatment of the media of Jewish primitivism and its languages diverges from disciplinary models for the study of both primitivist modernism and modern Jewish culture, I will address each in turn.

Art historian William Rubin has noted that primitivism began as an art-historical term describing a painterly phenomenon.⁶⁵ But I have addressed so far mostly literature; where I have touched on visual art, I have not made any special distinction from texts. This is because Rubin's point deals with a scholarly genealogy; but to the primary actors of primitivism, the separation of text and image was not a foregone conclusion. In fact, the German-Jewish avant-garde writer and art historian Carl Einstein, an early (arguably the first) theorist of both primitivism and cubism, wrote: "I've long known that this thing that we call 'Cubism' goes far beyond painting. . . . I've long known that not only is a transformation of vision possible . . . but also a transformation of its verbal equivalent."⁶⁶ Einstein's theory of African art was imbricated with his

understanding of cubism: the visual principles he extracted from the former were at work, as he saw it, in the latter. But how could visual principles be transferred to a work of literature? Einstein acknowledged that his own attempt to answer this question was insufficient.⁶⁷ I will argue in Chapter 5 that this challenge—the transfer of the visual to the literary—was compellingly met by the Yiddish writer Der Nister. Der Nister’s stories show how verbal rhetoric—particularly Yiddish rhetoric—could be deployed in a way that built on and exemplified visual principles while nevertheless being derived from Hasidic and Yiddish literary folk traditions. This is an example of how Jewish primitivism addressed the theoretical analogy of visual primitivism and literary primitivism. Else Lasker-Schüler, by contrast, developed themes that she reinforced reciprocally across her drawings and writings, while the artist Moyshe Voro-beichic (Moï Ver) used the avant-garde engagement with semiotics to explore the textuality of photography and to ironize the supposed bias in Jewish culture toward the textual.

My insistence that there were no meaningful distinctions between literature and art in Jewish primitivism beyond the obvious ones of genre and medium goes against the grain of much scholarship on primitivism, which neatly sorts the literary from the visual. Indeed, in all the vast scholarship on primitivism, literature seems barely to exist as a subject. In one of only a handful of books⁶⁸ that redress this imbalance, Nicola Gess offers a sensible explanation for why visual art has been privileged: “Comprehension of foreign-language literatures was hindered, for European readers, by a language barrier. Hardly any writers knew the foreign languages, there were few translations, and those that existed paid no attention to semantic thoroughness let alone stylistic particularities.”⁶⁹ Erhard Schüttpelz goes so far as to say that literary primitivism on the model of visual primitivism is impossible for this very reason; he sees primitivism as a question of the anthropological definition of the category of the primitive.⁷⁰

But this all depends on what, exactly, constitutes a “foreign” language and whose comprehension is at stake. The categories used in this argument do not take into account Europe’s own minority languages, let alone those in Europe’s colonies. The problem is related to the inapt idea that primitivism can only draw on foreign sources.⁷¹ But this approach—which admirably expands the field—also bypasses the question of identity as it played out in the period, that is, as a social problem. When the domestic and the foreign can be equally primitive, as they were in Jewish primitivism, untranslatability is moot and identity

is brought to the foreground. Yiddish- and Hebrew-speaking writers could work with Jewish folklore as easily as with folk art—perhaps more easily, since the literary sources were more readily available, by far.⁷²

Since there was no linguistic impediment to the formation of Jewish literary primitivism, and the question of transfer between media was itself part of the technical and theoretical agenda of the primary creators of Jewish primitivism, there is no need to separate art and literature in this study.⁷³ This is yet another example of the scrambled categories and definitions that result from Jewish primitivism: it stretched across media, from literature, to graphic art, painting, photography, and, indeed, music.⁷⁴

Languages of Jewish Primitivism

How did Jewish primitivism find purchase in German, Yiddish, and Hebrew? German was a civilized tongue: the language of Goethe and of science. But Yiddish was a so-called *Jargon*, thought to have no substance, no importance, no literature—to be essentially a primitive language.⁷⁵ And Hebrew was a fossil, unsuited for the work of modern literature. Although language posed a crucial cultural and social question for European Jews of the period (at least for the intelligentsia), it did not interfere with the agenda of Jewish primitivism. Jewish primitivist aesthetics encompassed the primary literary languages of Jewish central and eastern Europe, that is, German, Yiddish, and Hebrew. Yet the literatures of the three languages have rarely been examined under a single lens. Scholars of European Jewish literature have instead mostly focused on the relation of Yiddish and Hebrew, which was, after all, a central concern of many writers and ideologues of the period.⁷⁶ Only recently have scholars turned to the relation of Yiddish and German, approaching the question as one of a social interchange between languages, literatures, and cultures that largely took place in Berlin between the world wars.⁷⁷ Seeing literature and art as things transmitted or negotiated between networks centered on language or geography foregrounds social interpretations, especially histories of reception, that can obscure a phenomenon like Jewish primitivism, which operated similarly across its contexts. This is because Jewish primitivism was a phenomenon more closely tied to the aesthetic and cultural agendas of its producers than to its social contexts.⁷⁸

Working within the existing paradigms of Jewish cultural history, it would be all too easy to separate the above-cited examples of Kafka and Bal

Makhshoves, one writing in German and the other in Yiddish. Kafka's perception of Hasidim slots into a ready-made and widely accepted narrative about the German-Jewish relation to eastern European Jews, the so-called *Ostjuden*. The discourse around *Ostjuden* in turn-of-the-century German-Jewish culture has deep roots: Gershom Scholem famously reminisced about what he called a cult of Eastern Jews among German Jews around the First World War;⁷⁹ Steven Aschheim's historical study of the phenomenon complicated the picture, showing how the so-called Eastern Jews functioned as both positive and negative stereotypes in German-Jewish culture and society, as "brothers and strangers," following Aschheim's title.⁸⁰ On the one hand, by showing how foreign Jewishness could be, *Ostjuden* served as prompts to assimilation. On the other, these real and imagined eastern European Jews were also foils for what Shulamit Volkov has called "dissimilation," reflecting the positive assertion of a supposedly authentic Jewish identity in the face of a hollow, artificial German-Jewishness.⁸¹ The discourse surrounding the *Ostjude* has been seen as quintessentially German: the word, of course, is German;⁸² and the cartographic orientation of the term requires a Western—that is, German—starting point. Furthermore, the social debate surrounding *Ostjuden* was informed by self-conceptions of German Jews regarding their culture and religion, catalyzed by a massive influx of Jewish immigrants to Germany from eastern Europe. The *Ostjude* has thus been seen as central to the German-Jewish navigation between the poles of assimilation and dissimilation, self-hatred and self-affirmation.⁸³ It is easy enough to read Kafka's pejorative dismissal of Hasidim in this light, namely, the history of German-Jewish culture.

But the fact that Bal Makhshoves, himself an *Ostjude* (if only insofar as Kafka was a German Jew), displayed the same attitude and deployed a similar trope must rebalance our understanding of both cases. It is no longer tenable to argue that Kafka's approach to *Ostjuden* was typical of German-Jewish culture and that Bal Makhshoves—a Yiddish writer from eastern Europe—was necessarily doing something else; rather, both Kafka and Bal Makhshoves engaged in Jewish primitivism.

That is to say, the powerful social and linguistic distinctions between West and East, between German and Yiddish, do not obtain in the aesthetic context of Jewish primitivism. The seemingly German phenomenon focused on Hasidism and Ashkenazic folklore was equally Yiddish: Martin Buber's first collection of Hasidic tales in German (*Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* [*The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*], 1906), which helped catalyze the *Ostjuden* fad in Germany,

postdated Peretz's Hasidic stories, which began appearing in the 1890s and were collected in 1903 in Yiddish (*Khsidish [Hasidic]*). In other words, projects with differing social contexts bore a striking aesthetic resemblance to each other. This was not mere coincidence. One important goal of this book is to demonstrate that Yiddish, German, and Hebrew were enlisted in the same aesthetic project of Jewish primitivism. Bal Makhshoves's insistence that Yiddish and Hebrew are, according to the title of his Yiddish essay "Two Languages, One Single Literature," expands in this study to three languages, one literature.⁸⁴

In this book, I balance the claims of Jewish primitivism: its claims about aesthetics and its claims about politics; its claims about Jewish art and its claims about Jewish identity. I identify two primary areas in which primitivist art and literature operated: identity and aesthetics. In the case of the former, the unique position of the Jew within European society granted artists a simultaneous identification as subject and as object in a way that opened up social and political possibilities that were largely inaccessible in the landscape of European modernism and modern Jewish culture. The turn to primitivism was an escape from—and a critique of—the omnipresent politics of Jewish identity formation.⁸⁵ But Jewish primitivism was also an aesthetic enterprise. By uncovering alternative artistic traditions, primitivism provided the tools to reconceive the formal possibilities of art and literature. Artists and writers in Yiddish, German, and Hebrew capitalized on these new developments not only to thematize ethnographic and folkloric notions of Jewish identity but, above all, to transform their works as such.

How was this transformation to be accomplished? The proclamations of its practitioners can be frustratingly vague. Peretz again offers a good example. In the 1910 essay in which he described the primitive of the folk as the ground floor beside art's staircase, he continued as follows: "It seems clear what one has to do: collect, make notes, transcribe. Come together and learn to read, sing together, recite, enjoy yourselves, create the atmosphere for art. . . . Genius will come later and create."⁸⁶ Though Peretz meant this somewhat ironically, he offered nothing more concrete. With no clear goals, the actual manifestations of primitivism—the works created by genius—varied drastically. This book charts the landscape of those works in art and literature, but not in order to compile an exhaustive list, which would be very long and of seemingly endless variety. My aim is to begin the task of drawing the map of Jewish primitivism and to point out some of its most notable features. The chapters of this book analyze literary and visual manifestations of these claims—the literary and artistic use

of folkloric and ethnographic sources not only as subjects and themes, that is, as content, but also in pursuit of new forms—esthetic forms and forms of identity; forms of objecthood and forms of subjecthood.

Chapter 1 describes the Jewish literary folklorism from which Jewish primitivism emerged and against which it reacted. It takes as its subject the works of Y. L. Peretz, the seminal author of folklore-inspired literature in Yiddish and simultaneously the *bête noire* of others in the Yiddish avant-garde for whom his work was politically reactionary, insufficiently formally inventive, or both. I show that Peretz, and Jewish folklorism more broadly, drew on Johann Gottfried Herder's technique of *Nachdichtung*, or translational adaptation, most characteristically represented in his Hasidic tales. Peretz's project initiated the primitivist project of undermining neo-Romantic aesthetics and ethno-nationalist politics. He did this in spite of himself, affirming the project of folklorism in his short stories while in his essays critiquing the very aesthetics his works embodied. An overt aesthetics of Jewish primitivism would finally emerge as a backlash to Peretz's Hasidic stories: the *Nachdichtung* of Peretz and his epigones was cast as mere "stylization" by members of the avant-garde, who called for his aesthetic to be discarded and his subject to be refashioned in a new way.

Chapter 2 analyzes the conflicted primitivism of writers who attempted to stage their encounter with the primitive other in travelogues while also describing being or becoming primitive in works of fiction. Writers like S. An-sky in Yiddish and Alfred Döblin and Joseph Roth in German could not square the primitivist fantasies of their belles lettres with the reality of Jewish life they depicted in travelogues. This conflict emerged because, while major forms of primitivism objectified the "primitive" by suppressing subjectivity and insisting on otherness (racial and/or geographic), Jewish primitivism had to face the nearness and accessibility of its object, the European Jew. The effort to engage in primitivism with a subject that refused objectification and insisted on its similitude resulted in works that both suppressed and revealed the potential for equality between the civilized writer and the savage Jew. The writers examined in this chapter felt obliged to adhere to a model of primitivism dependent on ethnographic description, which meant that the very tool they used to approach the primitive foreclosed access to it. Jewish primitivism was what I call a "plausible" primitivism, in which the conflation of subject and object was not hindered by daunting geographic, racial, or political distances. This chapter shows how the paradox of plausible primitivism manifests in two opposing literary orientations. On the one hand, a range of belletristic genres presented an

idealized vision of Jewish primitivity; on the other, travelogues foregrounded the reality of European Jewish life. Plausible primitivism could not help but trip over itself.

Chapter 3 reads Kafka as a Jewish primitivist. This runs counter to the prevailing view that sees Kafka apart from broader trends in European Jewish literature. Instead, as I demonstrate, Kafka connects the contradictions of Jewish primitivism to his own ambivalence about his Jewish identity, which in turn reflects back onto several of Kafka's core texts, including "Vor dem Gesetz" ("Before the Law") and "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie" ("A Report to an Academy"). In these works, Kafka comments on the allure of identity. In this light, Kafka's presumed avoidance of introducing Jewishness into his aesthetics is actually a manifestation of the instability and critique of authenticity at the heart of Jewish primitivism.

Chapter 4 explores the politics of Jewish primitivism, which ranged from the radical Left to the radical Right, from Berlin to Jerusalem—all within the aesthetic of the avant-garde. I explore this political breadth in my description and analysis of the unlikely poetic relationship between the German-Jewish poet Else Lasker-Schüler and the Yiddish and Hebrew poet Uri Zvi Grinberg, the former ambivalent toward Zionism, the latter a proponent of the movement's most radical wing. The idea of an originary, authentic Jewish identity rooted in an ancient but geographically unspecified East was nevertheless central to Lasker-Schüler's poetry and visual art, if not her politics. Where her trope of the "Society of Savage Jews" was a utopian community of writers and artists that existed only in her work, Grinberg deployed this trope to very different ends—his savage Jews were Zionist pioneers, creating a nation-state. This chapter explores the political flexibility of primitivism, showing how it could marshal the same aesthetics in pursuit of opposing politics.

Chapter 5 considers the ways ethnography motivated bold formal and generic experiments that brought to literature innovations that were otherwise limited to the visual arts. I examine the avant-garde short stories of the Yiddish writer Der Nister, whose abstracting primitivism fractures the narrator-ego into a kaleidoscopic and disorienting landscape, disassembling Western forms of narrative production that privileged a stable subject. I use the work of the German avant-garde theorist of primitivism Carl Einstein to clarify Der Nister's own innovative solution to the problem of abstraction as a visual and spatial phenomenon in literature. Einstein noted that primitivist abstraction was in principle achievable in literature but in practice absent; I argue that

this was because, unlike visual sources, which, since immediately perceptible, seemed to be readily comprehensible, the literary sources of primitivism were obscured by multiple layers of translation. Der Nister's intimate familiarity with Yiddish folklore served as the ground of his literary abstraction; from the particularity of Yiddish textuality he was able to spring to the visual principles of modernist painting.

Chapter 6 examines visual culture, focusing on a little-known photobook by the Bauhaus-trained photographer Moyshe Vorobeichic (Moï Ver). In *A Ghetto in the East—Vilna*, published in three bilingual editions (German/Hebrew, German/Yiddish, and English/Hebrew), Vorobeichic refracted the peddlers and rabbis of Vilna through the lens of avant-garde photography. Specifically, he used an avant-garde visual idiom, including montage and distorted perspective, to depict subjects usually portrayed with sentimental naturalism. Vorobeichic's skepticism toward notions of primitive authenticity diverged strikingly from the mainstream of Jewish modernist art in the period, which was dominated by Marc Chagall and his imitators, an aesthetic the Yiddish avant-garde artist Henryk Berlewi dismissed as "Chagallism."⁸⁷ Employing an approach similar to what James Clifford has termed ethnographic surrealism, Vorobeichic's photobook critiques the trope of the primitive Jew even as it ostensibly reifies this trope. In ironically but sensitively taking as his subject supposedly primitive Jews, Vorobeichic restores their subjectivity.

Jewish Primitivism concludes with a chapter that connects the Jewish primitivism explored in the preceding chapters with the persistence of Jewish primitivism after the Holocaust. I do this through an analysis of two short prose texts by the Czech-German-Jewish journalist Egon Erwin Kisch. One, a story about searching for the Golem of Prague, written shortly after the First World War, mournfully describes how incommensurate folklore is with the violent disenchantment of modernity. The next describes Kisch's search, during the years of the Holocaust, for a village of "Indian Jews" in Mexico, where he had fled to escape the Nazis. As in Kafka's encounter with Hasidim, Kisch's quest leads to a radical confrontation with himself. Kisch's alienation was not voluntary—he was alone because his family, his friends, so many of Europe's Jews, were gone. But he does not experience his loss alone; he joins with the Indian Jews—his fellow Jews—to pray and to mourn. The distinction between European and primitive disappears.

This book shows that Jewish primitivism encompassed a range of techniques and possibilities conditioned by both the aesthetics of primitivist modernism

and the politics of Jewish identity in Europe but was ultimately responsive to its own internal aesthetic agenda. The texts and images that promote a vision of Jews as primitives take their origins in any number of familiar locations on the map of European modernism and Jewish cultural and political history. The ends of these textual and visual journeys are, however, unexpected and even unprecedented in the versions of Jewish identity and Jewish art and literature they generated. In literature, graphic art, and photography, Jewish modernists developed a series of distinct primitivist aesthetics that, by locating the primitive present in Europe, troubled the boundary between observer and observed, cultured and savage, colonizer and colonized, subject and object.