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**Utopianism, Memory  
and the Body,  
and the Bergen-Belsen  
Displaced Persons Camp**

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements of  
Manchester Metropolitan  
University  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts (by Research)

Department of Media

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# Utopianism, Memory and the Body, and the Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons Camp

- How can arts practice expand family testimony to explore wider questions of Jewish corporeality and memory?
- How does Walter Benjamin's approach to the past offer tools to explore themes of loss and utopian possibilities?



## ABSTRACT

This project used art practice as research to open up questions about the way that loss and utopianism are manifested in the 'Jewish body', by bringing together elements of practice involving movement, sound and film. I expanded upon the testimony of my great aunt Rene Sakula that began with her experience volunteering with Jewish survivors in the Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons Camp in 1945. This involved running dance classes, in which she was struck by how the young women moved; they danced, she said, with hope not with sorrow.

The research explored ways of using the body to work the narrative frames imposed on Jewish identity and to consider how the body can move between, and perhaps beyond, them. The practice involved collaborative movement-based interviews, individual audio and video editing and composition, and the development of a public installation piece. Documentation of this multi-media process is presented throughout this thesis: from my early investigation of sonic 'stutters' to disrupt narratives, to the later choreographed installation piece that opened the research up to new meaning in the movement of bodies.

My process of inquiry occupied a space of tension between established, positivist forms of knowledge production, and practice as research. I experienced an ongoing strain of feeling pulled towards the theoretical and affective aspects of the work, and away from the freeing and open potential of the aesthetic. I sought a more productive balance through working with the "esoteric intellectualism" (Rabinbach, 1985) of Walter Benjamin's approach to history, and the possibilities offered by film practice, sonic art, and especially dance and movement. To develop this inquiry beyond this Masters by Research, the body and its movements could offer a useful tool in which to further explore the tension between these forms of knowledge production.

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# INTRODUCTION

This project used art practice as research to open up questions about the way that loss and utopianism are manifested in the 'Jewish body'. Bringing together elements of practice involving movement, sound and film, the small-scale experiences within the testimony of my great aunt Rene Sakula were drawn into dialogue with large narratives of identity and the body. My process involved collaborative movement-based interviews, individual audio and video editing and composition, and the development of a public installation piece. Whilst moving between practice and a range of literature, I sought to underpin my inquiry through creative interpretations of Walter Benjamin's approach to history.

My great aunt Rene Sakula volunteered to work with Jewish survivors of the Holocaust at the Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons Camp in Germany for a year from 1945. During her time there, Rene organised and facilitated informal dance classes attended by young survivors. The venue was a grand building called the Rundhaus, to which Rene would walk through the woods surrounding the Camp; large chandeliers hung from its high ceiling and light came in through tall windows, framed by heavy drape curtains. The Rundhaus had been the site of banquets and social events for SS and Nazi officers; in Rene's classes, Jews were dancing across its wooden floor. In their movements, Rene said, it was not sorrow that she saw, it was hope.

This project sought out meaning in the movement of bodies and the way that bodies could move between – and perhaps beyond - competing narratives that seek to frame them. I explored the persistent and significant role that antisemitism plays in shaping the 'Jewish body', and considered how Zionism as a response to antisemitism provides its own problematic and gendered frames.

The project developed through a series of 3 interviews with Rene, a process of reading-making-reflecting, and in the production of a publicly-displayed installation piece. The methodology was multi-faceted, using audio and video editing and composition, musical performance and dance in an iterative process of

experimentation, that quickly moved away from using arts practice as a tool of illustration of historical themes.

From my position of safety and privilege, a world away from the horrors of the Holocaust and displacement of the DP camps, I reflected on notions of the relationship between the present, the past and utopian possibilities of the future.

This was evidently a personal study that through art practice expanded and opened up questions about Jewish corporeality and memory. In terms that are affective, intellectual, and of course practical in producing this work, this research started from me and my body.

I was born in to Jewish lineage, but not marked as Jewish through the rituals that legitimise the Jewish male body, either physically through circumcision nor as a rite of passage, through a Barmitzvah. My knowledge of Jewish prayers and of stories of the Torah is threadbare and I do not possess the cultural ‘short-hand’ or full set of references that easily allows me entry into the community. Importantly when thinking through antisemitism and representations of the Jewish body, as I do in this project, my body is not defined as Jewish by other Jews or non-Jews: I am told frequently that I do not “look Jewish”.

Yet the ‘Jewish body’ – historically and contemporaneously - is the site in which a vast array of narratives are imposed – by Jews and non-Jews, antisemites and allies of Jews alike.

The Jewish body is the site of victimhood<sup>1</sup>, of warrior status<sup>2</sup>, and of the seemingly contradictory but ultimately compatible position in antisemitic narratives as global super-human and sub-human threat. The ‘Jewish body’ in its individual and collective, communal form has also been destroyed and re-born, in conceptual, mythical and very embodied ways. This project begins at the very material

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<sup>1</sup>Most dramatically resulting from the Shoah, but stretching from its historical roots in Biblical narratives of persecution to the twentieth century pogroms of Eastern Europe

<sup>2</sup>Since the development of Zionism, and now in the context of current Middle East politics



moment of 1945 as the interface of near complete annihilation and of re-birth, and through art practice opens up wider questions of memory and hope.

## **DISSERTATION STRUCTURE**

### **Chapter 1: Context**

Here I outline the key disciplinary areas I have engaged with through the life of the project – some aspects of which moved from playing a contextual to a methodological role, and vice versa. The literature I engaged with included: historiography, Jewish studies, critical theory, dance scholarship, memory studies and contemporary art. Through both the Context and Methodology chapters, I will position my multi-media practice in relation to artists whose work features relevant technical or thematic elements. Throughout, I will return to the evolving role of Walter Benjamin's work in this project.

### **Chapter 2: Methodology**

In this section, I chart the development of my practice through its interaction with relevant literature, the different approaches to the series of interviews with my great aunt, and the coming together of an installation piece that engaged a public audience. I will discuss relevant debates within practice as research and explore how my pre-existing practice based around music and speech increasingly became part of a more embodied approach that incorporated bodily movement. I will go on to explain the increasing prominence of the body - and the Jewish body in particular - as both a focus and as a tool of the research.

### **Chapter 3: Learning**

Here I evaluate my learning from what I define as the 3 'spaces' in which my research took place, and consider how they relate to both my research aims and to the nature and efficacy of notions of practice as research.

1. The interviews with Rene, in which a variety of methods and feelings were produced and that had profound effects on both researcher and 'participant'.

2. The iterative personal process of reading-making-reflecting, in which practice developed from music and radio to include movement and film, through engagement with a range of disciplinary influences.
3. The final installation provided a point at which meaning could emerge from the interaction between Rene, myself and a public audience.

I conclude by considering the tensions that arose when working in the space between established bodies of knowledge and the openness of practice as a form of research. I will explain how by bringing the body in to the project, I was able to more productively exist between these approaches to knowledge.

# CHAPTER 1: CONTEXT



*“you had to give them some sort of technique[...] and then I would say ‘dance what you’re feeling’ [...] most of them weren’t all, you know, like that, and miserable...”*

*“you’re bowed over”*

*“...they seemed to dance about the future”<sup>3</sup>*

This Context section outlines the key theoretical and historical themes with which I have engaged in the development of this project. The question of how the research fits in to, or is in constructive tension with, an existing body of knowledge becomes problematised when considering Estelle Barratt’s suggestion ‘that artistic practice be viewed as the production of knowledge or philosophy in action [...] and draws on subjective, interdisciplinary and emergent methodologies that have the potential to extend the frontiers of research’ (Barrett and Bolt, 2010 p.3)<sup>4</sup>

This section begins with an introduction to my great aunt Rene Sakula, followed by an overview of the historiography of Jewish Displaced Persons (DPs) after the Holocaust and the specific context of the Bergen-Belsen DP Camp at which my great aunt volunteered in 1945. It then focuses on the most significant political aspect to the DP’s experience: Zionism, and then the intersection of its utopianism with the physical experience and manifestation of loss among Jewish DPs.

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<sup>3</sup>Exchange between Rene Sakula and myself during our pre-project interview, April 2017

<sup>4</sup>The subjectivity and independence of inquiry is taken further by James Oliver whose view is that ‘in practice-as-research it is the situated practice (and emplaced practitioner) that should orient the research methodology and methods, and not a disciplinary or objective method per se.’ (Oliver, 2018 p.7)

The work then broadens out to wider issues within the representation of Jewish bodies, before connecting with themes in contemporary dance and movement, which are particularly relevant for my great aunt's experiences. I then look at how the past is engaged with, in the present, through arts-based approaches to memory. Finally, I outline the influence of Walter Benjamin whose work ran through the project and provided an important lens through which to consider the relationship between past and present, as well as the project's key themes of loss, utopianism and Jewish identity.

## **RENE SAKULA**

My great aunt Rene Sakula (nee Rurka), who is my maternal grandmother's sister-in-law, is 93 and lives in the South East of England.<sup>5</sup>

Rene was born in Hackney, East London to working class Jewish parents who had emigrated from Poland. Rene explained that she had left school early and, "had worked in day nurseries, and, at the same time, trained at the then LCC College of Physical Education in London, as a Recreative Leader in Further Education. This was wartime and I travelled for miles to teach classes in the blackout, sometimes with bombs falling around me." (Rene Sakula, 1992 p.1)

It is not clear how she heard about or took steps to join the Jewish Relief Unit as a volunteer at the War's end, nor how she was assigned to travel to Bergen-Belsen DP Camp. However, her older sister Sadie Rurka also went there as a volunteer so that may have been a factor.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>I asked that Rene be interviewed as part of this project after initial enquiries were made through my mother, her niece, with whom she has a good relationship. The two meet fairly regularly and in recent years have connected over shared interests in contemporary dance: Rene having been a dance teacher and had a life-long passion for movement, whilst my parents have been involved in a contemporary dance group in Brighton for around 8 years.

<sup>6</sup>Soon after returning from Bergen-Belsen DP Camp, Rene married Alex Sakula who was a doctor from a bourgeois family of tailors, had 4 children and worked as a housewife until later returning to Laban's work to train as a teacher of his movement techniques. She delivered classes based on this tradition in Reigate, Surrey and elsewhere for the next 40 years.

## **JEWISH DPs & BERGEN-BELSEN**

Rene travelled with the Jewish Relief Unit (JRU), an English charity that took around 90 volunteers to support Jewish DPs in the British Zone, in which the Bergen-Belsen Camp was situated (Wyman, 1985). Rene was 20 years old when she began volunteering in 1945 and left in mid 1946; in a photograph, a young woman lies on some grass in the sun, smiling at the camera. On the back is written: “Bergen-Belsen May 4<sup>th</sup> 1946 – my 21<sup>st</sup>!”

The Bergen-Belsen DP camp<sup>7</sup> was the largest in the British Zone holding between 9,000-12,000 in the first years after the War, with fewer by the time of its closure in 1950 (Lavsky, 2002). It was a former German military base, close to the site of the concentration camp which had been destroyed by the British to prevent the spread of disease. When the British liberated the Camp on 15 April 1945, there were around 60,000 inmates (Jews and non-Jews), a month later, up to 13,000 had died and 17,000 had been repatriated (Lavsky, 2002). The remaining non-Jewish DPs were soon moved, and replaced by large numbers of Jews from the USSR and Eastern Europe, who were fleeing rising antisemitism and pogroms, such as in Kielce, Poland in July 1946 (Wyman, 1985).

In developing a picture of the Jewish DPs, Atina Grossmann writes about how they were perceived and identifies a range of terms that were applied to this group, both sympathetically and unsympathetically. These included: ‘uncivilised’, ‘not hygienic’, ‘uninhibited in regard to the opposite sex’, ‘hopeless’, suffering with ‘inertia’, ‘jittery, excitable, anxiety prone’. Grossmann claims that the “unromantic, unappealing and alien” appearance of the DP survivors is in stark contrast to the modern “valorization” of Holocaust survivors (Grossmann, 2002 p.297).<sup>8</sup>

### **Photographs of Bergen-Belsen DPs**

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<sup>7</sup>officially called the ‘Hohne’ DP camp by the military authorities

<sup>8</sup>The central role of the Holocaust in modern Jewish identity is discussed by Manuela Consonni. She addresses how this has led to a collective status of Jews as victims and an ‘othering’ of Jews, and explains how Jews’ presence and belonging in Europe before and since the Shoah is ‘erased’ through the way that the Holocaust is used (Consonni, 2010)

In looking through Yad Vashem's online collection of photographs of the DP Camp, I was struck by the dynamism and clarity of images from the collection of Rabbi Dr. Zvi Asaria Herman Helfgott. The pictures focus on Zionist organising in Bergen-Belsen: a group listening to a speaker at an outdoors political rally, a woman marching with men holding a banner, a group holding a banner demanding emigration to Palestine, and a column of people with a few faces turned excitedly towards the camera. The people in the photographs do not look noticeably unwell, nor would it be easy to connect them to the Camp or to necessarily identify them as Jews (Helfgott, 2008)<sup>9</sup>.

## **Zionism**

Zionism expressed the aspiration for a homeland for Jews in the area of land referred to in the Torah (Old Testament), between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan. The various religious and secular strains of the modern form of Zionism developed from the latter half of the Nineteenth Century. Emigration to Palestine took place from the late 1900s, but with larger numbers moving in the 1920s/30s after the British 'Balfour Declaration' agreed with the principle of a Jewish state in the region, and antisemitism flourished in Europe. Following the Holocaust, Zionism became the hegemonic political aspiration across Jewish communities, including within the DP camps, where a UNRRA<sup>10</sup> questionnaire of 19,000 Jewish DPs resulted in around 18,000 respondents listing Palestine as their first as well as their second choices for emigration (Wyman, 1985).

Jewish emigration to Palestine was highly limited by the British until the end of its Mandate in the region. Young Jewish men were the particular focus of British and Zionist struggles over migration, as they were in the best position to fight. In the

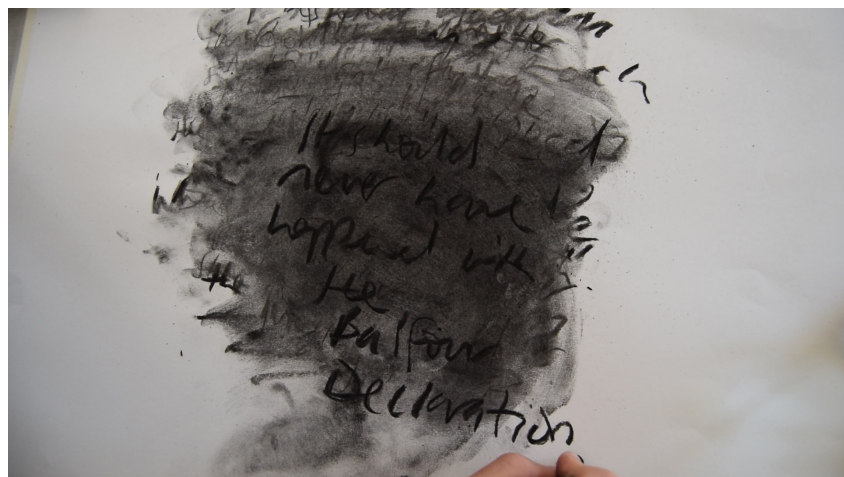
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<sup>9</sup> Photographs from the collection of Rabbi Dr. Zvi Asaria Herman Helfgott in Yad Vashem online collection: <https://photos.yadvashem.org/index.html?language=en&displayType=image&collectionFilter=%257B%2522field%2522%253A%2522collection%2522%252C%2522operator%2522%253A%2522global%2522%252C%2522value%2522%253A%2522Photographs%2520from%2520the%2520collection%2520of%2520Rabbi%2520Dr.%2520Zvi%2520Asaria%2520Herman%2520Helfgott.%2522%252C%2522idVal%2522%253A%25226972419%2522%252C%2522codeSearch%2522%253A%2522%2522%2527D> . (visited 04/10/17)

<sup>10</sup>United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

ensuing war after Israel's founding was declared, 21,000 Jewish DPs enlisted to fight in the paramilitary Hagannah. (Patt, 2010).

A number of groups and parties representing different strains of Zionism were prominent in Bergen-Belsen DP camp, and even ran their own schools and newspapers (Wyman, 1985). For young people, perhaps including those in Rene's dance classes, their educational experience was shaped by Zionist politics. Boaz Cohen has investigated the efforts to collect children's testimonies in the months following the camp's liberation (Cohen, 2006). This initiative centred on the Camp's secondary school, the 'Hebrew Gymnasium', which was co-founded by an ex-British Army Zionist activist named David Litman, who Rene befriended, and whose work involved organising illegal emigration of DPs to Palestine.



## THE JEWISH BODY

### DPs' bodies

Few people will not hold in their minds a single or composite image of Jewish survivors at the time of the liberation of Nazi concentration camps in 1945; photographs of naked corpses and of the emaciated living with their striped uniform hanging off their bodies are ubiquitous.

After an estimated 13,000 had died in the first 6 weeks after Bergen-Belsen was liberated in April 1945, and thousands had been repatriated, over half of the remaining DPs required hospitalisation by the end of May (Lavsky, 2002). The

poor state of the living conditions of Jewish DPs in Germany was highlighted in a significant report in August 1945 to President Truman that likened their treatment by the American military to that of the Nazis, but without the deliberate extermination (Patt, 2010). However, conditions did quite quickly improve as the authorities recognised the needs and self-organisation of Jewish DPs and aid arrived including through Rene's organisation, the JRU (Lavsky, 2002).

## **Babies and Youth**

The demographic make-up of Jewish DPs was dramatically young: up to 50% were below 25, and 80% were below 40 years old (Patt, 2010) and there were already more child survivors in Belsen than in other DP camps (Lavsky, 2010). Marriages and births were a significant feature of Jewish DP life in the first years after the War, with around 1000 babies born between 1945 and early 1948 (Lavsky, 2002). Mankowitz highlights the relationship between the living and the dead as it symbolically and literally manifested in the children born in the DP camps, as they bore the physical features of the dead, and were given their names (Mankowitz referenced in Grossmann, 2002). In representations of DP culture and politics, there was an emphasis on "life reborn", and photographs and references to babies and baby carriages were prominent in the Zionist press and physically, in political demonstrations demanding emigration to Palestine (Grossmann, 2002).

## **'People of the Book'**

Though it began with DPs and the way that past, present and future manifested in their bodies, the project expanded out to consider broader questions of Jewish corporeality. Eilberg-Schwartz recognises the significance of the representation of the Jewish body and its symbols in the holy scriptures of Torah and Talmud<sup>11</sup>, for instance, highlighting how the Jewish people's covenant with God is inscribed on the Jewish body, specifically on the penis through circumcision (Eilberg-Schwartz, 1991).

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<sup>11</sup>Torah is the Jewish name for the Christian 'Old Testament' and Talmud is its accompanying text that serves to elaborate and clarify meanings and religious rituals references in the Torah



Despite the significance of the body for Jewishness, the dance scholar Rebecca Rossen claims that through cultural representation there has been a process of disembodiment of Jews through the common stereotyping of 'Jewish intellectual superiority' and 'logocentrism' (Rossen, 2012). According to Rossen, even Eilberg-Schwartz's recognition of the Jewish body's importance serves to reinforce these stereotypes, by exploring bodies only through text. This, she believes, is a response to a central function of antisemitism that pathologises Jewish physicality as inferior (Rossen, 2012).

According to Eilberg-Schwartz and Rossen it is not all Jewish bodies that are central to both Jewish and antisemitic narratives, it is the male body. Even where women are integral, such as in procreation, their role is undermined in scriptural references through the association of all blood (including that of menstruation and delivering babies) with death (Eilberg-Schwartz, 1991). In the representation of Jewish women's bodies in popular culture, Rossen highlights that their features are often dramatically 'excessive or lacking' such as those of the 'exotic Jewess', the 'Jewish mother' or the 'Jewish American Princess' (Rossen, 2012 p.60).

Representations of the Jewish body have been used within antisemitism as a powerful tool of othering Jews and justifying exclusion and violence against them, and was particularly acute in late nineteenth century Europe. Here, older narratives intersected with pseudo-scientific Eugenics and wider attempts to categorise and pathologise groups of the population.

## **Antisemitism**

Well established historical antisemitic tropes relate to Jews' alleged crimes against Christians, and many had an embodied aspect. As punishment for the murder of Christ, God was said to have forced Jews to wander for eternity, never being able to be accepted or rooted. The later antisemitic 'blood libel' held that Jews sacrificed Christian children and used their bodies and blood as ingredients for their ritual foods like Matzo<sup>12</sup>. Both claims have proved historically persistent and have been incorporated in to more modern forms of antisemitism.

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<sup>12</sup>Unleavened bread

In his important book, *The Jew's Body*, Sander Gilman analyses the way in which Jewish difference has been developed in antisemitic narratives from the latter half of the Nineteenth Century to the late Twentieth, and how these have played out around aspects of the Jew's body such as the voice, feet and nose. The 'Jewish body', Gilman explains, is represented as pathologically physically deformed or diseased, which renders Jews unable to be effective citizens and soldiers. Simultaneously, Jews collectively present a physical threat to the health and vitality of the body politic (Gilman, 1991).

Gilman's chapter on 'The Jewish Foot' was particularly relevant for this project in helping me to think through the way in which antisemites and Zionists struggled over representations of Jews, but often on shared intellectual terrain that drew on positivist science and modernist notions of masculinity (Gilman, 1991). Gilman's work includes a range of images of Jewish bodies from antisemitic propaganda and popular culture which I incorporated in the embodied aspects of my research, as I explain in the Methodology chapter.



### **The Zionist Body**

In 1898 at the second Zionist Conference, Max Nordau had coined the term 'Muscle Jew' as a response both to the marginalised and oppressed position of

Jews in Europe and to prepare them for the pioneering construction of a state in Palestine.

“Zionism [will] awaken Judaism to new life [...] It achieves this morally through the rejuvenation of the ideals of the *Volk* and corporeally through the physical rearing of one’s offspring, in order to create a lost muscle Jewry once again”  
(Max Nordau quoted in Presner, 2003)

Sport and physical exercise were key to shaping the new (very much male) body of the ‘Muscle Jew’ and links were made between the health of the mind and the body, and how this also ‘provided his ability to be a full-scale citizen’ (Gilman, 1991 p.53). Many Zionist arguments accepted medical narratives about Jewish bodily weakness, whilst some explained that those impairments were rooted in the experience of living in ghettos (Gilman, 1991).

For Todd Presner, narratives around the ‘Muscle Jew’ tied reconstructing the individual body to that of ‘the body politic of the desired nation [...]and] these intersecting Zionist discourses extended from the aesthetic and the therapeutic to the eugenic and the colonial.’ (Presner, 2003 p.270).

Work by the significant early Twentieth Century Zionist artist, E.M.Lilien depict Jewish male bodies as giant figures stylistically drawn from the aesthetics of Ancient Greece (Arbel, 1996). Illustrations like Lilien’s ‘link the individual body of the Jew to the larger project of state formation.’ (Presner, 2003 p.272). Whilst Nordau and Lilien’s representations of the Jewish body came out of German Zionism in particular, images and rhetoric of heroic, muscular and male Jews runs throughout Zionist imagery up to (and I would say beyond) the founding of the state of Israel.<sup>13</sup>

The idealised images of Zionist bodies contrasted starkly with the indelible black and white newsreel pictures of concentration camp survivors. Grossmann highlights the way that perceptions of Jewish DPs were not uncomplicated, even

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<sup>13</sup> A range of propaganda material from different currents within Zionism can be found in Rachel Arbel’s edited publication *Blue and White in Colour: Visual Images of Zionism 1897 – 1947* an exhibition catalogue from Beth Hatefutsoth, the Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, Tel Aviv 1996

amongst other Jews. Indeed, terms such as “human debris” and “living corpses” were assigned to the DPs by many of the Yishuv<sup>14</sup> according to Israeli historian Idith Zerta (quoted in Grossmann, 2002 p.298).<sup>15</sup>

In the following methodology chapter, I explain how this range of representations of the ‘Jewish body’ became part of the (often embodied) dialogue within this project. I will analyse the way that narratives like these interacted with the small, experiential aspects of my great aunt’s testimony, to open up questions of Jewish corporeality and memory.



## DANCE

Having been trained as a ‘Recreative Leader in Further Education’ in London, Rene initially conceived of the classes that she put on for Jewish survivors in Bergen-Belsen DP camp as ‘keep fit’ activities. DP camps in Germany did have outlets for sports, like football, boxing and other physical activities but this seemed different. Rene’s dance classes were not in an established routine, but every week she would walk through the woods to the Rundhaus, and small numbers of young DPs would join her there.

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<sup>14</sup>Jews living in Palestine before the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

<sup>15</sup>The ‘right’ kind of Jewish body remained of considerable consequence for European Jewish DPs, even after the establishment of the state of Israel. During Israel’s ‘War of Independence’ with its Arab neighbours and despite the overwhelming vocal support for emigration to Palestine among DPs, emigration to the United States matched that to ‘Eretz Israel’, partly due to “the Israeli authorities’ decision to withhold immigration permits from those unsuited for participation in the war effort.” (Lavksy, 2002 p.210)

*“It was a palatial building and the groups I taught from the camps were able to overcome their feelings about the purpose for which the Rundhaus had been used by almost re-creating themselves. Surprisingly, they did not dwell on and explore their seemingly hopeless experiences of the past, but presented images of a more hopeful future. Some of them lived to fulfil their dreams, others did not.”*

(Rene Sakula, 1992)

Contemporary dance was not a part of the practice that I began this study with, nor is it within the scope of this project to provide a thorough overview of this broad practice. However, I do make reference to the work of Rudolf Laban, due to his significant influence on both the content of my great aunt’s testimony and the movement-based elements of our interviews together.

## **Laban**

*“At this time I had not heard of Laban, so when I did meet him I was very excited by his ideas, which seemed to reinforce my own instinctive feelings as to how movement education could be used in a variety of situations.”*

(Rene Sakula, 1992)

Rene first met the dance theorist and choreographer Rudolf Laban at his movement studio upstairs on Oxford Road in Manchester, shortly after she returned from Bergen-Belsen. Rene explained that Laban offered her a place on his dance teaching course but, shortly after, she met her future husband and was soon married. It was several years later, once her children were born, that Rene formally reconnected with Laban’s training. However, she went on to teach Laban-based movement classes to women and girls in Reigate, Kent for 40 years.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Despite what Rene and others saw as Laban’s progressive work, Laban himself had risen to be a prominent dance theorist and choreographer in the mid 1930s in Nazi Germany (having been promoted by Josef Goebbels to a role overseeing dance across the country). According to Jean Newlove and John Dalby, during preparations for a major dance work for the opening of the Berlin Olympics in 1936, Hitler and Goebbels attended the dress rehearsal and the two were so concerned by what Laban was doing that the performance was cancelled and his work (including his dance notation and instructional books) were banned and Laban ‘was put under unofficial house arrest’ (Newlove and Dalby, 2004 p.14). Around a year later, he fled Germany and travelled to England, via Paris.

According to Jean Newlove and John Dalby, Laban's philosophy is based on the oneness of the human mind and the body, and seeks conformity to the laws of nature (Newlove and Dalby, 2004). Inspired by ideas rooted in Ancient Greece, Laban made connections between Platonic shapes<sup>17</sup>, the human body and the space that its movement can inhabit. The basis of Laban's theory of movement was the 'Dimensional Cross', which marked the spatial dimensions in which we move: upwards and downwards, backwards and forwards and from side to side (Newlove and Dalby, 2004 p.49). Movements were sourced in eight basic actions: press, slash, float, punch, glide, dab, wring and flick, and a person's movements would inhabit the 'kinesphere': the space which marks the parameters to which a person's body can extend to (Newlove and Dalby, 2004).

I wanted to get a sense of the values that dancers felt were there within Laban's practice – especially in the time that Rene would have engaged with his work. I had an informal telephone interview with Valerie Preston-Dunlop, who was Laban's apprentice and student for 12 years from 1947<sup>18</sup>. She outlined what she called the 'socialist' and 'egalitarian' nature of Laban's work. In those post-war years, Mrs Preston-Dunlop described an "atmosphere [of] renewal" which in that austere period of rationing, "made for a feeling of urgency to collaborate" reinforced by a reaction against the antagonisms and violence of the War. She said that both in the make up of the performers ("race, age, gender didn't matter") and in the rejection of established dance steps, Laban's methods encouraged the creation of movements that had never been done before.

As part of my research, I was interested in the implicit or more ambiguous political facets of Laban's movement work. In the following Methodology chapter, I look at how these ideas and Laban's techniques became significant in my interviews with Rene, as both the subject and tool for my research.

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<sup>17</sup>Plato's triangle-shaped structures ('Solids') represented the 4 elements of earth, air, fire and water. Laban, calling these shapes 'Crystals', used these as the basis for defining the spaces in which dancers can move.

<sup>18</sup>Valerie Preston-Dunlop is the author of a range of significant books on Laban and his techniques, since *Handbook for Modern Educational Dance* in 1969. I was given her contact details after contacting the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance (at which she is a consultant) to request an interview with one of their dance scholars about the theory and ideas behind Laban's movement style.

## MEMORY & TESTIMONY

This project does not start with a polished, pristine set of memories of the Bergen-Belsen DP camp. What Rene articulated in our interviews oscillated between what might be deemed the 'important' and the 'mundane', and between different moments in her life; sometimes placing events in quite dramatically a-chronological order but in ways that somehow felt that they belonged together.<sup>19</sup> The question then arises: is this arrangement of experiences and points of reference a problem? Is it an issue of inaccuracy that needs challenging or dismissing from the research, or can it be worked with?

Ernst Van Alphen rejects the frequent dichotomy between narrative testimony that is 'historical' (and therefore positive) and one that is 'imaginative' (negative) (van Alphen, 2002 pp16/17). This project's purpose is not to validate Rene's testimony as hard evidence, indeed, in referring to the case of Holocaust victims' testimony, James Young cautions against dismissing imaginative aspects in the production and representation of history (referenced in Van Alphen, 2002).<sup>20</sup>

### Art and Memory

Questions though, should be asked of those artists working with themes of memory, especially those relating to traumatic events. Marianne Hirsch raises concerns about a risk of abstracting art from its historical and traumatic context (Hirsch, 2012). She cites Christian Boltanski's work, that has featured faces of the dead in installations that suggest the arrangement of altars and of icons for mourning, though we are often not told how or in what context they died. Hirsch

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<sup>19</sup>For example, when I asked about the training she had received from the JRU before travelling to Belsen, Rene had said that it included an explanation of ongoing antisemitic feelings. Rene explained to me that she knew all about this as her parents were Polish Jews and that she knew about antisemitic views as she had travelled to Poland. When I asked when this trip had taken place, Rene explained this happened years later, when travelling to Poland for her husband's work and she had sought out the street on which her mother had been born.

<sup>20</sup> James Young explains that there remains an assumption that the more realistic the representation, the more adequate it is as testimonial evidence of events. He also cautions against too rigidly distinguishing between 'testimony' and 'interpretation' and explains that imaginative aspects in the production and representation of history, do not invalidate it – citing examples of Holocaust victims' testimony. (Young in van Alphen, 2002 pp.24-27)

also draws attention to Boltanski's admission that he himself may be fabricating his own biography as he works with ideas that he now cannot be certain that he experienced (Hirsch, 2012).

For this project, there is a tension within the creative process of decontextualizing Rene's testimony. When it comes to sound art, which features in my own practice, John Wynne explains that there is a tension between communicating the content and context of what is said and "a desire to explore sound itself and to express myself" (Wynne quoted in Lane, 2008 p.79). Trevor Wishart, whose work *Encounters in the Republic of Heaven* is an influence on the way that I worked the rhythmic elements of voice goes further to say that, "I find that meaning [of words] gets in the way" (quoted in Lane, 2008).

Then of course, when art work enters the public realm, it is interpreted by others – perhaps drawing it even further away from the original source of the memory or testimony. I explore this issue in my practice in the Methodology chapter, but it is worth noting Janek Shaefer's approach in *Extended Play* (Shaefer, 2007). Shaefer took a piece of classical music used in a particular historical context, deconstructed its component instrumental parts and played these elements separately on record players. Using motion sensors, these were interrupted by the physical presence of members of a gallery's audience, thereby re-working the piece of music and abstracting it even further from its context.

Despite the prominent role of the audience, Shaefer's stated aim with *Extended Play* was quite a personal one: to seek to bridge the gap between the contexts of his mother's birth in war-torn Poland and that of his daughter's in safe, affluent England. Work such as Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (Reich, 1988) and Yael Bartana's *And Europe Will Be Stunned* (Bartana, 2012) have also been influential as they seek to bridge the gap between the artist's present and a traumatic collective past – in their case, that of European Jewry.





## **WALTER BENJAMIN**

Benjamin's ambiguous and intriguing combination of pessimism and emancipatory hope seemed highly relevant for a study that began with an historical meeting point of near-extinction and re-birth; between Holocaust and Jewish recovery and nation-building.

Benjamin's biography is also relevant, as a German Jew who engaged with Marxism, Zionism and features of modernist culture and communication until his suicide, and wrote during the inter-war period that was characterised by uncertainty, revolutionary possibility and terror.

The role of Benjamin's work in the project began as an attempt to operationalise and make literal his concept of a 'constellation' as a methodological tool through audio-visual practice. However, locating a context of relevant practice for this proved difficult. Indeed, the breadth of Benjamin's appeal across a range of disciplines also presents problems due to the sheer variety of interpretations and applications of key motifs. I will therefore focus on the theoretical framing that Benjamin provided through his notion of a 'Constellation', his wider concept of history and the usefulness of what Rabbinbach describes as 'Jewish Messianism' (Rabbinbach, 1985).

## Benjamin's 'Constellation'

The concept of 'constellation' seemed productive as it offered an intuitive approach to arranging the necessarily fragmentary nature of historical sources, testimony and the audio-visual elements I produce, in a way that could be visualised. It also incited hope in the possibility of a revelatory moment in the process of inquiry itself, where an alignment of aspects of the project might result in a 'lightning bolt' moment in which new meaning is revealed. In the following chapter I consider the tension between a dynamic, process-led project and the use of the notion of 'constellation' that implies the arrival at a point of resolution and conclusion about the relationship between past and present.

Benjamin conceives of a meeting point for the past and present in a constellation 'in which splinters of messianic time are shot through' (Benjamin, 2005, Addendum A), which connects to utopian possibilities manifested in the past. Benjamin contrasts his approach to that of 'historicism', the method of which is 'additive: it offers a mass of facts, in order to fill up a homogeneous and empty time.' (Benjamin, 2005 XVII).<sup>21</sup>

I hoped that this project would result in a productive convergence of past and present, 'in which [the historical materialist's] own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one.' (Benjamin, 2005 Addendum A). I am unsure whether Benjamin articulated methodological steps to accompany his concept of history, though his approach was characterised by the identification of fragments of the past; the 'rich and strange bits' as Arendt describes them (Arendt, 2015). This was manifested visually in the arrangement of his notebooks (Benjamin, 2015), as well as in his allegorical character of the rag-picker in *Nineteenth Century Paris*, collecting scraps from the detritus of bourgeois society (Benjamin, 2002).

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<sup>21</sup>Helmling brings attention to the contrasting dynamics between Benjamin's 'dialectics at a standstill' that manifest in a constellation, and Adorno's use of that same term. Adorno repeatedly talks in seemingly contradictory ways about Benjamin's approach to apparently obsolete and unimportant objects from civilization. On the one hand, Adorno speaks of Benjamin's approach 'Medusa-like' - making what perhaps should be fluid and dynamic, still. On the other, Adorno is complementary of 'Benjamin's attempt to "awaken congealed life in petrified objects" (*Prisms* 233).' (Helmling, 2003). Helmling sees Adorno's notion of 'constellation' as both a theoretical frame in which to hold 'seemingly clashing phenomena together' and as manifesting in his 'style and practice' of writing, which connects and moves quickly between objects (Helmling, 2003)

## Concept of History

Benjamin describes an approach to engagement with the past that is critical and uses the term 'historical materialist', yet rejects notions of progress. According to Michaël Löwy, Benjamin's was a revolutionary and utopian critic of modernity (and its accompanying ideology of progress), which is quite different to conventional critiques of modernity that come from conservative political viewpoints (Löwy, 1989). He is particularly concerned by the political use of the past as well as the risk that "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably." (Benjamin *Illuminations* p.53 quoted in Wolin, 1994). The homogeneous 'continuum' of history prevents due attention being paid to important and often overlooked elements of the past, and Benjamin identifies the need to 'explode' that continuum, as revolutionaries have done before (Benjamin, 2005 XIV and XVI). In his famous use of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* as an allegorical tool, Benjamin describes the process of the 'angel of history' being blown unceasingly forward by a storm - which he sees as 'progress' - and that is therefore unable to attend to the piles of rubble that build up through history, from which the angel would awaken the dead and rebuild pieces of the past (Benjamin, 2005 IV).

Benjamin's commitment to finding the important, prescient and utopian amongst what might be dismissed as unimportant, obsolete or mundane appealed to my curiosity as well as to my politics as, in his words, "elements of the ultimate state of things are not manifest in formless tendencies of progress, but rather are embedded in every present as the most endangered, discredited and ridiculed creations and thoughts." (Benjamin quoted in Rabinbach, 1985).<sup>22</sup>

I engaged with literature from a variety of disciplinary areas and came to these as I responded to material produced from interviews and in my individual making process. Some themes that began as contextual and supporting material, such as

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<sup>22</sup> The role of the historical materialist, Richard Wolin explains, is critical if the utopian elements of the past are to be rescued from what is referred to 'homogeneous time of the always-the-same'. Interestingly when considering non-linear notions of a relationship with the past, Benjamin refers to those elements that need to be captured as 'now-times' (Wolin, 1994 pp49-50)

from dance studies, became integrated in to my evolving methodologies, and conversely, the use of Walter Benjamin's work became more contextual through the experience of the research process.



## Chapter 2: Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the steps I took to apply art practice as research to the themes of utopianism, loss, memory and Jewish identity, and do so in a roughly chronological way. It is important to note the circuitous and unpredicted way that links were made and knowledge moved on in the project's attempt to initiate a dialogue between large narratives and small-scale experiences by working material from interviews and the literature. The work of Walter Benjamin and his concept of how those in the present engage with the past and thereby challenge linear notions of temporality, runs throughout the project. I discuss how I interpreted Benjamin's notion of a 'constellation' in a literal form in order to use it as a methodological tool.

The process and methodological steps took place through interviews with my great aunt Rene Sakula on three occasions and involving different methods: April 2017 (an informal, group/family interview) before the project began, March 2018, and July 2018. From October 2017 until August 2018, I used art practice to respond to themes sourced both from interviews (with Rene and with 2 other participants via informal, phone interviews) and a wide range of literature. Finally, I brought together several thematic and technical elements of the project in to an installation piece which was publicly displayed and engaged with by an audience in Manchester School of Art's MA Show, in September 2018.<sup>23</sup>

First, I will outline relevant notions of Practice as Research (PAR), then introduce my practice background in music and radio. I will then chart how my practice developed in response to what emerged in the literature and interviews, to incorporate forms of practice and technique that were new to me. I will elaborate on the way that my experience as a musician and radio artist expanded to include film, more abstract sound work, and movement in response to emerging themes around the body: as a site of complex and competing meanings and as a tool of research itself.

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<sup>23</sup>The MA Show website entry for my installation is here:  
<http://www.art.mmu.ac.uk/mashow/2018/max-munday/>

## **PRACTICE AS RESEARCH (PAR)<sup>24</sup>**

This project employed art practice as a means to explore the interaction between large narratives and small-scale experiences around notions of time, memory, utopianism, and Jewish corporeality and identity. I use the term 'practice as research' interchangeably with practice-based research and similar formulations (see Barrett and Bolt, 2010 and contributors in Oliver, 2018).

For my project, that used practice as method and was a personal familial inquiry, questioning how this work can be rigorous in the sense that it can connect with widely agreed levels of academic validity, seems relevant. However, does such a notion of rigour simply seek scientific language for an approach (through PAR) that cannot conform to those parameters?<sup>25</sup> How does rigour accommodate the uncertainty of practice, and specifically improvisation and what Jenny Hughes calls the 'decomposition' of practice in the face of experiences? (Hughes, c.2014) As I will outline, this project utilised a practice that evolved from a basis in music and radio, to incorporate movement, and film, as well as a broadening of the parameters of sound art from its original form in my practice. This is not just a question relating to rigour, but to other comparisons with more positivist notions of research, as the actual methodological tools I used in the study changed and expanded. The process of learning and *practise* to use those new tools was also something that I wanted to reflect on and bring in to questions about practice as research.

### **Embodied Research**

This chapter will analyse how and why the body became both an important tool in the research, as well as one of its key subjects. In her explanation of the

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<sup>24</sup> James Oliver uses the term practice-as-research (hyphens optional, he says) 'where the application of a creative practice (whether as context, method or outcome) is a key generative mode for the research.' Oliver identifies its use at postgraduate study level to produce 'a written scholarly component and a 'non-traditional' research output' which is the format of this Masters by Research submission. (Oliver, 2018 pp.6-7)

<sup>25</sup>Useful discussion in to the notion of 'rigour' in arts-based research took place at *Artful Research: Symposium One* on Practice-as-Research took place at Manchester Metropolitan University, 03/05/2018

relationship between dance and research, Patricia Leavy refers to Elizabeth Grosz's approaches to embodied research and its link to Phenomenology when she talks about the 'inscribed body' and the 'lived body' (Leavy, p.183).

This project used both mine and Rene's embodied knowledge and experiences, often manifested in our movements, as part of the inquiry. This was brought together with an interest in the way that competing historical narratives manifested in the Jewish body, which speaks to Grosz's 'inscribed body [which] serves as a site where social meanings are created and resisted' (Grosz 1994 p.148 quoted in Leavy, 2009)

## **MY ART PRACTICE**

My practice dramatically developed over the course of the project, with film making and dance building on my established knowledge in music and radio broadcasting. In addition to the technical skills of editing and composition, expertise in working with sound would prove valuable in exploring themes of memory and the body.

### **Music**

I have trained in classical Double Bass, and have played in a range of orchestras and bands, performing a wide range of classical and popular genres. It is important to point out the embodied nature of playing music and of the Double Bass in particular, as one of the tools of the Practice in this project. As an individual, playing the Double Bass involves physically wrapping your arms around a person-sized instrument and bringing its side in to your chest. The movement when bowing feels almost dance like, as the right hand pulls and pushes left and right, while the player's body sways and the left hand is anchored to the fingerboard. Plucking the Double Bass has that same left hand anchor point but with the fingers of the right hand's frequent pulling of strings towards the player's body, the movements of instrument and musician are less flowing and smooth, and instead, jerk and pop. In both techniques, the back bends and shoulders pull in to the instrument's neck as the player stretches their left hand

downwards to reach the higher register notes. The back and shoulders roll open and up again for the lower register notes.

Playing with other musicians is a process of deep affective connection made up of rhythmic, harmonic, melodic aspects of the music itself as well as the practical coordination involved in the arrangement of the piece.

## **Radio**

Since 2012, my radio practice has been rooted in community broadcasting and has involved in-depth interviews, particularly with those from marginalised communities and from within active radical political campaigns. This practice then developed through a series of co-produced Connected Communities-funded research projects, from which I produced several radio documentaries<sup>26</sup>. By the start of this project, I had become increasingly interested in the aesthetics, rhythms and dynamics within narratives and conversation and my radio practice included both conventional forms of documentary-making and experimental approaches.<sup>27</sup>

## **DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRACTICE**

### **A Single Case-Study**

For a project that ranges across different artistic and disciplinary traditions, the fact that there was only one central case study (and a familial one at that) might raise concerns about extrapolating wider or universal claims from a narrow source. Questions could be asked about how as a researcher I might get adequate perspective on the relevance of data produced with my great aunt and connect it to large-scale historical or theoretical themes.

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<sup>26</sup>I was commissioned for 3 AHRC Connected Communities-funded projects based at ESRI, Manchester Metropolitan University. More information on my practice in this context is available at [www.socialhaunting.com/radio](http://www.socialhaunting.com/radio)

<sup>27</sup>An example of the latter was the improvisation-based performance/paper 'Multiplying "Ghost Labs" as an affect-space of concrete utopia' at the European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in Leuven, Belgium in 2017.



However, interviews with my great aunt and the data it produced served as a catalyst to connect with a range of literatures and traditions and then to work the threads from these disciplines in to a generative entanglement. Material from our three interviews have not served as representative of a homogeneous Jewish identity or experience, or as a fixed and definitive account of the Bergen-Belsen DP Camp, or as the last word on contemporary dance and movement. Through interviews with Rene, in my independent working and during a public audience's engagement with the work, tensions between large narratives and small-scale experiences have been drawn out in multiple ways. The aim was not to arrive at definitive conclusions that reinforce narratives in a static form, but rather to open up questions of how we interact with the past in the present, and in a necessarily embodied, relational, and affective way.

### **Testimony: Hesitations and Gaps**

I began by working with a pre-project recording of a family interview with Rene. Listening to a particular section and transcribing this, I focused in on both Rene's words and the gaps and hesitations between them. I listened closely and typed the sounds of the hesitations and considered what might exist within those moments between word; perhaps: remembering, forgetting, imagining, fabricating, editing. Transcribing our interaction also highlighted my own stammers and my voice lost some of the power traditionally associated with an interviewer. The transcription laid out the non-linear form that the testimony took and in video editing software I formatted this into white rolling text on a black background. I felt this was a powerfully simple way to present this work as it highlighted the shape of testimony, its rhythms, gaps, the 'important' and the 'mundane' but also in some way, this format limited any inclination to dramatically aestheticize Rene's testimony. Listen here: <https://soundcloud.com/maxmunday/rene-eerhs>

This was then developed into 'A Constellation to Remember the Future?', a film that was presented at the MMU Postgraduate conference 'Provoking Discourse'<sup>28</sup>. The film is available here: <https://vimeo.com/303004689/a3fb113eaf>

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<sup>28</sup> Installation piece as part of *Provoking Discourse* Postgraduate Research Conference, 07/03/2018, Students' Union, Manchester Metropolitan University

## Testimony: Absences

In anticipation of the project's start I wrote to the Association of Jewish Refugees, an organisation that continues to support Holocaust survivors in the UK. I asked to be put in touch with anyone who had come through Belsen as a Displaced Person and was given the details of a woman, who I then had two brief phone conversations/informal interviews with in the first month of the project. The woman had been in Auschwitz and as we discussed doing a formal interview, it appeared that whilst she was prepared to recall her experiences through the Holocaust and her time as a DP, she was resolute in not wanting to speak about their affective aspects. "Feelings" she dismissed as "not important" and "not interesting".

I was naive to think that a survivor would discuss difficult feelings with a stranger, but I made a short film *Feelings are not interesting* to emphasise both the denial of feelings, and their simultaneous ubiquity, within our conversation. The film featured repeating phrases of alternating black and white text and background insisting on an absence of feelings. This seemed simple and suitable, whilst importantly detached from the content of the woman's testimony which was of course, only hers to frame as she needed to. This was also influenced by seeing Alfredo Jaar's work *The Sound of Silence* (Jaar, 1995)<sup>29</sup> where the stark contrast between seemingly neutral and dispassionate white text on black background exaggerates the power of the statements.

I wanted to consider ways to reach across the divide between me and Holocaust survivors, and to go beyond an intellectual appreciation of the linear narrative of their terrible experiences. I noticed that in a BBC interview with a survivor, a particular piece of music was played alongside her testimony as she highlighted the experience of playing the cello as part of the prisoners' orchestra in Auschwitz that would perform frequently for Nazi officers (BBC, 2014). The piece that the woman highlighted and was played during the interview was called 'Träumerei' by Robert Schumann (Schumann, 1838). It caught my attention, as the survivor sat

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<sup>29</sup>Exhibited at Yorkshire Sculpture Park over winter 2017/18, and which I visited in November 2017.

listening to it during the interview, despite its direct connection to her experience of Auschwitz.

To consider how, from my distance of privilege and safety, I could approach survivors' experiences and feelings, I sought to learn the piece 'Träumerei' on the double bass. This process seemed to chime with the intentions of Janek Schaefer's purpose in *Extended Play* (Schaefer 2007) which through the use of a piece of music, connects the very different historical contexts of the birth of his mother and of his daughter. The difference with that approach however was the use of the instrument itself, as well as the specific composition, to connect on an embodied and affective level; the vibrations and reverberations produced by her original cello would have similarities with that of my double bass. However, I was mindful that I could not (and would not want to) 'step in to her shoes' through that. I recorded the process of practising and learning the piece, incorporating the mistakes, hesitations and repetitions of my learning. I learnt this by plucking and bowing the piece; the plucking felt fragile and with all the mistakes and poor intonation, it did not represent the lush and romantic intention of the piece. Listen here: <https://soundcloud.com/maxmunday/traumerei-practise-bowed> (bowed double bass); <https://soundcloud.com/maxmunday/traumerei-practise-plucked> (plucked double bass)

Once I had learnt to play 'Träumerei', I chose to manipulate a copy of the recording, to fracture it and repeat a small section, the effect of which was to unsettle and dramatically re-frame this piece of Romantic music with all its affective associations and resonance, and to connect it more with the repetitious nature of how trauma manifests.<sup>30</sup> I then put this with the video *Feelings are not interesting*, available here: <https://vimeo.com/303156754/8aa62bad61>

## Constellation within an interview

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<sup>30</sup>The sound artist Susan Philipsz also deconstructed a piece of classic music that was heavily imbued with historical significance. 'Study for Strings' (2012) featured only the cello and viola parts, and playing each note separately and installed in individual speakers. Fragmentary elements of a piece 'Studies' by Pavel Hass written in 1943 in Theresienstadt concentration camp for a Nazi propaganda film. Philipsz is interested in the emotive effects of song, and of gaps – in this case making reference to Hass' contemporaries murdered in the Holocaust.

At our interview in March 2018, I brought printed out images that referenced a range of things that Rene had mentioned during our pre-project family/group interview.<sup>31</sup> The intention was for Rene to just give her reactions to the images, to help trigger associations, or to make connections between the images themselves on a thematic or aesthetic basis. Here, I had in mind the characters that Walter Benjamin uses in his approach to the past: the collector, the rag picker and the historical materialist. These characters represent an approach that is curious, intuitive and grounded in a desire to unearth meaning in a seemingly unimportant or disparate set of objects (Benjamin, 2002; Benjamin, 2005; Benjamin, 2015).

This was an experiment to see whether the revelatory moment of the coming together of 'dialectics at a standstill' (Benjamin, 2005) was a testable notion, and that this contrived process of examining, sifting, touching, musing on those fragmentary images might produce new insights into the relationship between the past and present.

Rene picked up one image after another; she very carefully and thoughtfully scrutinised the images. I filmed the process of Rene inspecting the images and made a video at 25% of the actual speed of her hands holding and carefully moving them around. I then turned the film into a triptych with the footage repeated and put slightly out of sync in order to amplify the tiny movements of the interaction between her and the images, which then rippled across the screen and served to rupture or wrinkle the calm, meditative process of Rene's scrutiny of the images. The film is available here: <https://vimeo.com/303153393/66eb29d852> Focusing so closely on the process, I had in mind both the potential of an arrangement of fragments that would lead to a 'constellation' in Benjamin's terms, but also I wanted to think about memory, the physical manifestation of

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<sup>31</sup>The images included: a recent photograph of a main street in Lodz, Poland – chosen due to its connection to Rene's ancestral home; a photograph of the inside of the Rundhaus; a photograph from a DP camp of a performance from one of the theatre groups where a rabbi and a variety of characters stand in a dramatic tableau around Torah scroll; a still of Ingrid Bergman from the 1943 film 'For Whom The Bell Tolls' - chosen as Rene had told us that she had modelled her hair on Bergman in this film when she had visited Bergen-Belsen; photographs of Zionist demonstrations at Bergen-Belsen DP Camp, from the Yad Vashem archives – chosen for its important political context in the DP Camps; a dancer from Rudolf Laban's school, standing with her arms outstretched within a wooden structure (an Icosahedron) – chosen due to Rene's life-long association with Laban's teachings; a sheet of Laban's dance instructions written in the form of notation.

recollection, of the attempts to make connections and associations running between Rene's brain and hands holding the images. This work connected to my processing of the hesitations and gaps in Rene's verbal testimony, opening this up to questions about what happens in these spaces, which this time was a more physical, embodied experience.

However, after a period of time looking through the images, Rene saw one that featured a dancer in Laban's Icosahedron structure and exclaimed: "I've got one of those!" and with a sudden rush of energy that took her to her feet, rushed to retrieve the Icosahedron from her bedroom, and directly moved into an instructional demonstration of Laban's movements.<sup>32</sup>

Coming back to the living room with the Icosahedron model, Rene began to talk through and then physically demonstrate a selection of core Laban movements. I rushed to set up the video camera to record, and the resulting film – that would become central to the installation piece – showed this 92 year old woman move with power and grace through a series of positions, whilst insisting she could not do the movements. A clip of these demonstrations is here: <https://vimeo.com/303156454/ef17bc75cb>

Rene then sat down and instructed me through some movements. The timing of this and of Rene's demonstration was impromptu, and produced a 'home-video' aesthetic. Despite its lack of planning, there was great power contained in both Rene's movements and in the dynamics between our bodies, as she talked me through the movements. In delivering and demonstrating instructions, in a clear yet poetic and profound way, Rene seemed to return to her role as a dance teacher and was animated in a way that bore little relation to the woman who shuffled to meet me at the door or who hesitated over her words. This process opened up an important phase of the project: where movement and the

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<sup>32</sup> The Icosahedron for Laban "encourages larger bodily movements reaching out into the kinesphere and beyond, often having a labile (or non-sustainable) quality." This particular shape, that Rene had in model form and catalysed our movement-based interactions, "most closely related to the structure and movement ability of the human body." (Newlove and Dalby, 2004 p.47). Laban used geometric shapes (such as the Icosahedron) to frame dancers so that they produce "movements that are precise and expressive in space rather than aimlessly wallowing about." (Newlove and Dalby, 2004 p.27).

possibilities and limitations of the body would be explored. This interaction is here:  
<https://vimeo.com/303227266/5c903183b7>

## THE BODY

### DPs' recovery and re-birth

The project began with historiography of the DP camps, then moved to explore the process of testimony delivery, and then came back to a specific theme in historiography around 'the body'. This would become a central part of my project as a bridge, not only from myself to the material and to Rene, but also to think about the wider historical themes and narratives around the Jewish body.

I turned to Atina Grossmann's observation that, in their representation, Holocaust survivors and DPs took on a semi or non-human form, described as 'human debris' and 'living corpses' (Grossmann, 2002). To explore the tension between this and the portrayal of Jews in Zionist propaganda - whilst avoiding aestheticisation of actual images of survivors - I decided to use the words Grossmann identifies alongside images of modern Israel. I used 'found footage' from a YouTube photo montage of modern Israeli beach life <sup>33</sup> and overlaid the descriptions of Jewish DPs. I presented the words in a form as if it were a beach holiday postcard, to dramatically heighten the contrast between these clashing symbolic representations. I added images of a dancer from the Israeli movement tradition of Eshkol-Wachman, whose work intersected with Laban's, in order to subtly suggest another form of Israeli body; a representation of an alternative to those on the Tel Aviv beaches and to the descriptions of those of the DPs. Incorporating *Rene Eehrs* to the photo montage, the words "human debris" and "living corpses" emerged from the point of hesitation and uncertainty within Rene's testimony, almost as if Rene opened up a bridge between past and present. The distorted, ghostly sound of Rene's hesitations further emphasised the discomfort

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<sup>33</sup> 'Tel Aviv Beach – Israel' on YouTube published on 01/03/2015 by 'light2tube':  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=590Fk8PDSgA> visited 17/02/2018

of such dehumanising representations emerging in the idyllic holiday scene. Watch here: <https://vimeo.com/303148938/42c78f1173>

## **DPs' children**

In reading about the way that Zionism manifested in the DP camps and in Bergen-Belsen in particular, I was drawn to a questionnaire used to capture children's testimony shortly after the War. This was given to children at the 'Hebrew Gymnasium' school at the Camp (Jewish Virtual Library, date unknown).

The questions themselves provided an interesting resource when thinking about the relationship between past, present and future within testimony, and notions of utopianism and of loss. The questionnaire culminates in asking about the child's intention to go to 'Eretz Israel' - a place that is both being agitated for, yet is at this point imagined.

I chose to present the questions quite simply in what is effectively a slide-show, in order to examine the affect that the order and phrasing of the questions might have on me. I accompanied the text with fragments of a photograph showing a column of young people in Bergen-Belsen DP camp. These pierce the text with increasing frequency following a recurring insistent tapping sound I had made with my double bass bow. These sounds and the pace of the images propels the viewer forward, in a linear movement from past to future, in a way that brings to mind Walter Benjamin's allegory of the inexorable pull of 'progress', dragging the 'angel of history' away from the piling rubble of catastrophe (Benjamin, 2005). Watch *Hebrew Gymnasium* here: <https://vimeo.com/303152004/56028fa813>

## **Embodying the Jew's Body**

Looking back at the transcription from our pre-project interview, I was drawn to Rene's description of her friend Madja, a young Jewish Czech woman who Rene befriended in Bergen-Belsen. Rene explained how Madja had survived the Concentration Camps and after Liberation, had met another survivor in Belsen and had quickly married him. Shortly after, Rene believed it was within a matter of months, her husband had died of appendicitis. Madja was described as "this

gorgeous, blonde girl” when Rene first met her. Later, Rene said, Madja moved to USA, modelled swim wear and married an American. She changed her name to Madeline and when Rene met her years later in the States, Rene described her transformation from someone who was happy and beautiful to this “whining middle aged woman” who talked “too much” about the Holocaust.

Rene’s description shocked me, as it came with so much judgement, but what she had described was interesting: the physicality of this woman was central, I could imagine her so vividly and from so few words.

Madja’s description was incredibly powerful and seemed to jar with my own image of survivors; she was a happy, beautiful, blonde (almost Aryan) young woman immediately after surviving the Camps. Then a swimwear model, seemingly perfectly assimilated and symbolising classic post-War American consumerism. Finally, a traumatised older woman.

I wanted to think more about the body and in particular the Jewish body, about assumptions, representation and stereotypes. I also wanted to think about dance and the Jewish body, and all with Rene’s expansive and powerful movements in the background.

In her paper, ‘Make me a Jewish Dance’ (Rossen, 2016) dance scholar Rebecca Rossen looks at the signifiers of being Jewish, whether from self-identifying or being labelled. Rossen, whose work is influenced by that of Sander Gilman (Gilman, 1991), explored these signifiers through composing a dance piece ‘Make Me a Jewish Dance’ (Rossen, 2000). She distinguishes between the idea of ‘Jewish dance’: a noun and a static notion, and ‘dancing Jewish’: a verb, a process and continuing a tradition of constructing Jewishness. This, she explains, captures the complexity of identity as she describes a project of devising her performance that mixes the comedic, the light-hearted and the tragic. Rossen researched Israeli folk dance and incorporated some of its movements in to her dance style, though she describes how these were more angular and rhythmic than her own. Rossen explains that this process aims to ‘generate corporeal knowledge that is crucial for scholarly knowledge’ (Rossen, 2016).



Rossen's work helped bring together different elements that were developing in the project: working with the Jewish body as a site of meanings, imposed by themselves and by others as a subject, and thinking about the body itself as a tool for research – in my case, using sound and voice, but increasingly bringing in movement as a result of Rene's experience of Laban's work.

### **Zionist postures**

Rossen had looked at Jewish physical and behavioural stereotypes, but these had not included Zionist bodies or representations of the 'Muscle Jew' and its subsequent incarnations. For me, the modern 'Muscle Jew' is embodied in a twenty-first century Israeli soldier; the soldier that raids Palestinian houses in the middle of the night, arrests and beats children and old people, and facilitates the occupation of Palestinian land. In my mind, the 'Muscle Jew'/Zionist body roughly engages other bodies; it stands, looks bored or menacing at checkpoints and is then quick to stop/push/chase/beat/shoot other bodies.

I turned back to historical images of the Jewish body within Zionist propaganda and the clear influence of the 'Muscle Jew': Ancient Greek-style figures, athletes, and pioneers working the soil and pulling fishing nets from the sea (Arbel, 1996). I was unsure how to relate to these two-dimensional figures, so I decided to shape my body to their poses. I set up a camcorder to face me and moved from one Zionist body to another, looking back to the pictures as I went. This built up to a short series of poses that I then linked together into a choreographed piece: <https://vimeo.com/303154496/c00be090d8>

### **'Stutter'**

Early on in the project, I had drawn out the gaps and hesitations from a section of Rene's testimony and expanded them through manipulating the audio in order to think about the tension between the weight and density of narratives and what possibilities exist in these gaps.

I returned to my working of the gaps and hesitations in Rene's testimony, but sought to develop the rhythmic aspects. Influenced by Steve Reich's *Come Out* (Reich, 1966), I took two clips of hesitations (from *Rene Eerhs*) on two tracks of my audio editing software, and looped them. The movement of these sounds in relation to each other, slipping in and out of sync, sounded as if they were in an ongoing struggle to connect with each other and felt human, despite being the product of a very mechanical/digital process. Listen here: <https://soundcloud.com/maxmunday/eerh-2-repeated>

I wanted to think about the rhythms of these 'eerhs' and, having originally emanated from the body, how they might relate to a body in motion - as part of video work and in terms of how it affected an audience engaging with my planned installation piece. I chose to work these gaps and hesitations in Rene's testimony and to avoid disregarding or glossing over them for the sake of what is deemed as the 'important' narrative.

Maggie MacLure and Simon O'Sullivan have thought about Giles Deleuze's notion of a 'stutter' in relation to disrupting dominant narratives; challenging 'existing affective/signifying regimes' in contemporary art (O'Sullivan, 2009) and producing 'something that escapes the structures of power' within qualitative research (MacLure, 2011). For MacLure, Deleuze's aim to "make the language system *stutter*" in order to release "variation and singularity" (Deleuze 1994 quoted in MacLure, 2011) can be thought about in the context of qualitative research, to challenge the 'production of the innocent Other [which] shores up our own self-certainty and replays colonial relations.' (MacLure, 2011 p.998). I wanted to avoid the politically imbalanced roles of me as the self-assured researcher and my great aunt being the 'innocent Other'. At the same time, my project sought to explore the productive disruption of powerful narratives of Jewishness, including antisemitic ones, using art practice to '[open] up a gap within these all too familiar series and circuits of knowledge/information.' (O'Sullivan 2009 p.250)

Thinking about this in practice terms, my final installation piece brought together my sonic work interpreting Rene's hesitations and pauses, manipulating and

repeating non-'musical' sounds made on the double bass, and fragmenting the musical rhetoric of a piece of Romantic music ('Träumerei'). Perhaps this gestures to how O'Sullivan thinks of art 'as an event that interrupts knowledge', just as Deleuze sees the stutter as a 'circuit breaker' of dominant speech and communication (O'Sullivan, 2009 pp.250-251).

## **July interview**

Before my July interview with Rene Sakula, I had received feedback from the Ethics Committee at the University. One of the practical recommendations was that I should bring a silent third party with me to the interview with Rene, to look out for any signs of distress being caused due to the weight and traumatic potential of discussions around the Holocaust. I invited my mother to attend the interview, as Rene trusts and likes her.

## **'Live Transcribing'**

At the project's start, I had used transcribing Rene's testimony to think about the non-linear arrangement of her experiences and the possibilities of the hesitations and gaps, and I returned to transcribing in our July interview. This time, I wanted to discuss some of the themes that were emerging in my research with Rene, think about how these might interact with her thoughts and memories in that moment and how that might be captured through transcribing what she said, live.

I spoke to Rene about how representations of the Jewish body were framed in antisemitic narratives, as elaborated in Gilman's work (Gilman, 1991), and about the use of the body in Zionist narratives. I also suggested that her dancing and her classes at Belsen, seemed to challenge some of the constraints these narratives place on the body's possibilities. The transcription of our first interview had been typed on computer and I had used that to explicitly document all the aspects of our verbal interaction. Here I used charcoal on paper to document elements of Rene's testimony, but this time, seeking to illustrate and accept the layering of what I hear and how editing, filtering and arrangement happens when listening. A clip is available here: <https://vimeo.com/303149270/f52c60865a>

Showing a range of stills from the 'live transcribing' of charcoal writing to a fellow art student, he was most interested in the images where the writing was unclear and there were traces, rather than clearly identifiable meanings. This allowed him to draw together his own 'story' from the fragments of text. The 'live transcribing' activity had sought to think through how the information we hear layers up and words mix, so with this student's response, the image (now of course detached from the time-based process of film) moved even further away from what emerged from Rene's mouth.

### **Rene's devised piece**

After sitting together as I transcribed what she was saying, Rene explained that she had devised a short movement sequence for me, with help from her daughter. First, I filmed Rene going through her piece: pressing outwards, making a transition to "gliding", then moving upwards, followed by a sharp inwards direction of the elbows "slashing downwards" and now "as a relief", fluttering, and "settle". She said she was happy with how I had moved through her piece, but now she wanted me to go through Laban's 'Dimensional Cross' movements and then bring the range of 8 efforts in to it, and my interpretations in to that – to think about the 'qualities' of my movement. This sequence, that I filmed and that would contribute to the projections in the final installation, felt invigorating and like it expanded my range of movement, despite being in a small part of Rene's living room. Watch here: <https://vimeo.com/303259074/6e981fc9b3>

### **Working with my Laban movements**

I wanted to think about the different actions and elements of movements, rather than just see them within a sequence. I felt that arranging fragments and working with the non-linear was an important approach within my research, so in video editing software, my body moving through the 8 actions now came in to contact with itself, as the moving figures interacted. By accident, a serene version of myself 'floated' on one side of the computer screen, whilst another 'punched' using his feet against a 'pressing' version whose hands pushed to the left as his back was strained and curved against these punching feet; my range of feelings embodied in dynamic tension.

I chose to bring together my movements with the charcoal transcriptions, so that layers of fragmented testimony interacted with layers of fragmented movement. I put charcoal transcription image behind me, whilst thinking about how the writing might frame or too heavily influence the feelings that might be invoked in the audience.

## **Choreography**

As movement became an increasingly important part of the project, I began to think about the role of choreography as Susan Foster says, not simply ‘the presentation of a kind of spectacle [...but] as the hypothetical setting forth of what the body is and what it can be based on the decisions made in rehearsal and in performance about its identity.’ (Foster, 2010 p.4) Foster aims to connect choreography with the original meaning of ‘empathy’, which was in its earliest conceptualisation, an experience at a bodily and emotional level, ‘not just as it has become, a psychological feature’. (Foster, 2010 p.10)

I began to think of my role in terms of choreography and how I aimed to animate, through my practice, my own connection with other bodies (be they of the past or continuing to exist in the present) and their knowledge(s).

## **FINAL INSTALLATION**

The video (link below) documents me moving through the installation piece, in the role of the audience. Please note that due to the very low lighting available, the video documents the arrangement of the installation and an example of how the audience might move through the space, rather than providing a clear picture of the piece’s constituent elements which are outlined below.

The text of the labels by the installation space are in the ‘description’ of the video:

<https://vimeo.com/302577181/d29b1f16a8>

I had conceived of the installation as forming a ‘constellation’ but, as movement of the body became more important as themes in the project, it felt too restricting to keep returning to Benjamin in this literal way. I felt I needed to open up the

installation for the potential dynamism and unpredictability that might be produced in a movement-based dialogue between projections and audiences' bodies.

It is a challenge to list the elements of the installation, as they were made to be experienced in a dynamic way and to be influenced – re-worked even – by the presence of the audience. However, I will outline the images and video that were projected on to different surfaces, and the sonic elements played from two speakers set on the floor.

## **Projections**

**'The Jew's Feet'** <https://vimeo.com/303154993/8061cffb46>

As a person came in to the space they would immediately see on the floor, a pair of feet pointing inwards 'pigeon-toed'. Feet shaped in this way are a recurring symbol of Jewish difference in late Nineteenth and Twentieth Century antisemitic narratives, primarily as a marker of (male) Jews' physical inability to be a legitimate member of society, as validated through service in the military (Gilman, 1991).

The photograph of my own bare feet in this shape – and obviously but not dramatically larger than average male feet – was projected on to the floor where the audience entered the installation space. Its purpose was to immediately draw attention to both the audience member's feet and to consider its relationship to this unusual inwards-pointing pose; to compare and contrast their own 'normal' feet with these ones, and to raise questions about the meaning of this awkward and ambiguous shape. Whilst its antisemitic association might not be well known, inward-pointing feet do not suggest a dynamic, movement-ready body or the confident opening position for any experience.

**Rene's Instructions** <https://vimeo.com/303156820/35435769cb>

Puncturing the darkness of the space, Rene's instructions from our March interview on how to move through Laban's movements were projected in white text on the wall facing the entrance.

**Rene's demonstrations** <https://vimeo.com/303155108/77bcc73663>

The instructions were followed by footage of Rene demonstrating a sequence of Laban's movement from that interview, projected on that same wall. The elements of sound in the installation came firstly from direct speech from Rene outlining instructions on how to move through Laban's movement.

**Antisemitic Instructions** <https://vimeo.com/303150010/db4910845e>

Following Rene's demonstrating, and in the same format and location as the text that displayed her instructions, descriptions of antisemitic stereotypes of Jewish bodies were projected on that wall which came from a reference made in *The Jew's Body* (Gilman, 1991). These appeared and flashed as if triggered by the stutters in the repetitive audio loop of the manipulated 'Träumerei' mix. This included plucking a short sequence from 'Träumerei' on the double bass, which was then interrupted with a tapping sound made with the double bass bow. Then, the plucked and coherent sequence was replaced by a chopped up and repeated bowed sequence from another of the 'Träumerei' recordings.

**Dancing with Rene** <https://vimeo.com/303150029/1acd458de0>

A slowed down sequence of me moving through a part of Laban's 'Dimensional Cross' as Rene sat beside. This was accompanied by the Steve Reich-inspired repeating 'eerhs'.

**Live Transcribing clips** <https://vimeo.com/303149159/e9551f8c07>

In a small projection in the bottom right hand corner of the space and appearing in the gaps between the other projections, clips showed text from the live transcribing and appeared briefly. This represented the length of time the words were on the page during the exercise before my hand wiped the sentence and moved on to the next.

**DPs** <https://vimeo.com/303154424/115d45eb88>

A selection of photographs flashed on to the side wall, triggered in their appearance by the distorted sounds of Rene's hesitations. These were the only

aspect of the installation that came explicitly from Bergen-Belsen DP Camp (and were sourced from the Yad Vashem archives), and despite one audience member saying she felt “very prickly” when they appeared, they were visible only briefly and in fact did not reference the Holocaust in any obvious way.

### **Dancing on charcoal** <https://vimeo.com/303262004/0eb2b3030c>

Individual movements from the Laban sequence I had done during the July interview were slowed down and layered up on top of a still of charcoal on paper, from the live transcribing. There was no sound for most of this projection, until a single repeated ‘eerh’ gradually increased to a crescendo to end the projection.

### **‘Eerhs’** <https://soundcloud.com/maxmunday/eerh-2-repeated>

I also used the manipulated hesitations from the first recordings of Rene’s testimony, in single sounds and in repeated rhythmic patterns.

### **Rene’s meaning in movement**

<https://soundcloud.com/maxmunday/renes-meaning-in-movement>

After the last projection ends (‘My Laban movements on charcoal’) and the space was in darkness, repeated audio of Rene’s voice came through to explain her understanding of meaning within movement. Listen here:

### **A final note on feet**

I wanted the audience to move through the space barefoot, to cause the slight discomfort that comes from exposing a body part that many are self-conscious about, whilst also aiming to open up the possibility of a more physical and movement-based connection with the work. In preparing the work, I would remain bare-footed in the space to connect me in advance to the audience’s experience. At the same time, I had that feeling, located in childhood, of being cooled by contact with the hard floor of a school hall or community centre; a kinetic memory/feeling of the anticipation of play or movement through a space.



I hoped that along with Rene's instructions and the position of sounds and projections, this would encourage a sense of movement and the opening up of people's bodies. However, I did not want to facilitate a solely pleasurable or liberatory experience but hoped to instigate points of tension within and between bodies – points out of which new meanings and knowledge might emerge.

My year of practice as research began, in a very literal way, with Rene's voice and it ended at a meeting point of bodies: mine, Rene's and members of an audience, moving together. The practice developed dramatically from my background of music and radio, whilst at the same time, shifting my own sense of what research 'should' be, as I sought to move increasingly away from my positivist historical training, to a more experiential, embodied sense of how knowledge is generated.

# Chapter 3: Learning

I chose to group the process of research in what I call 3 'spaces'. These 'spaces' involved different considerations, tools and mind-sets based primarily on how I was interacting with other people, but the knowledge produced in them was not discrete and moved between the spaces.

Firstly, the interviews and interactions of my great aunt Rene Sakula and I define one space: **Interviews**. The second space was where I individually responded to themes from the interviews with Rene (as well as the 3 brief and informal phone interviews) and in which I moved back and forth between working interview material and engaging in the literature: **Reading-Making-Reflecting**. The third space was that of the **Final Installation** piece, which was an interaction between me, Rene and members of a public audience in the MMU MA Show.

## INTERVIEWS

*“Just after doing that little bit I feel a normal person again[...] my blood is flowing, you can get that in exercise, but there’s something additional in dance [...] so, thank you for that.”*

(Rene Sakula, July 2018)

### **Between past, present and future through movement**

Interviews with Rene made me reflect on the way in which memory is constructed in the present through testimony, and how articulating this develops in a relational process. The hesitations and gaps within the narrative felt like they invited questions and possible alternative paths of knowledge and experience.

I sought to use the camera to observe Rene’s movements and embodied thought processes, but also turned it around to see how these had manifested in my own bodily movement. Even during those times when Rene instructed me to move through Laban’s techniques, I felt a sense in which, my movements embodied learning and questions produced by our interviews, as well as my wider research. Images from her descriptions and from the literature, and bits of narrative that had trailed off, had a presence there.

Rene explained Laban's term 'qualities' to mean the attitudinal aspect to a person's movements, which humanises the direction and type of action. My own qualities emerged unconsciously in doing the basic actions and the 'Dimensional Cross'. Moving through Laban's movement, Rene believed, allowed connection with "other people's qualities"; the term 'qualities' was therefore redefined from the commonly understood meaning of skills or positive traits, to something that explains both the embodied essence of an individual and the possibilities it opens up at a relational level.

*"Incidentally, you're capturing your sympathy for other people  
and the way they are."*

Rene Sakula, 2018

On the one hand, the significance of movement in the interviews was that we were creating something together in that present. The articulation of testimony felt like it developed through a relational process: through speech and explicit questions and answers, through Rene's gestural demonstrations, and in more subtle and ambiguous embodied ways. Rene and I were intensely in the present as we sat close together and danced in ways that were very consciously in dialogue with each other.

At the same time, there was a sense in our interviews of liberating, new and freeing movements that felt like an opening up of a possible future led by the body and going beyond our normal bodily constrictions. Simultaneously I was connected with Rene within the present as it appeared: moving through a prepared routine of movements with her sat in front of me, my shoes off, in her living room, on a warm summer's day.

To underline the significance of the relational process of sharing testimony and of producing knowledge through our movements, I ended the installation piece with a phrase from Rene that I edited to repeat into something almost mantra-like. At a point at which layered video clips of me moving through Laban's 'Basic Actions' faded out, the audience was left in darkness with Rene's phrase:

*“Your basic being exists.  
What you can do is try and enter in to the world of other people’s qualities  
other people’s qualities  
other people’s qualities  
What you can do is try and enter in to the world of other people’s qualities  
other people’s qualities  
other people’s qualities”*

## **READING-MAKING-REFLECTING**

### **Testimony**

It seems in a way ‘disrespectful’ to the individual’s experience to approach testimony with anything other than an attempt to preserve what we might see as its integrity and coherence, especially testimony connected with events that carry so much ‘weight’. To fracture in order to generate more knowledge than what testimony presents in its textual content, also seems counter-intuitive. However, my practice led me towards deconstructing the process of how testimony was articulated by Rene and received by me.

My research utilised a variety of practice methods to open up questions about where and how memory manifests, particularly at an embodied level. Early on I explored the gaps and hesitations between Rene’s words, and connecting with Deleuzean literature (MacLure, 2011 and O’Sullivan, 2009) around ‘stutter’ enabled me to consider the proto-political power of disrupting dominant narratives, within research and through art.

The ‘live transcribing’ that I did in our July interview broke out of positivist notions of neatly defined roles of interviewee and interviewer, by dramatically acknowledging my role in receiving and editing Rene’s testimony in the moment. The fragments of Rene’s memories appeared written in charcoal as they filtered through me, and were then consumed in within the cloud of charcoal in which all the traces of her words were in some way arranged. Watching the video of the transcribing process back highlighted powerful and complicated facets of Jewish identity and Zionism within Rene’s experience, but through the movement of my

hands, highlighted the embodied process of me receiving her testimony.<sup>34</sup> This had striking similarities to the ‘stutter’ within Rene’s speech in the first interview, as my hand holding the charcoal seemed to ‘stutter’ in the narratives of Jewishness that I was simultaneously receiving and expressing. Manipulating this video, changing the speed and playing it forwards and backwards, visually generated questions about the revealing and covering up of narrative complexities.

My practice worked with the fragmentary and non-linear nature of Rene’s testimony, which seemed in tune with Walter Benjamin’s approach to the arrangement of elements of the past, in the present. In our March interview, I brought a variety of images that I felt were relevant. I conceived of Rene’s role here as bridging the space between her subjective experience and wider themes and, thinking about Benjamin’s ‘constellation’, I hoped for a revelatory moment of recognition where the images were connected, to illuminate the coming together of past and present. Whilst this was not the result, Rene’s response to an image of one of Laban’s dancers within the Icosahedron structure shifted much of our subsequent interaction on to the plane of movement. This ultimately felt more productive for the inquiry than some sort of ‘proof’ of my reading of Benjamin’s ‘constellation’.

### **Walter Benjamin and ‘constellation’**

The attempt to operationalise Benjamin’s notion of a ‘constellation’ was complicated by several issues. Firstly, whilst Benjamin’s influence can be identified in a range of disciplines, it was not clear where I could contextualise, locate or compare this approach with other researchers who were working with his ideas as a form of practice or methodology.

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<sup>34</sup> Reflecting on the role of charcoal and the presence of an ‘author’ in the work, I was inspired by William Kentridge’s recent exhibition *Thick Time* at The Whitworth Gallery, Manchester (2018). Kentridge has spoken about his use of charcoal and pencil on paper in his animations. In not entirely erasing former marks, he leaves a “ghost trace [...] you see that passage of the movement of the hand, which is of course also the passage of time.” (Kentridge quoted in Koerner, 2012)

Secondly, I used the concept of ‘constellation’ in different ways in all 3 ‘spaces’ of the project: in an interview, in arranging fragments of historical material in composing a short film, and initially conceiving of the final installation itself as a single constellation. This made the idea of validating the concept’s ‘utility’ as a methodological tool in a ‘scientific’ sense, more difficult.

Thirdly, Benjamin describes the arrangement of a ‘constellation’ appearing to the ‘historical materialist’ (Benjamin, 2005). In this study, that role was taken on by different people. At some points it was me, arranging fragments of historical sources and of elements of sound and visual work that I had created; at another, during our interview, perhaps it was Rene sifting through images drawn from her own and a wider Jewish past. Perhaps it was one of the dozens of people who stood and moved through my final installation and interacted with the elements I had put in there through projections and sound pieces; maybe their embodied presence – and the experiences and knowledge they carry – created the arrangement of a ‘constellation’.

I believe that in trying to animate Benjamin’s ideas in this study, the coming together of meaningful fragments of the past with the present was more of an embodied and process-based experience, than a theoretical inquiry towards a resolution. Arguably, trying to work with Benjamin’s work in too literal a way actually served to inhibit the artistic process. Later in the project, reading Rabinbach’s analysis of Benjamin in a tradition of ‘Jewish Messianism’, I was struck by his analysis of the aims of Benjamin and his contemporary, Ernst Bloch: ‘to create anti-Enlightenment philosophy meant finding an alternative to positivism that could fulfil the purpose of returning thought to the realm of experience denied by rationalism.’ (Rabinbach, 1985 p.102). Rabinbach goes on to talk about how the ‘esoteric intellectualism’ of Benjamin and Bloch involved an attempt to ‘discover a language that brings the experience into being’ (Rabinbach, 1985 p.102). This framing of Benjamin and Bloch’s approach feels resonant with a practice as research, and with how I saw my practice working with ideas of Jewish identity, history and utopianism. It also chimed with Estelle Barrett’s proposal ‘that artistic practice be viewed as the production of knowledge or philosophy in action

[...] and draws on subjective, interdisciplinary and emergent methodologies that have the potential to extend the frontiers of research.’ (Barrett and Bolt, 2010 p.3)

Having been concerned about how I would arrive at some sort of clear and literal experience of a ‘constellation’ - of convergence between the past and present - I came to embrace the ambiguity of Benjamin’s work in order to enable my practice, rather than limit it.

### **Development of practice and of research themes**

To attribute importance to the fact that my art practice developed during the life of this project, is to value the coming together of my music and radio practice with more abstract sound work, dance and movement as a more effective way to consider the multi-faceted way in which testimony and the presence of the past is experienced and worked through, in the present.

Looking back, the incorporation of movement and the body as a tool of the research may have partially been a reaction to my feelings of discomfort during the early stage of editing audio and video through which to interpret and manipulate testimony. The actual mechanics of the process of editing – the clicking of the keyboard and computer mouse - felt quite weak and flimsy in contrast to the weight of the historical material; it felt inappropriate somehow.

I had a feeling that working with testimony and its serious content should involve an amount of exertion and emotional and physical labour that felt commensurate with the significance of the content. Of course, such an equation is an arbitrary one to make, and perhaps the issue is more to do with a more general approach based on sensitivity.<sup>35</sup>

It was important to use my body to connect with difficult themes; in the case of embodying representations of Jewish bodies (as I discuss later), and in the

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<sup>35</sup> In discussing the ethics of his approach to making *History of the Main Complainant* (1996) William Kentridge responded to concerns about the “appropriation of other people’s distress” by explaining that redemption for an artist exploring traumatic themes can come through “contemplating, depicting and spending time with [other people’s distress]” (Kentridge, 2010)

physicality of learning to play the Schumann piece in response to the testimony of an Auschwitz survivor. Recording the hesitant, faltering process of learning *Träumerei* (Schumann, 1838) felt appropriate to document and present the discomfort of approaching such a difficult area of experience. Likewise, this punctured any inclination I might have had to being able to neatly connect with, or even recreate the feelings of this Holocaust survivor, who played this piece in Auschwitz. I think that this process also raises the question of how *practise* might relate to research, in a context like mine, especially given how central this is in the development of art *practice*.

## **FINAL INSTALLATION**

Despite being the final and only public piece of work, the installation that was presented in the MA Show of September 2018 was not one in which I or the audience felt a sense of arrival at a single point or conclusion. I considered that my approach was in some way that of a choreographer, but not working up a fixed, repeatable performance. Indeed, reflecting on opening the research process up to the influence of a public audience, dramatically underlined Jenny Hughes' point that bringing art in to research means 'we are creating the possibilities of chance, or uncertainty, of not knowing as much as knowing [...we] shift the ground under us.' (Hughes, 2014)

The installation served to stimulate the audience's movements and through this – as the quote of Rene's that I used in the piece pointed towards - "enter into the world of other people's qualities."

### **Deliberate and Accidental Choreography**

From what was a very personal and familial project, its inclusion in the public MA Show dramatically expanded the work to include others. This meant opening up the work to multiple interpretations and all of the experiences and knowledge within the individuals that saw the piece. The physical presence of the audience was important for the process, that had by this point become focused on representations of the body and of the capacity of movement to help facilitate a dialogue between the past and present. There were multiple ways in which the



audience's bodies interacted with and re-composed the piece in relevant ways for the research.

Firstly, the two sets of instructions explicitly explaining how to move: those from Rene and those drawn from antisemitic descriptions of the 'Jewish body'. Secondly, the arrangement of projections and sounds around the space and their appearance/disappearance pulled the audience's bodies, as well as their attention, towards them. Thirdly, people's bodies may well have been 'in the way', blocking the image from reaching the wall and, instead, projecting on to their body. This could be accidental or deliberate, but the person became incorporated into the image – as a silhouette or in holding a bit of image on themselves. All of these served in a way to choreograph and re-work the piece through their bodily presence.

### **Audience feedback and influence**

The sight of inward-pointing feet projected on the floor as a person entered the space had an arresting and unsettling effect according to many people's feedback. I had intended to initiate the audience's experience of the installation through a feeling of comparison between their own bare feet and these, slightly larger and unusually positioned ones. Audience responses were intriguingly varied: for some, in this dark space and with images appearing all around them, the feet "grounded" them, many stood on the image, but others consciously avoided them. Some believed them to be Rene's feet, one woman asked if they were a "little girl's" and described them as looking "vulnerable". One comment was that it "felt like standing in someone else's experiences". The presence of these feet was effective in bringing attention to the audience member's own body and its relationship to the representation of another's, because as they invested meaning in the projection, they positioned themselves in relation to that meaning.

Reflecting on some comments about being unable to discern explicit historical or theoretical meanings in the piece, I thought about the artist's ability to communicate a uniform meaning to an audience's range of subjectivities, and what role those individuals have in shaping the piece themselves. Despite the

piece being on a repeated cycle, to some extent the work was re-shaped through the interaction of bodies, projections, sounds and space within the installation, at every viewing.

A friend who saw it, and knew the background, said that the piece seemed “therapeutic” and about movement and my relationship with Rene, but much less clearly about Jewish bodies, DPs or connections to the aftermath of the Holocaust. Others who knew me and the general area of my research, thought that the purpose was for people to empathise with Jewish survivors (or Jews more generally) through movement. A work colleague of mine explained that she had been struck and moved by Rene’s phrases about “capturing your sympathy for other people” and “enter into the world of other people’s qualities”. She said that through these phrases and the choreographing of the piece, she felt connected to me and Rene, whilst at the same time reflecting on the way that Holocaust survivors might have coped or healed from their experience. Many people commented about the power of Rene’s energy, movements and descriptions of those movements.

### **Between bodies of antisemitism and liberation**

Many audience members said that they danced or moved in the space. This made me return to what Rene talks about as the ‘qualities’, and the way that these might offer a profound connection with other people.

One of my supervisors spent the piece dancing and said that he felt he was “coming alive”, just like Rene was, in the space. However, when he incorporated the shape of the inward pointing feet projected on the floor, into his movements, he said, “there’s such a tension going on in the legs that imprisons movements in the pelvis and in the knees”. Another audience member also commented that turning his feet inwards in this way, and trying to bring his knees up to his chest – as the antisemitic instructions described – was an awkward and uncomfortable experience.

I had hoped for people to appreciate what I viewed as the liberatory possibility offered by both Rene's instructions and by the effect of seeing this older woman so animated through her beautiful, agile movements. However, I wanted audience responses to be complicated by exposure to the awkward, almost grotesque movements and shapes of antisemitic representations of the 'Jewish body'.

Following Rene's Laban instructions, there was other writing projected. These phrases came from an antisemitic story quoted in Gilman's 'The Jew's Body', to illustrate the negative framing of Jewish bodily capacity and movement (Gilman, 1991). By using these phrases in the same format as Rene's instructional phrases, many audience members responded to them in the same way as the benign Laban moves.

That this tension "imprisons movements", felt like a very appropriate response to my inclusion of antisemitic narratives, as these were designed to restrict the possibility of Jewish involvement in society by locking their otherness into their physicality. The bodies of the audience were being enabled and restricted in this piece, thereby embodying the multiple tensions within representations of Jewish corporeality. This was further enhanced and complicated though, by the conscious and unconscious knowledge that audience members brought to the experience of being within the installation.

The way in which I used 3 'spaces' - Interviews, Reading-Making-Reflecting, Final Installation - complicated the inquiry by using, what felt like, very different processes in which to generate knowledge. Navigating between established disciplines and methods, like historiography, and the much more open arena of Practice as Research, posed another and intersecting issue with that of the processes involved in the 3 'spaces'. However, the dynamic way in which I moved between established bodies of knowledge and my own developing practice produced a rich inquiry that I believe was based on an ethical and sensitive approach to difficult themes.

# CONCLUSION

In this ambitious project I moved a great deal, in a number of ways. From a background in conventional, positivist historical research to engaging in more open-ended ideas of a relationship with the past. With a basis of practice in established forms of music and a conventional approach to narrative and speech in radio, I moved to deconstruct musical patterns and explore sound's affective and embodied aspects. And, of course, I moved quite dramatically in physical terms too, as movement and bodies became central tools of the inquiry, as well as its subject.

The project took place through 3 'spaces': Interviews, Reading-Making-Reflecting and the Final Installation. Using very different processes in the 'spaces' whilst also navigating between established bodies of knowledge and the openness of practice as research, provided large and interconnected challenges to my inquiry. Ultimately though, strong linking themes tie together the 'spaces' and enabled me to reach across the disciplines: one was the use of an embodied approach to explore the body as a subject, the other was my use of the productively ambiguous work of Walter Benjamin. Key to both of these, was allowing my own identity and experiences in to the study, in order to connect the seemingly discrete 'spaces'.

Throughout this project, there was a tension between the way that my collaborative interviews with Rene generated embodied and entangled threads of knowledge, and my tendency to revert to a more distanced, positivist approach to inquiry; towards what my supervisor described as a 'dispassionate technician' role. At times in my practice I would restrict myself by being too literal in interpreting Walter Benjamin's work<sup>36</sup> and a more general inclination to justify the use of creative practice on the basis of its 'relevance' to the historiography.

Even aspects of my making process, such as video editing, could at times reinforce the sense of safety and security of being that 'dispassionate technician'.

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<sup>36</sup> Theoretically, it was of great help to approach Benjamin's work through the lens of what Rabinbach explains as 'Jewish Messianism' (Rabinbach, 1985)

Whilst this tendency limited my own subjectivity to be 'present' in the project, an attachment to the conceptual in my practice, risked stifling the work's generative potential. To stimulate an interaction between art work and audience that might produce new knowledge, meant addressing the transition from idea to audio-visual form, so that the work did not require specific background knowledge or convoluted explanation.

However, I did push myself to go beyond the comfort of a 'dispassionate' approach to my practice and found a way to open up my work as a meeting point between my own and others' subjectivities. Whilst I felt increasingly confident to go beyond these restrictions, this gained urgency in the weeks leading to the MA Show and exhibiting the final installation piece. I returned to that phrase of Rene's: "What you can do is try and enter into the world of other people's qualities" and focused on how to use bodily movement and the physical space of the installation most effectively. I resolved that my piece should catalyse the production of meaning in the relationship between Rene's movements and embodied knowledge, me as an artist and my movements, and the experiences and knowledge that are brought in to the space within the bodies of the audience.

Reflecting on this research process, and on my own development as an arts-based researcher, has led me to a new found confidence. Frequently there was frustration and, in a way, pain in carrying multiple roles: historian and dancer, radio documentary maker and abstract sonic artist, and philosopher and video editor. However, in considering how this work and my approach might go forward at Doctoral level, I believe that in occupying these points of tension, between academic rigour and the opportunities of knowing through embodied movement and art, I could contribute innovative research to the areas of identity, memory and utopianism.

This project considered the heavy weight of narratives and began to explore how space is made for a person to become more than those narrative might allow – particularly through the body and its relationship to other bodies.

Hanging in the air throughout this project was the image of those young Holocaust survivors dancing, as Rene explained, with hope not with sorrow. It would be easy to freeze the picture of that moment and return to it for emotional and political sustenance in dark times, and maybe 'hope is lodged in temporal consciousness and in memory' as David Kaufmann has described Walter Benjamin's utopianism (Kaufmann, 1997). Perhaps though, movement cannot be frozen in time, and bringing myself and my own Jewish body in to the project has made me consider how movement might carve space out of narratives – including that of antisemitism and its flawed response within Zionism. If Peter McLaren is right when he says that human beings must realise that they carry 'the mega- and microstructures of social life in the machinery of their flesh' (McLaren in Shapiro, 2005 p.viii), then our possibilities for becoming more than powerful narratives allow, become greater.

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