Dirty Subjects
Shaping Jewish Colonial Subjectivities in Early Twentieth-Century South Africa
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Resumen
A principios del siglo XX, en los estados colonizadores del sur de África, las incipientes instituciones de la comunidad judía tomaron medidas para evitar la acusación racializada de suciedad, lo que hizo que la comunidad adoptara subjetividades colonialistas blancas. Utilizando el marco analítico de Albert Memmi sobre colonizadores y colonialistas, y la conceptualización de Anne McClintock sobre la función racial de la suciedad, este artículo reevalúa las fuentes de archivo existentes a través de la lente de los cuerpos sucios, el sexo sucio y el trabajo sucio para mostrar cómo se formaron las subjetividades comunitarias a través de la estrecha connivencia con el estado colonial y la imposición interna de los hábitos sociales de la blancura. Este artículo sostiene que esta formación del sujeto colonial excluyó las posibilidades de un peruvnik, una potencial barbarie judía anticolonial sudafricana.

Palabras clave: Judíos, Sudáfrica, Peruanos, Peruvnik, Suciedad, Memmi, Blancura, Colonialista, Colonialismo de colonos, Subjetividad.

Resumo
No início do século XIX, nos estados coloniais colonizadores da África Austral, as instituições nascentes da comunidade judaica tomaram medidas para evitar a acusação racializada de sujeira, moldando assim a comunidade a adotar subjetividades colonialistas brancas. Usando a estrutura analítica de Albert Memmi sobre colonizadores e colonialistas, e a conceituação de Anne McClintock da função racial da sujeira, este artigo reavalia as fontes de arquivo existentes através da lente de corpos sujos, sexo sujo e trabalho sujo para mostrar como as subjetividades comunitárias foram formadas através de uma estreita convivência com o estado colonial e a imposição
In the early 1900s in the settler colonial states in Southern Africa, the nascent Jewish community institutions took actions to avoid the racialised accusation of dirtiness, thus shaping the community into adopting white colonialist subjectivities. Using Albert Memmi’s analytic framework of colonisers and colonialists, and Anne McClintock’s conceptualisation of the racial function of dirt, this article reassesses existing archival sources through the lens of dirty bodies, dirty sex, and dirty work to show how communal subjectivities were formed through close collusion with the colonial state and the internal enforcing of the social habits of Whiteness. This article argues that this colonial subject formation foreclosed the possibilities of a peruvnik: a potential South African anticolonial Jewish barbarism.

**Keywords:** Jews, South Africa, Peruvian, Peruvnik, dirt, Memmi, Whiteness, colonialist, settler colonialism, subjectivity.

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Introduction

In the 1880s, Jews from the Pale of Settlement in Eastern Europe started arriving in Cape Town, South Africa. They were a small offshoot of a much larger migration of Eastern European Jews to settler colonies around the world, leaving racial discrimination, poverty, and violence behind to find a place to begin a new life. They were not the same as the other people from Europe who got off the boat in Cape Town. They did not come with state support, or from social contexts in which colonialism was a great national achievement, nor were they Christian. And in the eyes of many people from Europe, they were not even Europeans.

But, from the point of view of the settler colonial context, they were settlers like any other. In the legal-political framework, and largely in the economic framework, they were regarded as settlers. Their social, religious, and linguistic positions however put them at risk of being placed otherwise. There were other groups of people who did not quite fit into the colonial bifurcation but they were worse off in many respects. The Jewish community, seeing the doors of whiteness held open for them took whatever actions they could to push through and shut the door behind them. They could only do this by enforcing the social habits of whiteness, and through that adopting a colonialist subjectivity.

This article will examine how this subjectivity was formed through the attempts to avoid the racialised violence that comes with being classed as dirty. Dirt functions as a tool of social control, and the responses to the accusation of dirtiness were fundamental to the shaping of Jewish colonial values, to the transformation of Eastern European Jews, who I will call Yidn, from colonisers into colonialists. Following Anne

1 Yidn means Jews in Yiddish, the majority language of the Jews of Eastern Europe. I use the term throughout the article to refer to Eastern European Jews.
McClintock this article explores how dirt was mobilised in three spheres of life: bodies, sex, and work. I will be examining how «dirt» metaphors were used to racialise Yidn and how the attempts to avoid the violence that comes with being classed as dirty led to an adoption of colonial subjectivities.

In this article, I turn to Albert Memmi’s analytic distinction between coloniser and colonialist to open up space for thinking through how colonial subjectivity is developed without implying that Yidn in South Africa occupied any position other than that of a settler.

Memmi, a Tunisian revolutionary and theorist, described himself as «a native in a colonial country, a Jew in an anti-Semitic universe, an African in a world dominated by Europe» (1992 [1966]: 66). In his 1957 book, the Colonised and the Colonizer (1967 [1957]: 10), he shows how the material colonial situation, the colonial relationship, «will transform the colonial candidate into a coloniser or colonialist».

The transformation into a coloniser is instantaneous, given that it describes a structural relation of power in which «the individual’s choices are irrelevant» (Memmi, 1967 [1957]: 130). The «coloniser» is a European living in Africa, a usurper on dispossessed land, an exploiter of the exploited, the privileged beneficiary of colonial oppression (Memmi, 1967 [1957]: 16, 21).

However, Memmi holds open the possibility that colonisers might rebel against colonialism, so he provides the term colonialist to speak to the subjectivity of the individual. A colonialist is a coloniser who believes that colonialism is good and supports its actions (Memmi, 1967 [1957]: 21, 45). Not only living as a coloniser, the colonialist’s consciousness is also developed based on “profit, privilege, and usurpation” (Memmi, 1967 [1957]: 9–10).

The concept of the colonialist speaks to the agency of an individual or a community in reaction to the colonial situation which Memmi (1967 [1957]: 51) argues «thrusts economic,
political, and affective facts upon every colonizer against which he may rebel, but which he can never abandon».

The first wave of Yidn arrived in South Africa between the 1880s and 1910s. They were fleeing as refugees and economic migrants from antisemitic measures implemented by the Russian Empire in the Pale of Settlement. These conditions included overcrowding, poverty, violence, forced removals, and massacres. They arrived into a colonial situation in Southern Africa which was in the final moments of colonial expansion and beginning to transform into a project of colonial management. In the 1880s–1890s the British colonies were usurping more land through wars of dispossession against the Pedi, Tswana, Xhosa, and Zulu polities (Rassool, 2019: 349). The Boer Republics were similarly dispossessing the Venda.

After 250 years of the wars of dispossession, the end of the Anglo-Boer war solidified the British Empire’s control over the region and allowed them to disastrously reformat the political economy and governance of the entire country,

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2 An area with shifting boundaries but which was made up of the countries now known as Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, parts of Ukraine, Poland, Moldova, and Russia. ‘Pale’ means an area enclosed by a fence or boundary.

3 In the 1880s, what is now known as South Africa was made up of four settler colonies. Two were under the ambit of the British Empire: the Cape Colony and the Natal Colony. Two were independent Boer (Dutch descendants) Republics: the Orange Free State and the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (the Transvaal). From 1902 they all came under control of the British Empire. And in 1910 were amalgamated into the Union of South Africa.

4 Since the 1999 centenary commemoration of the war in the newly post-Apartheid state, the war has sometimes been reframed as the South African War as a part of a rainbow nation project and inscribed as a lesson of racial unification (Witz and others, 2017: 165–166). This obscures the imperial objectives of the two opposing sides and the role of the war in the creation of a White supremacist settler colonial state. I therefore stick to calling it the Anglo-Boer War.
and violently squash multiple uprisings, in such a way as to ensure their supremacy, and increase their profits. The alliance of the «two White races» —British and Boers — was based on an extension of «the supremacy of the White man» and was reflected in political debates, and legal plans that resulted in the 1910 Union of South Africa, with its White men only franchise, racial labour hierarchy, and continued land dispossession. In establishing, for the first time, a single state from the Cape to the Limpopo structured on the desires of mining capitalists and the settler population, this period of history is one of most foundational in the historical narrative of South Africa.

Theft of land, destruction of government, and coercion into wage labour are all integral parts of the history of South Africa. Historian and social scientist Bernard Magubane (1996: 237–238) argues that «the incorporation of the African population as cheap labour, segregated by political rightlessness and severe social discrimination, is thus the simple but most important key to an understanding of all subsequent social and capitalist development in the country».

Yidn were arriving into a context that was still carrying out colonial wars, and they engaged in these processes as travelling salesmen out into the far reaches of the colony. But towards the end of the 1890s, and especially after 1902, the Jewish community had reached a threshold that was large enough to form communal institutions that could represent the Jews as a group and persist until the present day. Anglo-

5 «Boers», a term which means farmers, came to refer to the amalgamation of people who drew linguistic, cultural and political heritage from the Dutch and French settlers in the 1600s–1806 and the Boer republics from the 1850s. Only in the 1920s, when Afrikaans was reinserted from a creole with a slave history to an independent language linked to settler claims of indigeneity, did «Boer» fall out of use and was replaced by «Afrikaner» (meaning African) (Baderoon, 2014: 167).
German Jews, who had had a minimal communal presence for the past five decades, and the newer Yidn settlers existed as two separate groups. But through the need to organise in relation to the colonial state as Jews, and through the predominance of Zionism, a coherent Jewish community can begin to be spoken of. By the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 there can be said to be one Jewish community, which despite still large and varied internal differences, collectively bought into their identity as White settlers, and enthusiastically celebrated the creation of the unified White settler state.

The communal institutions that I will be referring to in this essay are the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF), the Jewish Board of Deputies for the Transvaal and Natal, and the Cape Jewish Board of Deputies. These three organisations were the only ones to reach a level of national significance and interface with the colonial state at the time. They were all also predominantly led by Anglo-German Jews who had positions of prominence in the colonial economy and politics. They continue to exist until the present. It is partly through their work in relation to the state, and the policing and patronage of poorer Yidn, that the Jewish community at large adopted colonialist subjectivities.

Dirt: racial violence and undesirability

The formulation of dirt that I use in this article comes from the seminal book *Imperial Leather* by feminist, postcolonial English literature scholar Anne McClintock. In it, she argues that «“Nothing is inherently dirty; dirt expresses a relation to social value and social disorder. . . In Victorian culture, the

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6 The two Boards of Deputies merged in 1912 to form the South African Jewish Board of Deputies which is its current form.
The iconography of dirt became deeply integrated in the policing and transgression of social boundaries» (McClintock, 1995: 153). «Dirt» was a social category used by the Victorian middle classes to denote a lack of value, and to relegate certain practices and people as transgressive, undesirable, or disposable.

In her book on how race, class, and gender shape and are shaped by British imperialism from the metropole to South Africa, McClintock saw how these value judgements functioned to racialise bodies and showed the theoretical links between «dirty» work, «dirty» money, and «dirty» sex. For McClintock,

money, work, and sexuality were seen to relate to each other by negative analogy to the realm of racial difference and empire. [. . .] As the nineteenth century drew on, the iconography of dirt became a poetics of surveillance, deployed increasingly to police the boundaries between «normal» sexuality and «dirty» sexuality, «normal» work and «dirty» work and «normal» money and «dirty» money. (McClintock, 1995: 154)

In all three realms, the «dirty» category transgresses or is degenerated within the control of male-dominated, heteronormative settler capitalist economies. Queer sex, «interracial» sex, sex work, illegal trading, amongst other people and practices all became «‘figured increasingly in the iconography of ‘pollution,’ ‘disorder,’ ‘plagues,’ ‘moral contagion,’ and racial ‘degeneration’» (McClintock, 1995: 154).

This is the technology of power, described by Foucault as «biopower» which was concerned with regulating the population as a whole social unit. The population became understood as a «political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem» (Foucault, 2004 [1976]: 244–245). Treating the population as a biological problem led to an interest in regulating the public health of the population. This, in turn, leads to recasting enemies not as
political adversaries but as threats to the health and purity of the population (Foucault, 2004 [1976]: 244, 256).

The political function of «dirt», why it acts as a tool of racialisation, is because the state would justify its violence based on turning collectives of people into biological threats, into contagions, to the whole social body. This was done by employing racism to «justify the murderous function of the state» (Foucault, 2004 [1976]: 256). Though Foucault was theorising based on the modern European state, this logic carries over into the settler colony.

When the colonial state, capitalist companies, or political groups implemented programmes in the name of «cleaning» («disinfecting», «purifying», etc.) these usually resulted in acts of racial terror and violence. This language of dirt was mobilised in South Africa by the colonial state against Africans and Indians. Gabeba Baderoon (2018: 258, 264), in an article on dirt and the production of disposability in South Africa since slavery, argues that «dirt» is «the label that renders this violence palpable» and «makes colonialism’s victims responsible for its effects». The trope of dirt was mobilised by the British to justify forced removals between 1902 and 1906, by mining companies to force migrant miners to endure humiliating strip showers, by white men to rape African women without consequence, and for countless other forms of colonial violence. Baderoon uses the lens of dirt to make visible the scale and impact of how some people were deemed surplus and expendable and subjected to naturalised violence. In South Africa, these «cleanliness» and «dirt» analogies were one of the methods used to establish racial categories and hierarchies both socially and administratively.

### The dirty Jew

Of course, Jews are not newcomers to the accusation of dirt. Jews in Christian Europe were often figured and were racialised by analogy to the category of dirty money, and as
threats to public health. In discussing the Dreyfus affair in late nineteenth-century France, Slabodsky (2014: 97) explains that «‘Dreyfus’ was a sacrificial ‘victim’ of a persuasive and pervasive ‘obsession’ of the society for the ‘dirty Jew’ who was allegedly polluting the social fabric and threatening the purity of the nation».

In South Africa, the Yidn were also framed as «dirty», predominantly by the British public media and politicians, but also by the Anglo-Jews, who were, of course, also British. The dirt metaphor was extended into many categories of which I will focus on bodies, sex, and work. Worried that the accusation of dirt would be extended from Yidn to all Jews, the Anglo-Jewish elite viewed the dirt narratives not as a form of colonial violence but as antisemitism. One of the responses, which became the mainstream response, was therefore not to join an «imagined community of barbarians» (Slabodsky, 2014: 66) against the colonial world but rather to prove themselves as valued members of colonial society.

Lionel Goldsmid (1905: 116-117), the editor of the South African Jewish Chronicle (SAJC), the premier English-language Jewish newspaper at the time, addressed this directly in an editorial in which he said it was the duty of Jews «to lead a white man’s life», which was, he argued, «the course which the Jews of South Africa should adopt to maintain the white man’s superiority».

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7 Dreyfus was an assimilated Jewish officer in the French army in the late nineteenth century who was accused and convicted of treason with popular and presidential support, despite the investigations finding him not guilty. It’s a central moment of Jewish history in France and Europe which reveals how, despite emancipation (being recognised citizens a hundred years earlier) and assimilation, Jews were still considered seditious and deceptive foreigners.

8 There is also a strong argument to be made for the inclusion of language which I developed elsewhere (Hunter, 2020).
The Jewish communal institutions adopted the practices of the modern colonial state. Through various campaigns and processes of policing and patronage, they worked tirelessly to «Whiten» Jews in general and Yidn in particular. As political theorist Mahmoud Mamdani (2012: 82) points out in his discussion on the practice of «Nativism», the problems with terms like Romanisation or Arabisation are «because the final product partakes of both, no matter how unequally, and does not quite resemble either, the process is also identity-transforming of both sides». In the process of Yidn adopting White colonial subjectivities, Whiteness is changed as well from an Anglo-Boer alliance to a multi-ethnic White racial identity that allowed President Jan Smuts to say in 1919 that South Africa «will be of composite character, including Dutch, English, German and Jews and whatever White nationality seeks refuge. All are welcome» (cited in Magubane, 1996: 62). This process is not unique to South African Whiteness, it has occurred in many settler colonies and at a global scale. Nor is it unique to Whiteness, all racial categories have undergone shifting expansions and contractions as the specific arrangements of colonial racism have mutated.

Jewish barbarisms and the peruvnik

Santiago Slabodsky, Argentinian Jewish decolonial scholar working in the USA, shows in the global context that Jews have been one amongst the many barbaric people in the eyes of civilised Europe. He develops an analysis of the European history of the construction of the barbarian. Sometimes the barbarian was classed as incorrigible and was to be a candidate

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9 See e.g. Goldstein (2006) for an example from the USA.

10 The most succinct and comprehensive account of this in South Africa is given by Rassool (2019).
for annihilation through expulsion or genocide. However, others were thought of as «primitive» and, under threat of annihilation, forced to assimilate through conversion, civilisation, or development. Assimilation however, Slabodsky argues, is never complete, and the «barbaric» difference gets used for political control, surveillance, and to maintain an exploited population (Slabodsky, 2014: 25–26).

Slabodsky gives a sense of this historical process of colonial modernity which occurred throughout the European colonial empires.

The project of modernity from the Renaissance to Colonialism to Enlightenment to Fascism is responsible of the categorization of the portrayal of Jews as barbarians. Many times, they were dismissed as extreme barbarians leading subversions to defeat imperial designs; in others counted occasions this barbarism was presupposed as the Jewish starting-point when offered short-lived candidacies to assimilation in interchange for their collaboration in the execution of the imperial designs. (Slabodsky, 2014: 60)

When Jews in Western Europe began to be emancipated between 1791 and 1858, the implicit agreement was that, in exchange, Jewish must assimilate into their host countries dominant culture. Though Jewish politics became centred around the politics of assimilation, it was never complete and afterwards antisemitism kept appearing, attacking Western European assimilated Jews for their infiltrating similarity and Yidn for their foreign difference.

This logic had a huge effect on Western European Jews. Avoiding racism by adopting the public culture of the host nation meant different things in different countries, but it highlights one of the key differences between anti-Jewish and anti-Black racism. The «European» Jew is noticed only by actions and words, not from a glace. Franz Fanon (2008 [1952]: 87)
reflects on this as well in Black Skins, White Masks, «the Jew can be unknown in his Jewishness. He is not ‘wholly’ what he is. One hopes, one waits. His actions, his behaviour are the final determinant.»¹¹ This difference is only compounded in South Africa where the Jewish body from Europe fits into the visual landscape of settler society.

But in African settler colonies, the structuring racial hierarchy was constructed between the European settler and African native. A combination of this fundamental difference and the different context of public culture meant that the Anglo-Jewish elite in South Africa, who had all arrived after emancipation, continued their emancipation pact-inspired politics, moulding actions and thoughts in public to fit within the framework of White supremacy. Many Yidn as well, uncomfortable with being called dirty by British colonial society in South Africa, and the continued threat of persecution in a country meant to be «liberation both for herself and for her children» (Slovo, 1989: 12), also made a concerted effort to assimilate into Whiteness in the public sphere.

In Foucault’s (2004 [1976]: 195) work on biopower, the barbarian, «appears only when civilization already exists, and only when he is in conflict with it. He does not make his entrance into history by founding a society, but by penetrating a civilization, setting it ablaze and destroying it.» Yidn in arriving into colonial society were framed in these terms, as undesirable immigrants who, in the words of one commentator in the South African Review in 1903, were a «cancer [...] eating right into our vitals in a way that will soon be irreparable» (cited in Shain, 180: 19).

The association between Yidn, Peruvians, and dirt has been recorded predominantly in the South African English-language

¹¹ For an extensive discussion of Fanon’s analysis of the lack of equivalence between the Black body and the Jewish body, see the chapter «Diaspora and Colonialism» in Cheyette (2013).
newspapers, as well as some references made in government reports, and the personal letters of state officials. Newspapers such as The Owl, the South African Review, The Transvaal Leader, and The Star, amongst others occupied an active role in the settler colonial public sphere. This article draws on archival research done into these newspapers by Milton Shain and others, though theorises their impact through vastly different theoretical and political frameworks.12

The iconography of dirt was tied up in the designation of undesirable barbaric Yidn as «Peruvians» or «peruvniks» in Yiddish. A term of uncertain origin, it seems to have come from an acronym of the Polish and Russian Union,13 a Jewish landsmanshaftn14 in Kimberly in the early 1880s. Another possibility is that it comes from an association of poor Jews with Baron de Hirshe’s immigration settlement scheme of Yidn in Argentina15 who later moved to South Africa (Shain and Mendelsohn, 2008: 45). Regardless of the term’s origins, it is a distinctly South African slur used to refer to Russian and Polish Jews.

Peruvians are often not only spoken about but described in great pejorative detail. The first known description of «Peruvians», is from an article in the Johannesburg Times from April 1896 in which Peruvians are referred to as a

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12 For a detailed analysis of these newspapers and their commentary on Jews consult Shain (1994) or other sources referenced throughout the article.

13 This is clearer through the Yiddish version of the word which would have been written, though in Yiddish characters, P-R-niks. The Polish and Russian union would have also have started P-R-. The suffix -niks indicates membership. So PeRuvNiks could have easily meant the members of the Polish and Russian Union. Why a word whose origin is in Yiddish became anglicised and used by English Christians is unknown.

14 Mutual aid society.

15 The confusion between Argentina and Peru has not been satisfactorily explained.
slovenly, unkempt and generally unwashed edition of the wandering Jew. [...] He is a pariah among his own people and among the gentiles. If some restraint is not imposed upon the operation of these unwashed peregrinators it might be necessary to consider some legislative means for the isolation of the species. (Cited in Shain, 1994: 27)

A similar article from February 1903 in the *South African Review* highlights an often-included physical dimension to the slur:

> Look at the hang-dog faces, the bowed shoulders, and the shambling walk of specimens of the race who are landing here, and ask whether they are «men». Of course, they are not. [...] to make self-respecting citizens out of the great bulk of them [...] is impossible. (Cited in Shain, 1994: 50)

Similar descriptions are picked up and used across the country throughout the rest of the decade and into the 1900s by other newspapers, politicians, and state officials in which these tropes of dirty, deformed, unlawful, immoral, and a threat to society become intimately intertwined with the undesirable alien Yidn.16

State officials, mostly district surgeons, but even high commissioners, also used this language. In an official report to the Cape Parliament, the Medical Officer of Health, Dr Gregory lamented that the Immigration Restriction Act wasn’t doing enough to limit the immigration of Yidn. Playing into all the tropes of dirtiness and barbarism, he described

> these immigrants being unsatisfactory in most important respects; being ill-provided; indifferently educated; unable to speak or understand any language

but Yiddish; of inferior physique; often dirty in their habits; persons and clothing, and most unreliable in their statements. (Gregory, 1904)

To be classed as a Peruvian was not only to be classed as undesirable but also to be unassimilable. To borrow from Memmi, Peruvians were seen as «incurable barbarians», an affront to civilisation, and in the settler-colonial context, an affront to Whiteness.

This link is made most clearly by Lionel Goldsmid in the SAJC. In 1905, in the front-page editorial, Goldsmid argues that Jews can support any political party (they were all White) but that

The Jews of the Transvaal,\textsuperscript{17} if they wish to act up to their name, are pledged to maintain the superiority of the White man in this country. As Jews, they object to being put on the same level as the Coloured races. And those of their brethren who do not assist them in this endeavour, and who are willing to be classed with the Coloured races, they stigmatise as «Peruvians» and treat with scant courtesy. (Goldsmid. 1905: 7)

Attempting to suppress this anticolonial possibility, elite Jews led a process of assimilation into colonial subjectivities, creating and convincing the White elite that Jews could be a constituent part of the White race and not a subject race. And though the elite, assimilated Anglo-Jews were equally disgusted with the «Peruvians» and made liberal use of the slur, they were concerned that the «stench» of the Peruvians would land on them as well. As the newspaper, Transvaal Leader, pointed out in May 1899 «low-class Jews» were spoiling the name of «clean-minded and honourable Jews» (cited in Shain, 1994: 29). The elite Jews bought into the late nineteenth- and

\textsuperscript{17} The northernmost region of South Africa, where the newspaper was published, and where an election was soon to take place.
twentieth-century colonial project «to shape the subjectivities of the colonized population and not simply of their elites» (Mamdani, 2012: 8).

This was not the only response to colonialism. There were a myriad of Yidn, pointed to indirectly by Goldsmid in the quote above, who rejected the colonial hierarchy of race and joined in the struggles against colonialism and capitalism, as peruvniks who had a stake in the collapse of empire. However, I have chosen academically not to focus on these narratives of resistance partly because post-Apartheid they have been systematically co-opted by Jewish historiography to avoid analyses of colonial racism.

Bodies

The Jewish body has long been an arena of racialisation and exclusion. It was no different in South Africa. We have already seen the pejorative descriptions of the Peruvian’s body in the quotes above. But what was the threat posed when the accusation of dirt extended from a single body to a collective neighbourhood? This extension was based on a miasma theory of disease from the 1800s «premised on the reciprocity of moral and bodily decay with environmental contamination» (Jackson and Robins, 2018: 77) which linked dirty bodies to disease-ridden bodies.

Yidn neighbourhoods in Cape Town and Johannesburg were frequently described as disease-ridden and risks to the national health. An editorial in The Star in July 1897 titled «Awful Hovels: Peruvian Uncleanliness» links dirt and disease directly and called for forced removals of Yidn neighbourhoods,

There is an evil in Johannesburg [...] which [...] every citizen should aid in representing to the responsible authorities, with a view to its eradication, or at any rate amelioration. There is in our midst a community of some four or five thousand Peruvians. They execrate
law and order [. . .] and as for cleanliness, well, that is an unknown quantity among them. The sooner they are sent out of the town the better for all concerned. Failing this [. . .] the town may be visited with an epidemic. (Cited in Shain and Mendelsohn, 2008: 46)

The district surgeon of Cape Town, Dr Claude-Wright reported in the *Public Health and Sanitation Reports* to the Cape Parliament of 1901 (with similar views expressed in 1897 and 1902):

Dwellings of the Jewish community are much overcrowded and ill-ventilated. [. . .] Their mode of living is objectionable and dirty in the extreme. They seldom or ever bath and their bodies are covered with vermin. They, therefore, remain a sickly crowd, entirely oblivious to decency and sanitation. Many of their habitations are unfit to be used as such, and as they are large vendors of food, some serious notice should be taken of their mode of life and preparation and storage of articles of food. [. . .] I cannot too strongly denounce the state of affairs, and express my emphatic opinion that strict supervision should be given this very undesirable class. (Cited in Shain, 2004: 240–241)

These quotes reveal an intense fascination with describing dirt and using it as evidence to lead to an argument, whether for forced removals or «strict supervision». There is also an obvious point in which the district surgeon is not saying that *this location* is a health risk but that *these people* are a health risk, a common tactic to justify state violence against a population (Baderoon, 2018: 258, 264).

There are no records of any state or popular action to enact a South African pogrom on Yidn. But these exact arguments were presented and then mobilised in the same era to forcefully remove Africans from urban towns to «native locations» on the town’s peripheries. During a bubonic plague outbreak, 7,000 Africans were removed from Cape Town to former
sewage farm Uitvlugt (later renamed Ndabeni) in 1901, a few thousand from Port Elizabeth in 1901–1902, and a further few thousand Africans were forcefully removed from Johannesburg to Klipspruit in 1906, which was also formally a sewage farm (Swanson, 1977: 388, 393, 400). The Indian location in Braamfontein was also purposively burnt down in 1904 using the same accusations of dirt and disease (Kallaway and Pearson, 1986: 32–33). Even though the disease infection points were tracked to White-owned workplaces rather than any residential areas, the racial discourse of «dirt» justified state attention on Africans in particular (Swanson, 1977: 294, 402).

The epidemic moment was a catalyst rather than cause, and the Liberal Cape Government had been planning the forced removals to Ndabeni for a while. The removal was a part of a strategy to create majority white urban centres, «a white man’s town», with nearby sources of cheap African labour (South African Native Affairs Commission, 1905: 48). The Yidn, as dirty as they were made out to be in public media and state documents, were needed to add numbers to the urban white population and were not part of the long-term plans for cheap African labour. Their neighbourhoods were thus spared.

To cement the security of Yidn living areas, some Jews bought into the idea of «a white man’s town» and, except for a few notable examples such as District Six in Cape Town, eschewed non-racial urban areas. A Reverend Fagan had described District Six in 1909 with obvious disdain:

The impression that will prevail in my mind is rows of shabby and unclean shops whose walls and signboard are sprinkled with Yiddish characters, sloping streets crowded with coloured people, Indians, Russians and Poles; narrow lanes where little Black and brown babies tumble amidst the discarded rags and the empty canisters flung out of the houses [. . .] I remember the shuffling gait, the hunted crafty look and the greasy dress of the Jewish refugee. I recall the glimpse of indescribable dirt
and squalor that I had through open doors and windows.
(Cited in Shain and Mendelsohn, 2008: 78)

Using the metaphor of dirt to denigrate the racially mixed, working-class urban environment, Fagan displays the ideological position of White supremacy and its increasing desire to enforce the urban environment as a «White only» space. Though District Six managed to survive another 50 years of this kind of threat before being forcefully dispossessed, Yidn by then had mostly moved out.

In response to the association of Yidn to dirt through their placement amongst the «coloured races», other Jews, who were more firmly ensconced in White society, chose to support white supremacist projects and enforced a white colonialist subjectivity within Jewish institutions. One such example is an internal programme which supported racial segregation for Jewish children. Calling for communal support to develop Jewish day schools in 1902, Maurice Abrahams, a member of the Board of Deputies for the Transvaal and Natal, argued that the need for Jewish educational institutions was «a thousand times more acute» in South Africa because «here the children had as their playmates little K*****s and H********s» (cited in Krut, 1985: 246). This line of thinking was instituted into the Jewish Orphanage (though it functioned more like a boarding house) which was founded in 1902. Riva Krut (1985: 273), whose thesis on building a Jewish community in early Johannesburg has been an invaluable source, argues that it was seen as a responsible decision by single or travelling parents to leave their children in the orphanage or with another white family but «where the informal child-care arrangements involved Black childminders, the philanthropists were most likely to claim that the child had been ‘deserted’ and needed to be ‘rescued’ by institutional welfare».

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18 Those who funded and ran the Jewish welfare institutions such as the Johannesburg Jewish Orphanage.
Sex (work)

The district surgeon, dr Claude-Wright, who was quoted above, added in his 1897 report that, in addition to being «objectionable and dirty in the extreme», the «Russian and other Jews overcrowd and cohabit promiscuously» (cited in Shain, 2004: 238). Through statements like this «dirty» sex is brought directly into conversation with «dirty» bodies and living conditions. In the male-dominated, heterosexual economy, only monogamous marital relations were seen as «clean» sex that had value (McClintock, 1995: 154).

Claiming that Yidn men weren’t monogamous, besides playing into the «dirty» sex trope, was also a highly racialised claim. The SAJC, in a long-running series of debates about whether Yidn or Indians should qualify for the franchise in the new (Union of) South Africa, argued that

the «Russian» Jew, however Oriental they may be in other respects, shares with the Western races that characteristic which forms the real distinctions between them and Oriental races —they are monogamous, while all Eastern races [. . .] are polygamous. (Goldsmid, 1906: 561)

This editorial was challenged by a letter under the pseudonym «a disgusted Jew» who raised the point that not all Eastern nations are polygamous but also that

there is no prohibition against polygamy even amongst the Chosen People [. . .] It is only within comparatively recent times that we have become «civilised» in this direction, and, in point of fact, we have merely adopted a Western convention. (Anon., 1906: 591)

This attempt by the «disgusted Jew» to blur the lines between «European» and «Oriental» also recognised that indeed a part of being seen as «civilised» was the practice
of monogamy. «Sexual perversions» were one of the central aspects of barbarism that was defined in direct opposition to civilisation (Slabodsky, 2014: 25). The threat of what would have been seen as a «racial devaluation» was used to control sexual desire. And the control of sexual desire was used to cement racial categories. This is nowhere more evident in the settler attempts to prevent sex and desire across differently racialised groups, something which in their minds «threatened the Eurocentric order of racial hierarchy» (Sherman and Steyn, 2009: 56).

Sherman and Steyn (2009: 62) demonstrate that anti-miscegenation rhetoric from colonialists was not only about «preserving the purity of the White race» but also to «establish race and gender hierarchies in law». This colonial «control over sex was fundamental to imperial definition of race» and the maintenance of racial boundaries (Baderoon, 2014: 85–86).

At the turn of the twentieth century in the Cape, Orange Free State, and the Transvaal, legal restrictions on mixed-race relationships, and against sex work, written with the assumption of heterosexual sex, only applied to cases when the woman was European. Black women, by this point, were being constructed in colonial society as hypersexual and unrapable, «rendering invisible the systematic sexual violence to which they were subjected» (Baderoon, 2014: 87). White women, on the other hand, were being constructed as the vulnerable property of White men for the sake of the «race». The hyper-focus on White women’s sexual practices and the imagined threat of race-mixing was used to police the sexuality of White women. Baderoon (2014: 86) explains that «sexual relations with enslaved and indigenous people posed an intolerable threat not only to the class but also the racial status of Whites».

Cognisant of how these tropes were used as tools of racial degradation and the threat that this posed to the Jewish community at large, institutions such as the Jewish Board of Deputies were extremely concerned to avoid any claims
that Jews were involved in «dirty sex». In particular, Jewish involvement in the «White slave trade» was quietly but effectively covered up.

The «White slave trade»

In the late 1800s, the term «White slave trade» indicated the coercion of White women into trafficking in the sex industry. This was facilitated through international networks stretching from inland Europe throughout the Atlantic world. However, some feminist scholars such as Jo Doezema (2000) have argued that the widespread attention to the «White slave trade» was more sensationalist than accurate. She argues that, though there were criminal networks of forced sex work, the public discourse and moniker were largely invented constructs which acted as «indicative of deeper fears and uncertainties concerning national identity, women’s increasing desire for autonomy, foreigners, immigrants and colonial peoples» (Doezema, 2000: 24).

Keeping this in mind, there were actual networks of pimps and «White» sex workers. Because of the lack of solid research, and reports exaggerated with anti-sex work moralising, it is unclear to what extent the women involved were the abducted victims this narrative provides, or if they were migrant labourers travelling, much like the miners and traders, to where economic opportunities, the possibility of autonomy from family structure, and new life could be built in the rapidly expanding colonial cities in the late 1800s.

In the Atlantic world, dominated by Christian leadership, while the «victims» of the «White slave trade» were seen as young innocent White women, the «villain» was cast as a foreign element (Doezema, 2000: 28). Tying into the existing discourse about undesirable foreign Jews, officials and the public constructed the pimp as an «alien Jew» (Van Onselen, 2000: 109). One example of this is seen in the Mafeking press
which reported on the arrest and sentencing of a pimp, Isaac Goldberg and described him as «an American Peruvian» (Anon., 1906: 3). Seen as responsible for «stealing» White women and threatening White racial strength and purity, Jews were categorised outside of the category of «White» and as racially degenerate. This reaffirms the long history of Jewish barbarism being cast as a «polluting the social fabric and threatening the purity of the nation» (Slabodsky, 2014: 97).

Partially to safeguard and construct an image of the Jewish community as an unthreatening part of colonial society, both Jewish Boards of Deputies in South Africa set up internal community watchdog committees and employed a combination of patronage and policing strategies. «Suspicious» Jews were put under surveillance; a category that was limited to new Yidn immigrants. Sharing photographs, creating case files, and working closely with the South African Police and international anti-trafficking networks, the Jewish communal representatives, almost entirely made up of Anglo-Jews, surveilled, tracked, arrested, and deported Yidn (Krut, 1985: 164–165). Of course, any men they found to be guilty of trafficking or other related crimes should have been held responsible. But in the context of «White slave trade» rhetoric, the construction of the villain as a Yidn, and a concern with the racial positioning of Jews in South Africa, the ideological function of these community watchdog committees was to carefully disassociate themselves from threats to their racial position in the colonial context. Through collusion with the colonial state, they were proving their civilisational credentials.

This is also true of the Jewish institutions’ self-professed assistance to the Jewish women who were involved in the sex industry. Similar to the global rhetoric, they were cast as victims to be rescued. Working with the London-based Jewish Society for the Protection of Girls and Women, the Boards sent «rescued» Jewish women back to London for «rehabilitation» (Krut, 1985: 164–165). Their work should be lauded for every woman who
was assisted to escape from being forced into sex work, and/or who wanted out of vulnerable and abusive conditions. Krut (1985: 166) notes however that «the intervention of the well-intentioned was not always appreciated. There was a subtle distinction between interfering for the benefit of a women, and just being plain nosy and interfering.» Both pimps and sex workers, regardless of the different moral treatment, were seen as incurable barbarians and expelled from the colony lest they taint the local Jewish community.

Because sex work, as a consensual economic practice, was seen as «dirty» sex and racially degenerate, the Board’s combination of patronage and policing functioned to control the sexual practices of Jewish women and thus cast them as White women, inscribed racial categories, and contributed to the position of South African Jews as a constituent part of the colonial state apparatus and within the boundaries of Whiteness.

(Liquor) Work

In addition to sex workers, anyone who did a form of work that was not in the interests —economically, socially, or politically— of the colonial capitalist class was seen as a threat, ostracised as dirty, dishonest, and subjected to state violence through the police, courts, and administration. Within this framework, Yidn were often described as crafty swindlers, and given that many made their livings as traders these slurs had great reach. This had a greater effect when it came to illegal trading. Besides links to the White slave trade, Yidn were often closely associated by the press and politicians to gambling, the illicit diamond trade, and the illicit liquor trade (Krut, 1985: 123).

Both English- and Dutch-language newspapers made these links frequently, accusing Yidn, as Peruvians, of being immoral, degraded, and the «unwashed peregrinators of things evil and illegal» (Krut, 1985: 111), which continued the long European tradition of scapegoating Jews for economic problems.
In a letter to the British Secretary of State Joseph Chamberlain from the Cape Colony’s High Commissioner Alfred Milner in 1899, Milner describes the refugees from the Transvaal as including:

the loafers and hangers-on of society, and those who made a precarious living by means and in some cases illegal trades—such as buying of stolen goods and the sale of liquor to natives. A great number of them are the low class of Jews known as Peruvians [. . .] «who are» an additional burden which threatens to break us down altogether, and involves danger to the health, as well as to the resources and the good order of British South Africa. (Cited in Krut, 1985: 66)

South African colonial society made close links between being immigration, citizenship, and economic contribution. Milner had already deported 350 Yidn, allegedly for illegal liquor trading (Krut, 1985: 66). This active threat was seen as detrimental to Jewish life in colonial society by the Jewish elite; the fault as usual however was placed not on the colonial state, but rather on Yidn. So, to socialise Yidn into colonialists, elite Jews made it their mission to delink Yidn from «dirty» deals—both in the public image and in practice—through a process of propaganda, patronage, and policing. Trying to fit in, and affected by the inferiority complex that developed amongst Yidn because of this, led many Yidn to see it as in their material and social interest to assimilate into the white colonial world.

The first editorial of *Die Afrikanshe Gazatten*, a Johannesburg Yiddish newspaper, in 1897 makes this clear by linking «dirt» on the body directly to «dirty» trade. It «stressed the values

19 The active fighting mostly took place in the northern parts of the country, which caused many who lived and worked there to flee to the coastal areas for a few years. Jews primarily went to Cape Town.
of cleanliness, sobriety and self-control» and «exhorted its membership to wash more frequently», and to «refrain from participating in the illicit liquor traffic» (Krut, 1985: 109).

Unlike the threat of forced removals which were never carried out, here the state did actively police Jewish behaviour. Convinced that all illicit liquor dealers were «Peruvians», the state police instituted a trapping system in which African agents would buy, or pretend to buy, alcohol from Yidn traders who would then be caught and charged by the White policemen. Due to the stereotype, many Jews who weren’t liquor traders were «trapped» through setups organised by the police.

One of the first responses to the «trappings» was for Manfred Nathan, a member of the Board of Deputies of the Transvaal and Natal, and a lawyer, to represent anyone caught out by it. Through his legal representation, the courts found many of the Yidn not guilty of illicit liquor trading. However, the individual approach was not enough and soon his legal representation was worked into an organisational strategy lead by Nathan, Max Langermann, Richard Rosenthal, and Harry Solomon: a team of elite Jews if there ever was one. They were all either mine owners, property developers, or lawyers; they all held executive positions in Jewish institutions including the Boards of Deputies, Zionist organisations, synagogues, schools, and the orphanage; most were also elected politicians in the colonial state at local, financial, and regional levels (Krut, 1985: 104, 146–147; Robertson, 1991: 36, 47–48; Cohen, 1991: 205–209; Mendelow and Robertson, 1991: 217).20

The economic, social, and political interests of these men are obvious. As an example, in 1904, member of parliament

20 How dispersed these references are for finding simple bibliographic information indicates how South African Jewish historiography has obscured the possible interrelationship between these men’s colonial and intracommunal practices and influence.
Harry Solomon, championed a law which introduced racial segregation on the South African railways (Feldman, 2007 [1955]: 130). Their actions as colonialists within South Africa were occurring simultaneously to their actions as colonialists within the Jewish community.

Far from representing all Yidn caught up in the legal system, Nathan would only represent those he was sure would be found not guilty. The Board then widely published news of the false trappings. Anyone guilty, or if they couldn’t prove their innocence, was left to fend for themselves. The Jewish Board was more concerned with becoming a constituent part of colonial society than representing the interests of individual Jews. Instead of working against the existence of racial bias of the trapping committee, or against the liquor legislation, the official Jewish institutions chose to rather engage in this process on internal subject formation. I agree with Riva Krut’s (1985: 170) assessment that the Board was «determined that they would only serve the ‘community’ they were trying to mould». The message was clear to Yidn: assimilate into colonial ideology and we will have your back, transgress in any way and we’ll leave you out to dry. In one case when Nathan discovered that the Jew he was assisting did actually make a living from liquor sales, he sent her a harsh letter which concluded by saying that «we exist for the purpose of helping in deserving cases, not to assist offenders against the Law and will certainly not be imposed upon by you again» (cited in Krut, 1985: 172).

The Board’s statement demonstrates their willingness to alternate between patronage and policing to shape Yidn into colonial subjects. Patronage was conditional on behaving within the bounds of colonial ideology and policing used to exclude anyone who would tarnish their image. Krut further notes that patronage was extended not when the need was greatest but rather only when the elite «representatives» felt the position of Jews was most vulnerable (Krut, 1985: 173).
Farewell to the peruvnik

To avoid the racial violence that accompanies the accusation of dirt was to think of these discourses and practices as antisemitic —i.e. specifically an anti-Jewish phenomenon—and fight to be accepted into the White settler state. Being accepted as colonialists was a twofold project. On the one hand, it meant convincing and working with the patriarchal colonial elite, to display a willingness to collaborate in what Slabodsky calls «the execution of the imperial designs» in exchange for «short-lived candidacies to assimilation» (Slabodsky, 2014: 60). This necessitated adopting and extending colonial projects to create and maintain racial hierarchies through the segregation and control of living conditions, labour, and sex.

On the other hand, this was an internal project of removing the stain of racial degeneracy from the Yidn, a project undertaken both by Anglo-Jews and by Yidn themselves. Sometimes via policing and exclusion of those deemed undesirable «Peruvians» and other times via patronage and welfare, the response to the threat of dirt was the transformation from colonisers, settlers in a colonial context, to colonialists —not only inhabiting the structural position of a settler population but also the ideological and practical allegiance to White supremacy.

The peruvnik, the Jewish barbarian in South Africa, had the potential to break this allegiance and become a symbol of anticolonial barbarism. Already the peruvnik resisted the authority of the colonial state at every turn. They had not, as a collective, yet embraced a full rejection of their position as colonisers but with their willingness to continuously break laws and habits which sought to hierarchically separate differently racialised groups could have led to such a position. Already there were some peruvniks, such as Yeshua Israelstam and J. Gillitz, who had joined anticapitalist and anticolonial movements.

But most Jews, led by the Jewish communal institutions chose to become colonialists: colonisers who seek to legitimise,
defend, collude, and further colonialism. This is not unexpected; most colonisers make the choice to improve their own lives. Memmi (1967: 19–20) reminds us that «it is not easy to escape mentally from a concrete situation, to refuse its ideology while continuing to live with its actual relationships». However, its success foreclosed the possibility of the peruvnik being anything other than a dirty, shameful character. Today, older Jews will tell you that they, or their parents, used the word peruvnik/peruvian to refer to someone who was rude or perhaps a bit brash. The subjectivity of the colonialist lived on to embrace colonial logics of domination through to the present.

References


