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Abrevaya Stein, Sarah

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Author(s): Sarah Abrevaya Stein

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## “Falling into Feathers”: Jews and the Trans-Atlantic Ostrich Feather Trade\*

Sarah Abrevaya Stein  
*University of Washington*

On August 30, 1912, Isaac Nurick shipped seven cases packed with 1,708 ostrich feathers from Oudtshoorn, in the western Cape, to London. The cases, which would sail aboard the *Saxon*, bore his trademark, which featured Nurick's initials and the first letter of his town. The feathers, and six more cases besides, were to be received by the National Bank of London and sold at public auction in December, likely by one of Nurick's favored brokerage firms, Figgis & Co. or Hale & Son. Insured for a total of £11,500, the thirteen cases represented a particularly vigorous season's work for Nurick.<sup>1</sup>

At the close of 1912, ostrich feather buyers like Nurick had reason to be satisfied with the state of their business. It was true, as Nurick's London-based associate had warned in correspondence as much as a year earlier, that American and French buyers had been losing interest in plumes for some time.<sup>2</sup> And yet fears about a waning international interest in feathers had circulated before: for the moment, the ostrich feather market was still quite strong. Reports on the state of South African produce markets published monthly in the *South African Agricultural Journal* stated that the last major ostrich feather auction

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<sup>1</sup> C. P. Nel Museum, uncatalogued Isaac Nurick exhibit (hereafter referred to as CPN INE), “Feather Book [1912–1913],” 19. This business ledger, along with other of Nurick's business records, is displayed in an uncatalogued exhibit at the C. P. Nel Museum in Oudtshoorn. Many thanks to Hilda Boshoff, curator and archivist at C. P. Nel, for allowing me unfettered access to this exhibit.

<sup>2</sup> Warnings to this effect were also voiced in the *Agricultural Journal of the Union of South Africa* (hereafter cited as *AJUSA*) 3, no. 1 (January 1912): 146. On the depressed demand for feathers: CPN INE, “Correspondence with Isach Hassan and associates,” November 1 and 10, 1911.

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Isaac Nurick, with cane, standing in front of his finest “prime white” ostrich plumes, which have been readied for auction (1911). Nurick is standing next to his granddaughter Cissie Nurick. The men in the image are unidentified. Reprinted with permission of the C. P. Nel Museum, Oudtshoorn.

in London (that of June 1912) witnessed “a good demand for all classes of goods.”<sup>3</sup> Overall, nearly a million pounds of ostrich feathers, valued at roughly £2.6 million, were exported from the Cape in 1912, yielding the largest gross income for ostrich feathers yet seen. Over a twenty-year period, the value of Cape ostrich feathers had trebled.<sup>4</sup>

In Oudtshoorn, Nurick was feverishly capitalizing on the ostrich feather boom. In November of 1912, he engaged in an ambitious bout of contract farming, purchasing the entire plumage of roughly 1,355 birds that were, at the time of sale, not yet ready to be plucked.<sup>5</sup> Advance contracts like these,

<sup>3</sup> “South African Produce Markets: Cape Town, Ostrich Feathers,” *AJUSA* 4, no. 1 (July 1912): 151.

<sup>4</sup> Board of Trade and Industries, “Report No. 55: The Ostrich Feather Industry” (1925), Annexure A.

<sup>5</sup> The majority of these feathers were purchased from the Potgeiter brothers, the largest ostrich holders in the district. CPN INE, “Feather Book [1912–1913],” 24. On

which were endemic to the feather trade, had made many feather buyers and ostrich farmers rich. To be sure, some had lost their wealth once or twice over, particularly between 1886 and 1896, when shifts in fashion caused the value of ostrich feathers to plunge by 75 percent. But the ostrich farming district of Oudtshoorn, and the town of Oudtshoorn in particular, was marked by grand “feather mansions” that bore testimony to the success of its wealthier white inhabitants. In the autumn of 1912, as thirteen cases of his feathers wended their way to auction on London’s Mincing Lane, Isaac Nurick took no heed of his industry’s own promotional material, which described ostrich plumes as “fancy feathers of fickle fashion.” Yet the mercurial feather market would ensure that in a few years’ time ostrich feathers would be nearly worthless and many buyers, himself included, would be deeply in debt and bereft of business, pride, and reputation.

The story of the highly lucrative, if ultimately short-lived, trade in ostrich feathers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is an incredible one. It was shaped by—and in turn influenced—imperial policy and social realities in the Russian and British Empires; the complex social and economic constitution of colonial Africa; the growing importance of global, trans-Atlantic, and colonial trade; and the whims and politics of women’s fashion. And it was fostered primarily by Jews, who were instrumental in nurturing the popularity and exchange of this commodity over oceans, political boundaries, and cultural and linguistic divides. The ostrich feather trade thus had roots that ramified over several continents and pushed deep into previous imperial and colonial histories. It was anchored, first, in the shtetls (small towns) of Chelm and Shavli, in the Lithuanian province of the Russian Empire. This was the provenance of the vast majority of the feather merchants of the Cape, the first generation of whom had surely never seen an ostrich before arriving in southern Africa as penniless, single Jewish men.<sup>6</sup> Once in the Cape, Jews developed business and personal relationships with “coloured” workers and Boer farmers,<sup>7</sup> from whom they would buy feathers and/or with whom they entered into business partnerships. Some Jewish feather buyers maintained small-scale

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the Potgeiter brothers themselves: Sue Van Waart, *Paleise van die pluime: 'n Vertelboek oor Oudtshoorn en eie volstruisveersage* (Pretoria, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> On the particular communities whence they came: Melech Bakalczuk-Felin, *Yizkur-bukh fun Rakishok un umgegnt* (Yohanesburg, 1952); *Krakenowo, Our Town in Lithuania: The Story of a World That Has Passed: Reminiscences Collected to Celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of the Krakenowo Sick Benefit and Benevolent Society*, ed. Krakenowo Sick Benefit and Benevolent Society (Johannesburg, 1961).

<sup>7</sup> “Coloured” people in this region of the Cape were the mixed descendants of Outeniqua and Attaqua Khoikhoi and Boers, who were whites of Dutch descent who left the Cape Colony in a series of trek parties in the 1830s and 1840s.

operations, buying and selling feathers in small quantities or plume by plume and never developing contacts overseas. Others, like Nurick, took their supply to the international market, plying the millinery, fashion, funereal, and costume industries of London, Paris, Berlin, New York, and beyond. Before they reached retailers and consumers, ostrich plumes changed hands at least one more time, at auction in London, where British and American Jews—some of whom had familial or professional ties in Oudtshoorn—constituted the majority of wholesale feather buyers. At every point along this commodity chain, fortunes were made and lost and, perhaps more interesting still, seemingly parallel universes converged.

The pages that follow tell the story of Jews' preeminence in the trans-Atlantic trade of ostrich feathers at the turn of the twentieth century, focusing on Jews' role as feather buyers in the western Cape with commercial ties overseas and in London, in particular. Based on business records and other archival material gathered in South Africa, Britain, and the United States, this article asks: How did Jewish immigrants from the Russian Empire come to dominate the lucrative trans-Atlantic trade of ostrich feathers? Why were Lithuanian Jewish immigrants—and not, for example, Lebanese, Greek, Chinese, or Sephardi merchants, all of whom were visible small-scale merchants in southern, western, and central Africa—well poised to “fall into feathers”? Were the Russian shtetls from which these feather merchants came merely sources of abundant, cheap mercantile labor, or did they provide a particularly apposite set of circumstances for incubating feather merchants? In what ways was feather merchants' work as buyers and sellers of ostrich feathers structured by their Jewishness, and, conversely, was the texture of their Jewishness influenced by their vocation? This article investigates these questions by reconstructing the making of a single global commodity chain.

In addressing these themes, I engage with three distinct historiographies that have not heretofore been put into conversation: scholarship on modern Jewish history, colonial southern Africa, and transnational commodity cultures. At the nexus of these three fields lies a story of the inextricable and symbiotic relationship between European imperialism, the expansion of global markets in colonial Africa, evolving patterns of consumption by women, and the prominence of Jews in transnational trade. To unpack the connections between these phenomena, this work makes three interrelated arguments.

I contend, first, that we must write Jews into the history of colonial economics as entrepreneurs and commercial liaisons of a consumption-hungry Europe. Though Hannah Arendt sketched out this provocative position in 1966, scholars of Jewish history have by and large avoided the topic since.<sup>8</sup> Arguably this scholarly lacuna betrays an anxiety about historicizing Jews'

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1966), 197–207.

involvement in the expansion of capitalist markets in colonial settings. For many, this topic is avoided out of fear of reiterating antisemitic stereotypes; for others, it is taboo because of lingering assumptions about Jews' powerlessness.<sup>9</sup> But just as our understanding of modern Jewish culture has been expanded by recent explorations of Jews' involvement in race science, long an unthinkable topic, we may benefit from a better understanding of Jews' involvement in the growth of global capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

If by thinking of capitalism we learn about Jews, it is also true that by thinking about Jews we learn about capitalism. In the story of the ostrich feather boom and bust, there is a trajectory resonant of other commodity chains: of oil, rubber, diamonds, tea, and soap, among others.<sup>11</sup> These commodities, too, have had volatile histories upon which have hinged the fate of racial, regional, and/or proletarian communities. Thus the story of the feather industry—and the story of Jews' place in this single transitory market—is evocative for scholars of other commodity chains and of colonial trade more generally. What is more, our sense of the practical linkages between imperialism and the expansion of capitalist markets overseas is deepened when we study individual arbiters. By studying Jews' role in the creation and operation of an international market in luxury goods, we may gain insight into the material construction of colonial and capitalist markets. In this regard, it is ironic that while scholars of modern Jewry have by and large failed to enmesh Jews in Europe's colonial web, scholars of southern African history have tended toward the other extreme, all but ignoring Jews and Jewishness as categories of analysis.<sup>12</sup> Scholars of South African Jews, for their part, have produced

<sup>9</sup> David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> Sander L. Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton, NJ, 1993); and *The Jew's Body* (New York, 1991); Mitchell Bryan Hart, *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity* (Stanford, CA, 2000); John M. Efron, *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (New Haven, CT, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> On the cited commodities: Brian Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom* (Baltimore, 2000); Greg Campbell, *Blood Diamonds: Tracing the Deadly Path of the World's Most Precious Stones* (Boulder, CO, 2002); Richard Collier, *The River That God Forgot: The Story of the Amazon Rubber Boom* (New York, 1968); Roy Moxham, *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation, and Empire* (New York, 2003); Barbara Weinstein, *The Amazon Rubber Boom, 1850–1920* (Stanford, CA, 1983); Charles Wilson, *The History of Unilever: A Study in Economic Growth and Social Change* (New York, 1968); James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660–1800* (New York, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Strikingly, the finest studies of the development of race consciousness in South Africa do not reflect on Jews or Jewishness: Saul Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1995); Timothy J. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (Charlottesville, VA, 1996).

excellent scholarship on intracommunal dynamics and representations of Jews by white South African society, yet they have all but neglected Jews' place in imperial circuits and transnational commerce.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, this article grapples with ethnicity as a powerful force in the shaping of commodity networks and, conversely, with the notion that particular commercial networks had an impact on the identity formation of their participants. In this respect, it builds upon scholarship that demonstrates how gender and class norms shaped—and were shaped by—patterns of consumption in the modern period.<sup>14</sup> The pages that follow suggest that our understanding of commodity culture may be nuanced when we allow ethnicity to enter the picture. After all, the consumption of ostrich feathers, like the consumption of diamonds, women, and liquor, depended upon contact between gendered consumers in the metropole and Jewish merchants at home, in colonial markets, and beyond; and these relationships in turn fueled cultural assumptions about Jews' rootlessness and their inseparability from the portable, ephemeral, and luxury goods so central to the modern experience. At the same time, the meaning of "Jewish" may have been to some extent contingent on vocational choice in the turn-of-the-century South African context. One question raised in the following pages is whether working in the feather trade allowed Jewish men and their families—seemingly regardless of the extent of their success—to exploit certain benefits of whiteness denied Jews in other industries or commercial pursuits. To explore these dynamics, we turn to a trading network that traversed linguistic, political, and oceanic divides, capitalizing on European and American women's thirst for adornment, a modern diaspora, and imperial ambitions.

<sup>13</sup> The existing literature on South African Jewry will be cited in the notes that follow. Two noteworthy exceptions to the aforementioned rule include: Riva M. Krut, "Building a Home and a Community: Jews in Johannesburg, 1886–1913" (PhD diss., University of London, 1985); Charles Van Onselen, "Jewish Marginality in the Atlantic World: Organised Crime in the Era of the Great Migrations, 1880–1914," *South African Historical Journal* 43 (2000): 96–137.

<sup>14</sup> On changing norms of consumption in Britain and the United States in the period: Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion, and City Life, 1860–1914* (Manchester, 1999); Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford, CA, 1990); Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992); Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940* (Urbana, IL, 1986); Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980* (New York, 1983); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, 1993); Kathy Lee Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986).



## BEPLUMED: THE RISE OF THE OSTRICH FEATHER INDUSTRY

Prior to the 1860s, ostriches ran wild in large numbers in southern Africa, East Africa, and the Horn of Africa. In South Africa, the birds were hunted and killed for their feathers by Khoisan and coloured residents and by white settlers and travelers, all of whom valued the plumes as adornment and/or sold them for profit.<sup>15</sup> It was in 1863 that the first ostrich was domesticated in the Cape: one year later, the first effective ostrich egg incubator, “The Eclipse,” was patented, an apparatus that allowed for the controlled breeding of birds.<sup>16</sup> Over the course of the next five decades, the ostrich farming region of the Little Karoo—the section of the semiarid plateau of southern Africa located in the western Cape—would see the number of domesticated ostriches skyrocket from next to nothing in the early 1860s to 776,000 in 1913.<sup>17</sup> By that year, when the price of ostrich feathers reached its peak, the plumes were ranked fourth in value among commodities exported from the Union of South Africa, following gold, diamonds, and wool.<sup>18</sup>

The lust for ostrich plumes in the European and American metropole was the central catalyst for the growth of ostrich farming. A variety of feathers, including those of the ostrich, adorned the hats and clothes of elite European and American women from at least the second half of the eighteenth century, when Marie Antoinette introduced a minor ostrich feather craze among elite women by wearing towering plumes atop her hats. The thirst for feathers endured among members of the aristocracy throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But ostrich feathers were not widely employed by the fashion world until the 1880s. This was a decade in which women were gaining ever more opportunity and desire to consume; the bevy of fashion choices they faced were outlined in new kinds of texts targeting the female shopper, fashion magazines among them, while the objects they coveted were displayed ever more alluringly in shopping neighborhoods like London’s West End.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> On ostrich hunting by white travelers: Albert Jackson and Eric Rosenthal, *Trader on the Veld* (Cape Town, 1958); R. M. Ballantyne, *Six Months at the Cape; or, Letters to Periwinkle from South Africa* (London, 1878), 53–87.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Douglass, “Ostrich Farming,” in *Official Handbook: History, Productions, and Resources of the Cape of Good Hope*, ed. John Noble (Cape Town, 1886); Julius de Mosenthal and James Edmund Harting, *Ostriches and Ostrich Farming* (London, 1876); Russel William Thornton, “The Ostrich Feather Industry in South Africa,” *South African Journal of Science* 12 (1915).

<sup>17</sup> In 1865, census returns recorded only eighty domesticated birds in Cape Colony; in 1875, there were 32,247. Mosenthal and Harting, *Ostriches and Ostrich Farming*, 191; D. J. v Z. Smit, *Ostrich Farming in the Little Karoo* (Pretoria, 1963), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Board of Trade and Industries, “Report No. 55.”

<sup>19</sup> Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*; Erika Rappaport, “Art, Commerce, or Empire? The Rebuilding of Regent Street, 1880–1927,” *History Workshop Journal* 53

The 1880s also represent the first of three decades in which women's hats were worn large and elaborately trimmed; for women of status, the addition of plumage from ostriches, hummingbirds, bird of paradise, herons, and other wild birds was increasingly de rigueur.<sup>20</sup> Women's hats became most elaborate and wide brimmed in the first decade of the twentieth century, just as the use of ostrich plumes became further popularized by the millinery industry, rendering some type of plume affordable for women of all classes. Now ostrich merchants saw the demand for the finest "prime whites" joined by demand for less superior plumes.<sup>21</sup> Wrote one fashion observer of the period: "A well dressed woman nowadays is as fluffy as a downy bird fresh from the nest." Declared another: "If you would be fashionable this winter, you will be be-plumed."<sup>22</sup>

As their perceived and actual value grew, ostrich feathers, and, indeed, entire flocks of the birds, were displayed at expositions and world's fairs in Chicago, Philadelphia, Paris, and London; by the Smithsonian Museum in 1914; at the Panama-California Exposition of 1915; and in the British Empire Exhibit of 1924, where the Queen herself clipped plumes from a live bird.<sup>23</sup> Thanks to the popularization of ostrich feather wearing, the United States imported between \$1.08 million and \$1.63 million worth of Cape ostrich feathers annually from 1907 to 1911; Britain imported between £1 million and £2 million of Cape ostrich feathers annually from 1903 to 1914 (including £2.2 million in

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(2002): 94–117; Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*. See also the references cited in note 14.

<sup>20</sup> Georgine De Courtais, *Women's Headdress and Hairstyles in England from AD 600 to the Present Day* (London, 1973); Madeleine Delpierre, *Chapeaux, 1750–1960* (Paris, 1980); Robin W. Doughty, *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation: A Study in Nature Protection* (Berkeley, 1975); Edmond Lefèvre, *Le commerce et l'industrie de la plume pour parure* (Paris, 1914); Pamela Swadling, Roy Wagner, and Billai Laba, *Plumes from Paradise: Trade Cycles in Outer Southeast Asia and Their Impact on New Guinea and Nearby Islands until 1920* (Cooptaroo, DC, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> De Courtais, *Women's Headdress*; Colin McDowell, *Hats: Status, Style, and Glamour* (New York, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> "The Feather Rage," *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 1891; Marian Martineau, "Present the Season of Plumes," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 9, 1910. See also De Courtais, *Women's Headdress*; Delpierre, *Chapeaux, 1750–1960*; Doughty, *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation*; Lefèvre, *Le commerce et l'industrie de la plume*; Swadling et al., *Plumes from Paradise*.

<sup>23</sup> *The Times* (London), May 31, 1924, 11. Reference to the feathers being purchased by the Smithsonian Museum may be found in: Huntington Library, Cawston Ostrich Farm Collection, box 3, folder 1914. See also Richard W. Amero, "The Southwest on Display at the Panama-California Exposition, 1915," *Journal of San Diego History* 36, no. 4 (1990); Cawston Ostrich Farm, *Twenty-fifth Anniversary Souvenir Catalogue and Feather Price List* (South Pasadena, CA, 1911).

1912); while France consumed nearly 8 million francs' worth of feathers in 1912 alone.<sup>24</sup> Ostrich feathers could be found wherever there were arbiters of style: a consignment of £20,000 worth of the plumes was even lost during the sinking of the Titanic.<sup>25</sup>

As international demand for ostrich feathers grew, Boer and British farmers in the Oudtshoorn District exploited the suitability of the region for ostrich farming to expand and intensify their operations continuously.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the ostrich farming center of Oudtshoorn evolved from "a relatively peripheral colonial rural economy linked into capitalist markets . . . to an industrializing economy."<sup>27</sup> Thus, though class, labor, and race relations in Oudtshoorn were in many respects distinct from those elsewhere in South Africa, the dramatic growth in ostrich farming in the district coincided with South Africa's agrarian and mineral revolutions and contributed to the capitalist accumulation that would forever transform the Cape.

What made the Oudtshoorn region so hospitable to ostrich farming? As ostrich farmer N. H. O. Gavin explained to a state-sponsored irrigation committee in 1913, the Karoo's arid climate was "essential to the production of the finest feathers." What is more, because of the climate in Oudtshoorn in particular, ostrich farmers could pluck adult birds three times in two years, or every eight months, a frequency of harvesting not possible even in neighboring Grahamstown, where rainfall was more frequent.<sup>28</sup> Other environmental factors made the Oudtshoorn District well suited to ostrich farming. High levels of

<sup>24</sup> Lefèvre, *Le commerce et l'industrie de la plume*, 349, 42, 45. In her 1930 study of the ostrich industry, Margaretha Wormser estimated that in 1905, Britain absorbed 31 percent of Cape feathers, Germany 11 percent, and Austria, Hungary, and the Netherlands less than 8 percent each. The United States and France purchased the rest, with the bulk destined for the United States. Margaretha Francina Wormser, "The Ostrich Industry in South Africa" (MA thesis, University of South Africa, 1930), 47. The American press approximated the value of annual imports of ostrich feathers to be between \$2 and \$3 million at the turn of the century. "An American Ostrich Farm," *Current Literature* (November 1898); "Ostrich Raising," *Current Literature* (December 1902).

<sup>25</sup> "A Loss on Ostrich Feathers," *The Times* (London), April 16, 1912, 21.

<sup>26</sup> In the early nineteenth century, grain, viticulture, and tobacco had been the principal crops farmed by Boers in Oudtshoorn District: these crops were cultivated on a modest scale, such that farmers could deliver goods to market themselves. The region's absence of grass made cattle and sheep farming difficult, and low annual precipitation rates (200 mm, on average) further limited farmers' flexibility. On the social and economic developments in Oudtshoorn in this period: A. Appel, *Die distrik Oudtshoorn tot die tagtigerjare van die 19<sup>de</sup> eeu: 'n Sosio-ekonomiese studie* (Pretoria, 1988); Smit, *Ostrich Farming*; Wormser, "The Ostrich Industry."

<sup>27</sup> Timothy J. Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrializing South Africa: The Southern Highveld to 1914* (Basingstoke, 1987), 198.

<sup>28</sup> "The Home of the Ostrich," *AJUSA* 5 (1913): 366.

lime in the alluvial soil of the region's river valleys presented ideal conditions for the farming of lucerne (alfalfa), which in turn provided superb nourishment for ostriches and allowed for the dense farming of birds.<sup>29</sup> These conditions, combined with the escalating value of ostrich feathers on the international market, ensured that ostriches could earn a farmer five to six times more than did wheat. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the quantity of wheat and grape vines grown in Oudtshoorn plummeted as the quantity of alfalfa and ostriches soared.<sup>30</sup> As early as 1864, the *Times* of London declared the ostrich feather industry so promising that it was "likely to eclipse the gold mines of Australia, California, and Vancouver."<sup>31</sup> In this journal and other sources, young British men were advised that they were certain to find both adventure and fortune in ostrich farming.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, ostrich farming brought great wealth to some in Oudtshoorn District. The wealth of Oudtshoorn developed at three times the rate in the Cape as a whole, and roughly three times as fast as wealth in other rural areas in the Colony.<sup>33</sup> The value of fixed property grew dramatically, leading wealthier farmers to engage in a landgrab, which in turn led to a rise in tenant farming in the district.<sup>34</sup> To accommodate Oudtshoorn's growth, the number of wells in the district increased from two to forty-six from 1891 to 1911.<sup>35</sup> Boer and British farmers and Jewish large-scale feather buyers were the principal beneficiaries of the feather boom. As a result of their success, the "valuation per head of European population" rose faster in the Little Karroo than almost anywhere else in the Cape.<sup>36</sup> Farmers built extravagant "feather mansions" to

<sup>29</sup> E. Evans and O. Evans, "Lucerne Growing as a Fodder for Stock," *Agricultural Journal of the Cape of Good Hope* 16–17 (1901–2), "The Home of the Ostrich." For the most detailed study of the environmental factors that shaped the Oudtshoorn District: Appel, *Die distrik Oudtshoorn*.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Buirski, "Aspects of Material Life in Oudtshoorn 1860–1927, with Particular Reference to the Labouring Poor" (BA honors thesis, University of Cape Town, 1983), 23–24.

<sup>31</sup> *The Times* (London), November 29, 1864, 12.

<sup>32</sup> *The Times* (London), October 2, 1876, 12. Arthur Douglass's study of ostrich farming in South Africa was written with the express purpose of advising young British men on how to enter the industry. Arthur Douglass, *Ostrich Farming in South Africa* (London, 1881), 26.

<sup>33</sup> A. J. Christopher, "The Growth of Landed Wealth in the Cape Colony, 1860–1910," *Historia* 22, no. 1 (1977).

<sup>34</sup> Buirski, "Aspects of Material Life," 52–53.

<sup>35</sup> The number of wells can be measured by comparing the censuses of the Cape of Good Hope of 1891 and the Union of South Africa of 1911: *Results of a Census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, as on the Night of Sunday, the 5th April, 1891* (Cape Town, 1892); *Census of the Union of South Africa, 1911* (Pretoria, 1913).

<sup>36</sup> Christopher, "The Growth of Landed Wealth."

display their wealth: luxurious homes adorned with “paneled walls, tiled bathrooms, hand-painted friezes; the finest mahogany, walnut, and oak furniture . . . imported mostly from Birmingham, but also from the Continent . . . gilt concave mirrors, silver and Sheffield plate, the best Irish linen.”<sup>37</sup>

There were, however, many who could not benefit from—and indeed were economically disenfranchised by—the surging ostrich industry. Large numbers of Boers who once worked on local vineyards as “bywoners” (labor tenants dependent upon and employed by landowners) were thrust into unemployment by the feather boom as the high price of land made such arrangements undesirable for land owners. Boer and coloured wage laborers of the district also found themselves redefined as surplus labor as a result of the ostrich feather boom. This was because relative to other crops, ostriches—and the alfalfa they thrived on—required little labor.<sup>38</sup> As feathers translated into wealth for British, Boer, and Jewish farmers, and for Jewish feather buyers in the Cape and abroad, then, their production created underemployed populations of Boers and coloured wage laborers and farmer bywoners.<sup>39</sup> In the process, the feather boom served to further narrow the economic opportunities of the coloured and Boer working class.<sup>40</sup>

While the ostrich feather boom had an effect on diverse residents of the western Cape, Jews proved a crucial link in the chain of economic changes that shook Oudtshoorn at the turn of the twentieth century. This was because Jews were responsible for readying Oudtshoorn’s new agricultural product for consumption and sale on an international market. As we shall see, Jewish immigrants from Lithuania were able to dominate the buying and selling of ostrich feathers in the western Cape because they had the human capital this vocation required: practical skills inherited from erstwhile homes, commercial and familial ties in requisite locations, shared languages with business partners at home and overseas, and copacetic relationships with the reigning authorities. Through their role as feather buyers, Jews brought the economic realities of a global commodity chain into the heart of the South African hinterland.

<sup>37</sup> George Aschman, “Oudtshoorn in the Early Days,” in *The Jews in South Africa: A History*, ed. Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz (London, 1955), 133. For further discussion of Oudtshoorn’s extravagance: Van Waart, *Paleise van die pluime*.

<sup>38</sup> Ostriches need little tending, and many farmers in Oudtshoorn hired workers for a short time only every eight months, when it was time to harvest feathers from the adult birds. Buirski, “Aspects of Material Life,” see esp. his chap. 2, “Bywoners, Squatters, and Tenants.”

<sup>39</sup> Between these years, the population of Oudtshoorn grew from 5,377 to 10,930. *Results of a Census, 1891; Census, 1911*.

<sup>40</sup> The wider story of the loss of land, capital, and opportunities by coloured people in the Cape is told in Keegan, *Colonial South Africa*.

“SERVING A NEW GOD, THE OSTRICH”: JEWS AND FEATHER BUYING

The ostrich feather trade bewitched the Jews. They threw themselves heart and soul, day and night, into this business. They “fell into feathers” easily. Gentiles used to say that Jews took to feathers like ducks took to water, adding later that the Jews “served a new God, the ostrich.”<sup>41</sup>

We may measure Jews’ influence in the trans-Atlantic trade of ostrich feathers thanks in part to government decree. According to statutes passed in 1883 and 1887, all persons carrying on “trade or business” in the Cape were required to purchase one of a series of licenses, one of which authorized the owner to “deal as a buyer of ostrich feathers” at a cost of £5.<sup>42</sup> Feather buyers were further required by statute and under threat of fine and hard labor to note the date on which they purchased feathers; their number, weight, and description; the name, residence, and occupation of the vendor; and the price the feathers commanded.<sup>43</sup> In the years that followed, the Oudtshoorn post office—the agency responsible for dispensing official feather buying permits—was inundated with requests for these documents.<sup>44</sup> In deference to the statutes of 1883 and 1887 and their heightened enforcement in the first decade of the twentieth century, feather buying was an increasingly formal affair. For example, from 1909 to 1914, Isaac Nurick maintained meticulous “ostrich feather ledgers” detailing the quantity and type of feathers he bought on a daily basis, the price paid, and the name and occupation of the seller.

From these quotidian records, we can learn in great detail not only about Nurick’s business but also about the ostrich feather trade more generally. Over the course of three years (1912–14), Nurick did business with roughly three hundred feather buyers and farmers. Over 80 percent of those he bought feathers from were feather buyers, and almost all of these feather buyers have recognizably Jewish names (this at a period in which roughly 1,000–1,500 Jews were permanent residents of Oudtshoorn District).<sup>45</sup> Nurick’s habit of

<sup>41</sup> Leibl Feldman, *Oudtshoorn Jerusalem of Africa*, ed. Joseph Sherman, trans. Lilian Dubb and Sheila Barkusky (Johannesburg, 1989), 95.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Foster, Hercules Tennant, and Edgar Michael Jackson, *Statutes of the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1886* (Cape Town, 1887), 2197.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 2196–98.

<sup>44</sup> John Simon, “Historical Notes and Commentary,” in *Oudtshoorn Jerusalem of Africa*, ed. Joseph Sherman (Johannesburg, 1989), 167.

<sup>45</sup> According to Cape censuses, 251 Jews lived in the district in 1891 and nearly 800 in 1904 and 1913. However, as the feather industry was fueled by itinerant feather buyers, these figures likely vastly underestimated how many Jews actually operated in Oudtshoorn District. *Results of a Census, 1891*; *Results of a Census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, as on the Night of Sunday, the 17th April, 1904* (Cape Town, 1905); *Census, 1911*. The figure of 1,000–1,500 Jews comes from Daniel Coetzee, “Immigrants to Citizens: Civil Integration and Acculturation of Jews into Oudtshoorn

buying almost exclusively from Jewish feather merchants was not idiosyncratic but reflected the ethnic economy of the ostrich feather market in Oudtshoorn and the Cape more generally. Leibl Feldman, who wrote a magisterial Yiddish-language study of Oudtshoorn Jewry in 1940, has suggested that during the boom years, 90 percent of Oudtshoorn's ostrich feather merchants were Jews.

Even before Feldman's account circulated, Jews' dominance over ostrich feather buying was accepted by those inside and outside of the industry. In 1887 and 1901, articles in London's *Jewish Chronicle* reported on Jews' ascendancy in the trade, noting that "this business is almost entirely in the hands of the Jews."<sup>46</sup> American accounts also dwelled on Jews' visibility in the feather industry. An 1886 article in the American journal *Forest and Stream* emphasized the Jewish and highly organized nature of the trans-Atlantic ostrich feather trade—two features, it seemed, that went hand in hand.<sup>47</sup> Accounts like these were little exaggerated. The vast majority of individuals who acquired feather buyer licenses from the Union of South Africa were Jews: such lists were regularly published in the *Oudtshoorn Courant* for all the industry to survey.<sup>48</sup> In 1913, almost all of the 277 licensed feather buyers in Oudtshoorn were Jews and many more no doubt operated illegally.<sup>49</sup>

Who were these feather buyers? The vast majority of Jewish feather buyers were young men who had recently immigrated to the Cape from Russian-controlled Lithuania (Lite in Yiddish). Their relocation was part of the mass migration of Eastern European Jews that commenced in the early 1880s.<sup>50</sup> The

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Society, 1874–1999" (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 2000), and "The Oudtshoorn Jewry Interviews: Synopses" (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1999), 6.

<sup>46</sup> M. P. V., "Jottings from South Africa: Oudtshoorn," *Jewish Chronicle* 15 (November 1901). A *Jewish Chronicle* article of 1887 stated that Oudtshoorn, the center of the feather buying trade, "is entirely in the hands of Jews." "Appeals from South Africa," *Jewish Chronicle*, no. 937 (March 3, 1887), 13.

<sup>47</sup> Cited in "Natural History: The Feather Industry," *Forest and Stream; A Journal of Outdoor Life, Travel, Nature Study, Shooting, Fishing, Yachting* (1873–1930) 26, no. 9 (1886).

<sup>48</sup> Lists of newly licensed ostrich feather buyers were regularly published in the *Oudtshoorn Courant*. See, e.g., December 1, 1888; March 25, 1890; February 2, 1893; and March 8, 1894.

<sup>49</sup> A ruthlessly antisemitic depiction of an illegal ostrich feather buyer was created by W. C. Scully, novelist and magistrate for the Oudtshoorn region: *Between Sun and Sand: A Tale of an African Desert* (Cape Town, 1898), 29. The figure of 277 feather buyers licensed in 1913 is drawn from a Standard Bank inspector's report and cited in Coetzee, "Immigrants to Citizens," 7.

<sup>50</sup> Arcadius Kahan, "Impact of Industrialization on the Jews in Tsarist Russia," in *Essays in Jewish Social and Economic History*, ed. Roger Weiss (Chicago, 1986); Simon Kuznets, "Immigration of Russian Jews to the United States: Nature and Background and Structure," *Perspectives in American History* 9 (1975); Jacob Lestchinsky, *Dos yidishe folk in tsifern* (Berlin, 1922), and "Di antviklung fun yidishn folk far di letzte 100 yor," *Shriftn far ekonomik un statistik* 1 (1928).



Jews who left Eastern Europe in the years that bracketed the turn of the twentieth century tended to be young men and women in search of economic and social opportunity rather than families fleeing pogrom violence or tsarist oppression, as most studies of South African Jewish history would have it.<sup>51</sup> Relatively few of these émigrés chose South Africa as their home, but the roughly 40,000 Eastern European Jews who did relocate to South Africa—drawn in part by reports of the riches of the region's gold and diamond mines—represented a highly visible population in the colony.<sup>52</sup> What is more, émigré Jews were overrepresented in certain expanding trades spawned by South Africa's mineral and agrarian revolutions, the prostitution, liquor, diamond, gold, and feather industries among them.<sup>53</sup>

Most future feather buyers came from two towns in Russian-controlled Lithuania, Chelm and Shavli. Their provenance was significant, for it meant they had at least a passing familiarity with certain industries that resembled the feather industry, namely, the textile, tanning, hide and leather, and/or fur

<sup>51</sup> Arcadius Kahan and Roger Weiss, *Essays in Jewish Social and Economic History* (Chicago, 1986); John D. Klier and Shlomo Lambroza, eds., *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History* (Cambridge, 1992); Hans Rogger, *Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics in Imperial Russia* (Berkeley, 1986).

<sup>52</sup> Letters by South African "correspondents" to Yiddish and Hebrew newspapers published in the Russian Empire (notably *Ha-melits*, *Ha-tsefira*, *Ha-magid*, and *Der fraynd*) reached Jewish readers with impressive regularity. Some of these letters have been cataloged: Michael Pesah Grossman, "A Study in the Trends and Tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish Writings in South Africa" (PhD diss., University of Witwatersrand, 1973). Others have been translated: N. D. Hoffman, *Book of Memoirs*, trans. Lillian Dubb and Sheila Barkusky (Cape Town, 1996). A thorough study of these texts, however, remains to be written. On the negative images of Jews that emerged in this and other periods of South African history: Milton Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa* (Charlottesville, VA, 1994). For further exploration of the topic: Greg C. Cuthbertson, "Jewish Immigration as an Issue in South African Politics, 1937–1939," *Historia* 26 (1989): 119–33; Krut, "Building a Home"; Riva M. Krut, "The Making of a South African Jewish Community in Johannesburg, 1886–1914," in *Class, Community, and Conflict: South African Perspectives*, ed. Belinda Bozzoli (Johannesburg, 1987); Milton Shain, *Jewry and Cape Society: The Origins and Activities of the Jewish Board of Deputies for the Cape Colony* (Cape Town, 1983); Gideon Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism: The South African Experience (1910–1967)* (Cape Town, 1980); Charles Van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914*, 2 vols. (Harlow, 1982).

<sup>53</sup> On Jews' role in the prostitution, liquor, diamond, and gold industries of South Africa: Edward J. Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight against White Slavery, 1870–1939* (New York, 1983); Eric Rosenthal, "On the Diamond Fields," in *The Jews in South Africa: A History*, ed. Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz (London, 1955); Van Onselen, "Jewish Marginality"; Charles Van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914: New Babylon*, vol. 1 (Harlow, 1982). Firsthand accounts of Jews' presence on the gold and diamond fields include: Louis Cohen, *Reminiscences of Kimberly* (London, 1911); Leybl Feldman, *Motsudi: Vi azoy ikh bin gevorn a diment-greber* (Johannesburg, 1962).



trades—trades in which Jews were significantly overrepresented in Eastern Europe in general and in Russian-controlled Lithuania in particular.<sup>54</sup> These industries, like the feather industry, obliged participants to have expertise in promoting and assessing fashion trends. What is more, merchants in these industries—like those in the feather industry—were compelled to be rooted in rural and urban or small town cultures and economies. Famously, Eastern European Jews were also experienced itinerant merchants, accustomed to transmitting goods for sale between country and town. This would constitute an essential task of the feather buyer, particularly the small-scale one, who tended to enter—or dabble in—the industry while working as *smous* (itinerant merchants).<sup>55</sup>

That Jews were part of a mass migratory movement also enhanced their ability to serve as feather buyers. The diaspora of Eastern European Jews that took shape in the thirty-five years that bracketed the turn of the twentieth century facilitated the exchange of bodies, ideas, and capital between Eastern and Western Europe, Britain, the United States, and smaller émigré centers such as could be found in South Africa and South America. Just as this diaspora afforded a vibrant cultural network, so too did it facilitate Jews' involvement in transnational and transregional commerce, allowing feather buyers like the Barron Brothers to rely upon fathers, brothers, or cousins as business partners in Cape Town, New York, London, and/or Paris with whom they shared a language (Yiddish) as well as ties of kith or kin.<sup>56</sup> Jews' success in the ostrich

<sup>54</sup> Salo Baron and Arcadius Kahn have described tanning and the leather trade as “an outstanding Jewish occupation” of Poland, Lithuania, and Russia. In interwar Poland, Jews represented over 40 percent of tanners and leather workers. Literature on Jews' involvement in textiles and tailoring—and on their creation of unions in both industries—is extensive. For a good, if dated, bibliography on this topic: Salo Wittmayer Baron, Arcadius Kahan, and Nachum Gross, *Economic History of the Jews* (New York, 1975), 288–90. See also Raphael Mahler, *Yidn in amolikh Poyln: in likht fun tsifern: di demografishe un sotsyal-ekonomishe struktur fun yidn: in kroyn-poyln in XVIII yorhundert* (Varshe, 1958); Raphael Mahler, *Yehude Polin ben shete milhamot 'olam: historyah kalkalit-sotsyalit le-or ha-statistikah* (Tel Aviv, 1968). On Jews and the fur trade: Raymond Henry Fisher, *The Russian Fur Trade, 1550–1700* (Berkeley, 1943), 196–97.

<sup>55</sup> The history of the Jewish *smous*, and popular views of him, has begun to be studied, but a comprehensive history remains to be written: Phyllis Jowell and Adrienne Folb, *Joe Jowell of Namaqualand: The Story of a Modern-Day Pioneer* (Vlaeberg, 1994); Milton Shain, “‘Vant to Puy a Vaatch’: The Smous and Pioneer Trader in South African Jewish Historiography,” *Jewish Affairs* (September 1987). Firsthand accounts include: Jackson and Rosenthal, *Trader on the Veld*; August Locher, “The South African Trader,” *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* 12, no. 1 (1881); Wolf Rybko, *Oyf di pleynen fun Afrike* (Johannesburg, 1961). A number of oral histories of *smous* and their families have been preserved by the UCT Archives.

<sup>56</sup> C. P. Nel Museum F/M Solomon Barron.

feather trade also depended on the exchange of bodies and capital between the Cape and Eastern Europe and not simply unidirectionally from Eastern Europe to South Africa. Jews in the Cape penned letters to their erstwhile homes, sent money to family members who had not emigrated, helped fund the passage of other Eastern European Jews to the Cape, and themselves visited and sometimes even permanently returned to Lithuania. The resulting migration of fiancées, wives, children, and future business partners created stability and business opportunities for feather buyers in South Africa and beyond.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Isaac Nurick was not among the wealthiest feather buyers in Oudtshoorn (among the most prominent were Morris Aschman, Marcus Hotz, Samuel Lazarus, Herman Lewin, Jacob Nochamson, Max Rose, and Moses Sanders), but his family was well off and prominent: they even acquired one of the first motorcars in town.<sup>57</sup> His success at feather buying distinguished him from most in the industry. Jewish feather buyers tended to operate independently and on a very small scale. Because they were unlikely to maintain or preserve business records, and because many of them did not remain in the feather trade for long, we know the least about these smallest-scale feather buyers. Many must have been like S. Jaffe, who, for a time, paid weekly visits to Isaac Nurick. During these encounters, Jaffe sold Nurick a small collection of feathers, earning an average of £5 but frequently as little as £1 a week before disappearing from Nurick's feather ledger after a last entry on February 28, 1914.<sup>58</sup> There is no record of Jaffe acquiring a feather buyer's permit, no record of his keeping a permanent address in Oudtshoorn or joining a synagogue, no record of his marrying, having children, or dying in the district. Presumably Jaffe—like so many other young Lithuanian Jewish men in South Africa—heard rumors of the lucrative trade in feathers, traveled to Oudtshoorn to seek his fortune, dabbled in the business for a spell, and then either settled elsewhere, participated in return migration, or died young.

Every Monday, itinerant buyers like Jaffe would leave the town on foot or by donkey, horse, or ox cart to roam the district on feather buying journeys that might last from a few days at a time to as much as a week.<sup>59</sup> There are

<sup>57</sup> The most prominent Jewish feather buyers were included in commercial directories compiled in the early decades of the twentieth century. One directory from 1912 included over 100 Jewish businesspeople, most of whom were feather buyers. *Donaldson's South African Directory* (Capetown), *Braby's Cape Province Directory* (Durban, 1900). On the Nurick's motorcar: Judith Landau to author and extended Nurick family, November 20, 2004; Derrick Lewis to Judith Landau, author, and extended Nurick family, November 20, 2004.

<sup>58</sup> CPN INE, "Feather Book [1914]."

<sup>59</sup> Many of the small-scale feather buyers of Oudtshoorn resided on the road to Calitzdorp, a street known then as "Jewish Street." Hotels and boarding houses were also home to a great number. Feldman, *Oudtshoorn*, 99.

many tales of these itinerant merchants, some romanticized, others rather more lugubrious. Lily Jacobs, who spent her childhood on an ostrich farm in the Oudtshoorn District, has recalled the stories of Jewish *smous* who were attacked and robbed while they wandered the district: according to her account, her father, a Jewish ostrich farmer, frequently aided itinerant Jewish feather buyers in distress.<sup>60</sup> But recollections such as Jacobs's are in the minority: most references to these small-scale Jewish feather buyers focus on their amicable relations with Boer farmers, eased by the linguistic similarities between Yiddish and Afrikaans. Alex Miller has recounted the great kindness Boer farmers extended to his father, who worked as an itinerant feather buyer during the boom years. Until he acquired a horse and cart, Miller's father roamed the region on foot, departing Oudtshoorn every Monday morning and returning Thursday evening. Miller recalls: "I must tell you the farmers in Oudtshoorn were very, very good to Jews . . . they used to call them people of the Bible and they were very religious, the Afrikaners in those days, extraordinarily religious, they used to go out of their way when a Jew couldn't eat the meat, they used to prepare eggs in a special vessel. . . . They were absolutely friendly, hospitable, and they used to have special private rooms for the Jewish people to stay in."<sup>61</sup>

This sanguine image of the feather world was shared by Leibl Feldman, who described itinerant, small-scale feather buyers operating as something of a brotherhood.<sup>62</sup> To others, cooperation between feather buyers was bald conspiracy. Robert Wallace, a British scholar of agricultural economics, wrote in 1896 of "the usurious practices of feather peddlers, frequently German, Polish, or Russian **Jews** of a low type, who swarm about the country as feather buyers" (boldface in original). According to Wallace, feather buyers "bewilder[ed] the ignorant and imperfectly educated farmers" by charging inflated interest and conspiring to keep prices low.<sup>63</sup>

The real tenor of feather buyers' cooperation no doubt fluctuated over time and in accordance with market conditions, but it is easy to imagine that the quality of these relations tended to lie between Feldman's and Wallace's accounts. There were, after all, reasons for feather buyers to collaborate—or even conspire—with one another. From his peers, a buyer could learn about the quality of a particular farm's feathers, the projected date of a farmer's plucking, the state of the market abroad, and so on. Jewish feather buyers

<sup>60</sup> UCT Manuscripts BC 949 Jewish oral history project (hereafter referred to as UCT BC 949), 0117, Lily Jacobs, 15–23.

<sup>61</sup> UCT BC 949, 0175, Alex Miller, 8.

<sup>62</sup> Feldman, *Oudtshoorn*, 96.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Wallace and Harry Stratford Caldecott, *Farming Industries of Cape Colony* (London, 1896), 21. Anxiety about Jews' dominance of the feather trade, expressed in the Afrikaans-language *De Volksbode*, has also been analyzed in Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism*, 23–24.

were, however, also competing with one another for business, and those in the industry were known for their paranoia and competitiveness. Chana Berman has recalled that her grandfather Isaac Nurick insisted that even his own children remain discreet about the family business: "My mother told us that one of the first lessons she learned from her father when she was a young child was never to speak to strangers about their father's business. Apparently a neighbour (a competitor in the feather business) questioned the children about their father's activities. Innocently they answered him and when Isaac arrived at the appointed business meeting found that his neighbour had arrived earlier and had received the business instead. He returned home in a terrible rage. So you see there was very intense competition."<sup>64</sup>

To protect their interests and expand their business, large-scale feather buyers like Nurick employed small-scale feather buyers to travel from farm to farm, buying feathers and brokering contract farming relationships. From a complex lawsuit filed after the crash of the feather market (about which more later), we know a great deal about one such employee of Nurick's, a man by the name of Abelkop. Over the course of 1913, Abelkop traveled the Oudtshoorn District, buying feathers and extending at least £4,000 worth of promissory notes in Nurick's name.<sup>65</sup> Abelkop appears to have purchased feathers not only after they were clipped but also in advance of their harvesting, through contract farming agreements. This kind of arrangement was typical of the ostrich feather industry, and it functioned quite successfully while the price of feathers was stable or increasing. When the bottom fell out of the feather market, however, contract farming proved disastrous for all involved.

Advance-purchase contracts (i.e., buying feathers in advance of their harvest) were common in the feather trade. Technically speaking, feather buyers were not engaged in speculation; unlike the typical speculator or financier, Cape ostrich feather buyers like Nurick both intended and had the capacity to take delivery of the feathers they contract farmed. Nonetheless, feather buyers in general and Jewish feather buyers in particular were habitually referred to as "speculators" by the farmers with whom they dealt, the banks that financed them, and by American and European observers of the industry who wrote about ostrich farming and the feather trade. The conflation of the categories of "feather buyer," "speculator," and "Jew"—which has been perpetuated in superficial studies of the feather trade—reiterated stereotypes about the Jewish financier who made no real contribution to the local agricultural economy.

All participants in the feather trade, be they small-scale, itinerant feather

<sup>64</sup> Chana Berman to author and extended Nurick family, November 20, 2004.

<sup>65</sup> Nurick's business records include thirty-two such transactions brokered by "Abelkop and Rosenberg" during the course of three trips conducted in 1913 and/or 1914: the total Nurick was owed by contract farmers was £4,482. CPN INE, "1909–1914 Letter book," "Trip 1% Abelkof & Rosenberg," undated.

merchants like Jaffe or large-scale exporters like Nurick, participated in Oudtshoorn's Friday feather market. After spending several days, a week, or longer on the road, itinerant feather buyers tended to return to town on Friday morning to sell their feathers and to spend *Shabbes* with families and/or in town. They were joined by Jewish merchants who lived in surrounding districts but who used Oudtshoorn's Friday feather market to ply their goods and assess the state of the feather market, and also by the larger-scale feather buyers who lived and worked in town. The financial effects of a bullish feather market rippled through Oudtshoorn. Reggie Kahn has described the pleasure of market days from the perspective of a child. After her father finished selling feathers, he would return to the family farm with presents for Reggie and her companion Sally, daughter of the Kahn's Jewish farm manager. Recalls Kahn: "he used to come back with fashions of clothing, shoes and dresses and hats, Sally and me we used to walk out on the high street . . . [in] the most beautiful crinoline dresses and hats."<sup>66</sup>

Leibl Feldman's description of Oudtshoorn's Friday feather market is particularly vivid, conjuring up the spirit of a shtetl marketplace before *Shabbes*: "From early Friday morning up until Sunday night, Jews so to speak dominated the town. On Fridays the spirit of the Exchange and the market-place ruled Oudtshoorn. With the arrival of the ebullient, excitable feather dealers, Oudtshoorn began to buzz and seethe. In the centre of town, where the offices of the industry and the bank were situated, and particularly at the Ostrich Feather Merchants' Association, which was a kind of *bourse*, the pavements were thronged with Yiddish speaking feather merchants."<sup>67</sup> Though Feldman's description of the Friday feather market is wonderfully vibrant, his inclination to conflate Oudtshoorn and Chelm is overblown. The Friday exchange—like the feather trade itself—in no way functioned as a Jewish-only affair. Boer ostrich farmers, essential to the feather industry, also took part in Oudtshoorn's Friday market; many brought their families to town for the weekend, not only to participate in Friday sales but also to attend church on Sunday.<sup>68</sup> Coloured wage laborers were also instrumental for the smooth operation of the feather market, and perhaps for market days themselves. Coloured workers were the principal feather sorters employed in Oudtshoorn District, where approximately 200–250 sorters, many children among them, were employed to assemble feathers into lots ready for export.<sup>69</sup> Feather sorting was a dirty and

<sup>66</sup> UCT BC 949, 0130, Kahn, Reggie, 18.

<sup>67</sup> Feldman, *Oudtshoorn*, 99.

<sup>68</sup> For this purpose, the wealthy maintained two homes, one on the farm and another more lavish home in town. Others stayed in hotels like the Imperial, a favored (and notoriously rowdy) gathering place for the wealthier participants in the trade. Van Waart, *Paleise van die pluime*, 98–99.

<sup>69</sup> Buirski, "Aspects of Material Life," 66.

dangerous profession, known to dramatically increase one's risk of tuberculosis, among other diseases.<sup>70</sup> Coloured workers were also responsible for the day-to-day tending of birds on ostrich farms, and for the arduous task of plucking.<sup>71</sup>

What is more, none in the feather trade—neither Boer ostrich farmers, nor coloured wage laborers, nor Jewish feather buyers—were operating free of state intervention. State investments in infrastructure by the Cape government were critical to the viability, success, and racial composition of the ostrich feather industry. The expansion of this industry depended, first, on state-sponsored improvements in transportation. These included the building of the mountain pass road linking Oudtshoorn and George, which, notably, relied on convict labor, and the railroad that connected Oudtshoorn and Pt. Elizabeth.<sup>72</sup> These transportation routes facilitated the explosion of the ostrich feather industry at the turn of the twentieth century, for they allowed for the relatively quick and safe conveyance of goods. Second, the state-sponsored postal service allowed feather buyers to communicate with contacts overseas and intraregionally. Regular communication with business partners abroad was, as we will see, particularly important for feather merchants whose goods were destined for auction in London, for it allowed them to anticipate changes in fashion and accumulate their own feather stock accordingly—buying more or less of a given type of feather in accordance with consumers' current or predicted desires. More directly, the Cape Colony regulated tariffs on ostrich feathers, eggs, and birds to support the strength of the industry.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup> According to a study published in the *Oudtshoorn Courant*, morbidity rates for tuberculosis were 13.3 per 1,000 feather sorters; 8.72 per 1,000 coloured people, and 1.36 per 1,000 Europeans living in Oudtshoorn. *Oudtshoorn Courant*, March 12, 1914, cited in *ibid.*, 67.

<sup>71</sup> "It is very rough to handle" ostriches, wrote one observer of this art, "and bruised hand, arms, and fingers, are generally exhibited after a day's ostrich-plucking." Mosenthal and Harting, *Ostriches and Ostrich Farming*, 230. Coloured workers, and especially coloured women, were also employed as domestic workers in the homes of white families in Oudtshoorn District. Here, as elsewhere in the Cape, Boer men and women resisted moving into the sphere of domestic work. On Boer resistance to domestic work: Buirski, "Aspects of Material Life," 61; Charles Van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914: New Ninevah*, vol. 2 (Harlow, 1982). For firsthand accounts: UCT BC 949, 0107 Sybil Honikman, 57–58; 0027 Charles Brenner, 12; 0159 Arthur Lewin, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Prior to 1904, when the railway connecting Oudtshoorn and Pt. Elizabeth was completed, goods leaving Oudtshoorn were conveyed by horseback or ox wagon fifty-seven miles over the Swartberg Mountains to Mossel Bay (where they could be loaded on ships and transported to Cape Town or overseas) or seventy miles over the mountains to Prince Albert Road, where the rail line commenced. On the state financing of roads over mountain passes: Keegan, *Colonial South Africa*, 211.

<sup>73</sup> For example, at the height of the feather boom, undressed ostrich feathers were permitted to be exported free of tariff, which more or less rewarded movement into the

Finally, the colonial government had a role in controlling the racial composition of the feather trade. This was achieved by the aforementioned statutes that required buyers of ostrich feathers to obtain licenses. Though these laws were theoretically intended to regulate feather buying, they—and the fees they stipulated—had the additional effect of limiting the trade of feathers by Khoisan and coloured people, who previously sold feathers to white merchants. Jews in the industry, it should be noted, also perceived this legislation to be racial in inspiration, but interpreted it to be directed at driving Jews out of the feather trade.<sup>74</sup>

State investments in infrastructure that supported the feather industry, like the involvement of coloured workers and Boer farmers in the feather trade, render untenable the suggestion that the trade of ostrich feathers was an exclusively or predominantly Jewish affair—an argument offered, oddly enough, both by antisemitic observers of the industry and by the few studies that lionize Jews' prominence in the feather world.<sup>75</sup> The implications of enmeshing Jewish feather merchants in the context of colonial policy and race relations are, however, greater still, for they suggest that in this case, at least, Jews were not merely accidental subjects of imperialism but also in part were able to succeed as transnational traders precisely because of an exploitative colonial system that privileged whites.

The story of Jewish feather buyers also serves to complicate the category of the export-oriented, white settler capitalist in southern Africa that is frequently employed by scholars of labor and class in the African setting. One could argue that Jews who partook of the feather boom functioned as and reaped the benefits of being white, settlers, and export-oriented capitalists, particularly relative to coloured workers in the industry. However, this argu-

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industry, while beginning in 1883 heavy taxes were placed on exported birds and eggs to prevent the anticipated development of competitive ostrich farms in Algeria, Australia, Argentina, and the United States. John Noble, ed., *Official Handbook: History, Productions, and Resources of the Cape of Good Hope* (Cape Town, 1886), 262, 326; Wormser, "The Ostrich Industry," 25–27. For an example of the kind of legislation the British government levied against ostrich imports: "An Act for the Better Preservation of Wild Ostriches (No. 12)," in *Laws in Colonies as to Trespass and Preservation of Game* (House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1871).

<sup>74</sup> When the Central Association Farmers Congress proposed in 1907 that a special board be created to vet feather buyer applications, Jewish feather buyers perceived the suggestion as bald antisemitism. Outraged, they created the Oudtshoorn Jewish Vigilance Committee, an organization that would defend "the poor unfortunate ones who would suffer by the proposed legislation." Simon, "Historical Notes," 167.

<sup>75</sup> George Aschman, "A Childhood in Oudtshoorn," *Jewish Affairs* (May 1969); Aschman, "Oudtshoorn"; Leibl Feldman, *Oudtshoorn— "Yerushalayim d'afrike"* (Johannesburg, 1940).



ment gains meaning only if one acknowledges that there are other instances in South African history where Jews straddled and/or elided the racial and social boundaries established by the colonial order.<sup>76</sup> Jews who owned or oversaw the notoriously foul eating houses frequented by the black workers who were all but imprisoned on Kimberly's diamond and gold fields (the so-called kaffir eateries), for example, were considered *vayse kaffirs* (white kaffirs) by their Yiddish-speaking peers.<sup>77</sup> To colonial administrators, missionaries, and other European settlers, meanwhile, Jews' whiteness and Europeaness was dubious at times: Jews were occasionally spoken of as "white niggers" who would never gain full entry into European colonial society.<sup>78</sup> Nor were white and black the only colors through which South African Jewry moved. Immigrant Jews, particularly those from Eastern Europe whose primary language was Yiddish, were labeled *greeners* (new immigrants) by Jewish immigrants more established than they and as "Peruvians" by non-Jews who blamed Jewish immigrants for crime and the illicit sale of liquor, diamonds, and women, especially to black consumers.<sup>79</sup> One 1937 Yiddish-language study of the Jews of South Africa argued that over time, Jews who worked with black Africans (on the diamond and gold fields or as proprietors of small or itinerant shops) became "less green and more black."<sup>80</sup>

The idea that one's commercial interlocutors could "bleed" color—infecting one, in this case, with a tinge of blackness—did not threaten Jews in the feather trade. While Jews who worked as *smous*, shopkeepers, sellers of alcohol, or traders in diamond and gold regularly interacted with black Africans, Jewish

<sup>76</sup> On the development of scientific racism in South Africa, see Dubow, *Scientific Racism*.

<sup>77</sup> Nathan Berger, *Jewish Trails through Southern Africa: A Documentary* (Johannesburg, 1976), 1; Rakhmiel Feldman, *Shvarts un vays: Dertseylungen fun Dorem-Afrike* (Warsaw, Johannesburg, 1935); Shmeul Leibowitz, "Vayse kafers," *Foroys* (1937); Joseph Sherman, "Serving the Natives: Whiteness as the Price of Hospitality in South African Yiddish Literature," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 505–21; B. M. Titelstad, "Eating-Houses on the Witwatersrand, 1902–1979" (MA thesis, University of Witwatersrand, 1991); Robert Vicat Turrell, *Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields, 1871–1890* (Cambridge, 1987), 146; Van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History*.

<sup>78</sup> On perceptions of Jews by colonial administrators, missionaries, and other European settlers: *The South African Jewish Year Book* (Johannesburg, 1929); Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham, NC, 1996), 73; J. L. Gray, *The Jew in the Economic Life in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1920); Gustav Saron and Louis Hertz, eds., *The Jews in South Africa: A History* (London, 1955); Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism*; Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*.

<sup>79</sup> The most thorough study of "anti-Peruvian" sentiment is Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism*, 26–34. Other relevant studies were cited above.

<sup>80</sup> Leybl Feldman, *Yidn in Dorem-Afrike* (Yohanesburg, 1937), 43–45.



sellers of feathers did not. This is not to say that racial hierarchies did not shape the feather trade: clearly the coloured population of Oudtshoorn was barred from certain aspects of the feather trade by decrees both formal and informal. For Jews, however, the absence of a black African labor force in the feather trade seems to have rendered the racial politics of the ostrich industry relatively benign, at least while the feather market was strong; put simply, Jews in the trade were immune from much of the hostile racial labeling to which their peers in other industries were vulnerable.<sup>81</sup> This distinction is significant because it suggests that in the South African context, at least, Jews had the ability to change their hue by involving themselves in different commercial pursuits or commodity chains. This finding raises a larger question hinted at in (but by no means resolved by) this study: if ethnicity influenced Jews' choice of vocation, did the choice of vocation, or even the choice to work with a particular commodity, influence the texture of Jews' ethnicity?

Participation in the feather industry did not render Jews permanently immune from antisemitic or "anti-Peruvian" sentiment. When the feather industry flagged, many Boer farmers blamed Jews for the industry's collapse, an accusation that found expression in the nationalizing of the region's agricultural economy in the 1920s and 1930s. However, while the feather market was strong, Jews did succeed as export-oriented capitalists, and their success was enabled by colonial laws and racial hierarchies. This being said, it must be added that even among those Jews who might be called export-oriented capitalists, there was much variation: as much, one could say, as there was within the Boer population of the Cape.<sup>82</sup> Small-scale feather merchants like Jaffe may have succeeded in penetrating an industry that coloured workers could not, and they may have benefited from state policies that aimed to create a white supremacist agrarian economy.<sup>83</sup> Yet Jaffe ought not be conflated with Samuel Marks, whose contemporaneous success in the diamond industry rendered him a metaphor for South Africa's exploitative mineral revolution, white and foreign accumulation, and the capitalization of the region as a whole.<sup>84</sup> The point here is not merely to disaggregate South African Jews by class, which other scholars have done before me; nor is it to reify the kind of crude distinctions Hannah Arendt made between "the mob element among the Jewish

<sup>81</sup> On "whiteness" of Oudtshoorn Jewry: Coetzee, "Immigrants to Citizens." Most sources that have explored the racial configuration of South African Jews have focused on the apartheid era and have been literary or memoiristic.

<sup>82</sup> The internal diversity of Boers is discussed in, among other sources, Keegan, *Colonial South Africa*; Van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History*.

<sup>83</sup> I borrow the term "white supremacist agrarian economy" from Timothy Keegan: Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 207.

<sup>84</sup> On Samuel Marks: Richard Mendelsohn, *Sammy Marks: The Uncrowned King of the Transvaal* (Cape Town, 1991).

people” and those “fortune hunters in the world of legitimate labor,” “the Jewish financiers.”<sup>85</sup> Instead, I suggest using the story of Jews to better understand the complexity and shape of transnational, transcolonial, and overseas trade and to use what we know of colonial relations to better understand the intricate place of Jews in modern political and economic orders. To this end, we must appreciate the role Jews played in creating and sustaining commodity chains that intertwined Europe and the colonies. The centrality of this role becomes starker as we turn to the European context.

#### TO AUCTION, TO AUCTION

Feathers from West Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East had reached European consumers through a variety of trade networks and ports since at least the sixteenth century.<sup>86</sup> But London acquired the monopoly on European ostrich feather auctions in 1876, just as the feather market—and London’s merchant house economy—was expanding.<sup>87</sup> At about the same time, London was absorbing roughly 15,000 Eastern European Jewish immigrants: men, women, girls, and boys who furnished a bountiful labor market to the feather trade.<sup>88</sup> Due in great part to this influx of immigrants, Jews quickly proved well represented in all tiers of the supply side of Britain’s feather industry. Jewish girls and women were the principal unskilled, semiskilled, and skilled workers to staff the hundreds of feather manufactories that dotted London’s East End, and Jewish men were well represented among ostrich feather dealers and manufacturers in the British capital, constituting, in 1883, 57 percent and 43 percent of these occupational niches, respectively.<sup>89</sup> According to one social

<sup>85</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

<sup>86</sup> I explore Jews’ place in the feather commodity chain that emanated from West and North Africa in Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Mediterranean Jews and Global Commerce in the Modern Period: On the Trail of the Feather Trade,” *Jewish Social Studies* 13, no. 2 (Winter 2007), and in *The Pursuit of Plumes: Jews, Ostrich Feathers, and Modern Global Commerce* (New Haven, CT, in press).

<sup>87</sup> Stanley D. Chapman, *Merchant Enterprise in Britain: From the Industrial Revolution to World War I* (Cambridge, 1992).

<sup>88</sup> David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture, 1840–1914* (New Haven, CT, 1994), and *Immigrants and Workers, Englishmen and Jews: Jewish Immigration to the East End of London, 1880–1906* (New Haven, CT, 1985); Lloyd P. Gartner, *The Jewish Immigrant in England, 1870–1914* (Detroit, 1960); V. D. Lipman, *Social History of the Jews in England, 1850–1950* (London, 1954); Harold Pollins, *Economic History of the Jews in England* (London, 1982); Bill Williams, *The Making of Manchester Jewry, 1740–1875* (New York, 1976).

<sup>89</sup> The figure of 90 percent is offered by the Ostrich Feather, Fancy Feather, and Artificial Flower Trade Board in a study of the industry conducted in roughly 1921. On the prominence of Jewish girls and women in feather manufacturing: Public Record

scientist who studied the economic landscape of British Jewry at the turn of the twentieth century, the preponderance of Jews in the ostrich feather trade rendered it one of London's "chief Jewish monopolies."<sup>90</sup> Declared the Ostrich and Fancy Feather and Artificial Flower Trade Board (a branch of the British Board of Trade created in 1919), London's "Ostrich Feather trade before the [First World] War was in the hands of East End Jews."<sup>91</sup>

Elsewhere I reflect on why London became the commercial heart of the global ostrich feather market, what role Jewish feather merchants, manufacturers, and blue-collar workers played in the city's economy, and how feathers auctioned in London reached consumers in Britain and overseas.<sup>92</sup> Here I will probe how feather exporters in the Cape brokered communications and commerce with ostrich feather merchants in London, reflecting on the importance of Jewishness to these processes.

After ostrich feathers had changed hands in the Cape for the last time, they were sorted and packed in wooden cases lined with tin or in specially prepared paper sewn in canvas bags, sent by wagon or rail to Mossel Bay, and shipped to London—carried, ironically, in steamers once filled with Russian Jewish immigrants.<sup>93</sup> Upon arrival in London, the feather cases were stored on docks and in dockside warehouses—what Jonathan Schneer has termed the "nexus" of the imperial metropolis that was London—where luxury items from the colonies including fruits, nuts, oils, spirits, tea, cinnamon, shells, and feathers (among countless other bounty) were stockpiled.<sup>94</sup> In the early years of the feather trade, potential buyers scrutinized the newly imported feathers in the warehouses that lined London's docks. As the market accelerated, this arrangement proved cumbersome and the presentation of feathers available for sale was relocated to warehouses on London's Billiter Street, leaving agents or associates of the sender to retrieve the feathers from the docks.<sup>95</sup>

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Office, National Archive, Kew (hereafter cited as PRO) LAB 2/723/15. See also "Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops Report, October 1886–87," in *Command Papers: Report of Commissioners* (House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1888).

<sup>90</sup> Joseph Jacobs, *Studies in Jewish Statistics, Social, Vital, and Anthropometric* (London, 1891), 37–38.

<sup>91</sup> PRO LAB 2/835/3, undated memorandum, likely of early winter 1919. A second version of this document, dated March, 1921, is filed in: PRO LAB 11/697/TB134/2/1927.

<sup>92</sup> Stein, *The Pursuit of Plumes*, esp. chap. 2, "London, Global Feather Hub."

<sup>93</sup> For a fascinating study of the way in which the overseas transport of Russian Jews and commercial interests collided, see Krut, "Building a Home."

<sup>94</sup> On docks as the nexus of London's imperial metropolis: Jonathan Schneer, *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (New Haven, CT, 1999).

<sup>95</sup> Lefèvre, *Le commerce et l'industrie de la plume*, 114. On the culture of London's waterfront and Britain's overseas trade more generally (though in an earlier period): William J. Ashworth, *Customs and Excise: Trade, Production, and Consumption in England, 1640–1845* (Oxford, 2003).

Sybil Honikman, descendent of a Jewish feather family based in Oudtshoorn and London, has recalled visiting the docks as a student with her father. “When . . . my father met me in London, [the] first thing he did was went [*sic*] on a trip to the docks, the warehouses, and climbing over lugs and bags of spices we got to a warehouse where a fellow in a white coat met us and he led me by the hand to a corner where there were bags of feathers. Every bag had a black diamond, and inside [the diamond were] the letters I.J.H. and he said, those are the feathers we buy, and no others. Those are my father’s initials, you see, and they could depend upon the quality.”<sup>96</sup> As father and daughter left the dock, Honikman remembers passing an elaborate ostrich feather fan, which was either being stored or displayed on the docks. It was, reminisced Honikman, “a gorgeous thing dyed brilliant colours and I can remember my father making a sweeping bow to the feather fan.”<sup>97</sup> This gesture, deliberately stagy as it feels, points to the delicate role middlemen like Honikman played in the global feather commodity chain. Jewish feather merchants like Honikman were, on the one hand, crucial to facilitating flows of capital from the colonies and independent states of Africa to Britain and, thereafter, to consumers in an international market. On the other hand, these merchants sought to profit from global fashion trends to which they paid obeisance but over which they had little control. Both cocksure and submissive, Honikman’s bow to the feather fan was a canny metaphor for the feather traders’ condition.

After being transported to warehouses on Billiter Street, feathers were displayed to prospective buyers for two days before auction. As Cape feathers made their way to consumers, the evaluation of feathers at Billiter Street was critical for participants in the trade throughout Europe and the United States. According to the *New York Times*, every New York feather merchant sent representatives there, and buyers examined plumes with the intensity of “New York commission men look[ing] over consignments of California fruit on the Erie pier.”<sup>98</sup> Thus scrutinized, ostrich feathers were at last destined for auction.

By 1876, large-scale public feather auctions were being held bimonthly (monthly and twice-monthly auctions would come in time) in London’s Commercial Sale Rooms, with those of June and December being particularly significant. Feather buyers in the Cape saved their best and largest quantity of stock for the June and December sales, and these auctions attracted the greatest number of feather buyers from overseas. All such auctions were overseen by

<sup>96</sup> UCT BC 949, 0107 Sybil Honikman, 6–7.

<sup>97</sup> UCT BC 949, 0107 Sybil Honikman, 7.

<sup>98</sup> “Ostrich Plume Rivals: New York Favors South African Rather than California Feathers—Reasons for the Preference,” *New York Times*, October 26, 1903. This point was confirmed by Edward Schuman, whose father, Philip R. Schuman, founded P. R. Schuman Duster Co. in 1907. According to Schuman, Americans involved in the feather trade visited London auctions sales themselves and/or hired associates to attend on their behalf. Edward Schuman to author, November 8, 2004.

established brokerage firms, the most important of which were those of Lewis & Peat, Hale & Son, and S. Figgis & Co., and attended primarily by feather wholesalers. One or more brokerage firms would offer lots of feathers each month, distributing in advance an auction catalog that detailed goods to be offered. These auction catalogs contained extensive information about feathers destined for auction, including their type and size, the emblem of the seller who shipped them across the Atlantic, the case in which they were packaged, and the name of the ship on which they sailed. This information allowed diligent feather buyers in London not only to select the kind of feathers they desired but also to buy from particular sellers they had come to trust, or, indeed, to buy particular lots toward which a seller might direct them.<sup>99</sup>

As this suggests, buyers in London could benefit from being in contact with Cape-based feather exporters; they could learn if a particular season's yield was strong, or whether a particular type of feather was of unusually high or low quality. Cape-based exporters also benefited from contact with buyers in London, for informants there could quickly convey the results of an auction and, more importantly, offer guidance on what feathers to pursue or eschew in the future.<sup>100</sup> To this end, Isaac Nurick relied on two London-based employees with deep roots in the feather world. One, Dan Andrade, was a Cape-based Anglo-Sephardic ostrich farmer who conducted business with a number of relatives in London.<sup>101</sup> The other, Isaac Hassan, was a Tripolitanian Jew of Livornese descent who represented a North African Jewish feather firm in the British capital. On Nurick's behalf, Andrade and Hassan spied on the competition in London, kept abreast of rumors and trends, and even worked as auction skills. The confidential information that resulted was considered so valuable that the men relied on code when sending one another telegrams.<sup>102</sup>

Feather exporters in Oudtshoorn might have avoided hiring associates and paying brokerage and auctioneer fees in London were they able to sell directly to consumers, an arrangement Isaac Nurick relentlessly pursued.<sup>103</sup> But the

<sup>99</sup> Examples of such catalogs are found in Guildhall Library among the business papers of the Salaman family: Guildhall Library (hereafter cited as GL) MS 20508.

<sup>100</sup> Postauction summaries were also circulated by individual brokerage firms and published in the *South African Agricultural Journal*. These, however, reached readers after a few weeks' delay. Plentiful examples of postauction summaries are to be found in the Salaman papers, GL MS 20509.

<sup>101</sup> The Andrade family was well represented in London's feather trade: from the 1870s to the 1890s, the *Post Office London Directory* advertised the services of feather merchants and manufacturers by the names of David Andrade, Joseph Andrade, Moses de Costa Andrade, S. H. de Cos[t]a Andrade, Samuel Andrade, and Victor Andrade.

<sup>102</sup> CPN INE, "1909–1914 Letter book," Nurick-Andrade correspondence, May 16, 1910. I analyze the relationship between Isaac Nurick and Isach Hassan elsewhere: Stein, "Mediterranean Jews."

<sup>103</sup> Over the course of 1914 Nurick repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) appealed to

nature of feather consumption in Europe and the United States prevented Cape-based exporters from operating independently of auction. This was in part because the feather trade was volatile and seasonal. It was also, as Arthur Douglass suggested in his 1886 study of the trade, because feather sellers suffered from “a want of knowledge in making up the cases to suit the retail dealer.” To explain this point, Douglass presented a list of actual feathers shipped to London from Port Elizabeth, pointing out that “the first, fourth, fifth, and tenth lines might suit a west-end retailer; whilst he could do nothing with the other lines; whilst a retailer from a manufacturing town might do with the cheaper lines, but could do nothing with the best lines.”<sup>104</sup> The very popularization of feather wearing thus made unmediated feather sales cumbersome, as milliners and millinery suppliers were unlikely to desire all of the forty-two types of feathers that could be identified by the expert. These factors put additional pressure on feather exporters, who were obliged to anticipate market trends constantly in ways that other colonial exporters—for example, those in the sugar, oil, diamond, or gold industries—did not.

Feather auctions were not open to every potential buyer, and individual consumers, in particular, were barred from these monthly events. Consumer participation was not in the interest of the London Produce Brokers’ Association, the agency that established the rules observed at feather auctions, for were consumers in attendance they would circumvent the wholesale operations that were the principal clients of brokers. At the same time, consumers’ needs were not in accordance with those of feather sellers, who sold by the parcel rather than the plume. With individual consumers barred from auction, the events were attended principally by feather manufacturers and wholesalers. Given the prevalence of Jews in these occupations, it follows that the auctions themselves were largely Jewish in composition. This is substantiated by the fact that ostrich feather auctions were routinely rescheduled if a given auction conflicted with the Jewish High Holidays, an extraordinary fact given that the Commercial Sale Rooms on London’s Mincing Lane, where the plumes were auctioned, represented the principal locale where “colonial produce” was sold to residents of an empire hungry to consume.<sup>105</sup>

The industry as a whole was by and large discreet about the overpresen-

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associates and brokers in London who might help him sell feathers “out of hand,” thereby circumventing auction. CPN INE, “1909–1914 Letter book.”

<sup>104</sup> Arthur Douglass, *Ostrich Farming in South Africa* (London, 1881), 81–85, 91–92.

<sup>105</sup> On the closure of feather auctions for the “Hebrew” holidays, see, e.g., GL MS 20509, August 1876 Lewis & Peat ostrich sales receipt; “Ostrich Feathers, August Sale,” Lewis & Peat, August, 18, 1876; “Prices Current of Ostrich Feathers,” Hale & Son, September, 20, 1888; “Prices Current of Ostrich Feathers,” Hale & Son, December 15, 1881, GL MS 20509.

tation of Jews at feather sales, but it did not go unnoted by frank observers of the industry. In Arthur Douglass's contemporary study of the trade—a necessary source for any budding feather entrepreneur—he observed, without referring directly to Jewishness, that an organized group of feather traders with “enormous connections in many parts of the world” kept “ordinary” merchants from participating in London's feather market.<sup>106</sup> Douglass's explanation hinted at rather more conspiracy than existed in reality. In fact, the connections that proved so critical to success in the ostrich feather market tended to be on the smallest rather than the largest scale: as in London more generally, the feather trade was dominated by “small masters” rather than industrial magnates.<sup>107</sup> At the same time, contacts local and foreign were indeed crucial to feather dealers on both sides of the Atlantic, and these were undergirded by trans-Atlantic Jewish networks. Thus Jewish feather traders in the Cape like Isaac Nurick relied upon Jewish contacts in London; large firms like the London-based, Jewish-owned I. Salaman & Co. sent sons and sons-in-law to create and oversee operations in Paris, New York, and beyond; and large-scale Jewish feather merchants in the Cape—including Max Rose, the “ostrich feather king of South Africa”—posted family members in London to create and oversee European operations.<sup>108</sup> When it came to the modern ostrich feather trade, Jewishness functioned as the glue that bound together a global market.

One of the most important trends in modern European history in the past two decades is to take seriously the cultural and material impacts of colonialism on European society, shifting patterns of consumption among them.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Douglass, *Ostrich Farming in South Africa*, 87–88.

<sup>107</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford, 1971), 239.

<sup>108</sup> The history of I. Salaman & Co., “the largest wholesale ostrich feather business in the world, with depots in Cape Town, Pt. Elizabeth, and Durban [which] for a time possessed ostrich farms up-country, in addition to offices and warehouses in London, Paris, New York & Buenos Aires,” represents a crucial case study of the larger project of which this article is a part. The papers of this company and its family members, held by Guildhall Library and Cambridge University Libraries, represent a crucial source base. See Stein, *The Pursuit of Plumes*. The preceding quotation is cited from University Library Cambridge, Redcliffe Nathan Salaman papers, 8171/27 “Boyhood & the Family Background,” 11. Max Rose's brother Barney oversaw the London-based office of the family company. Two other brothers, Albert and Wulf, also appear to have resided in London and worked on Max's behalf. George Aschman, “Oudtshoorn in the Early Days,” in *The Jews in South Africa: A History*, ed. Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz (London, 1955), 132. More details on Rose's personal and business history are preserved in drafts of Aschman's article, which may be found in UCT BC 830 “Oudtshoorn Hebrew Congregation Archive.” Other relevant sources include: CPN F/M “Max Rose” and J/C 5/1 “Joodse Artikles” and “Residents' List of Oudtshoorn Jewry” (South African Friends of Beth Hatefutsoth Country Communities Project).

<sup>109</sup> See, e.g., the contributions to Maxine Berg, “New Commodities, Luxuries, and



Scholars of Jewish culture have only begun to engage with this literature and still face many unanswered questions: whether, for example, specifically Jewish patterns of consumption existed, and to what extent the answer to this question varied over time and space.<sup>110</sup> We also lack an understanding of the ways in which Jews shaped patterns of consumption outside their community at the turn of the century. This is ironic given that many of Europe's Jewish populations were profoundly implicated in colonial economics in the modern period, not merely through the feather trade but also through the trade of diamonds and gold, oil, opium, liquor, the textile industry, and brokerage and financing (to name but the most obvious examples).<sup>111</sup> Exploration of Jews' involvement in these trade networks—a challenge this article invites—would allow us to fathom the ways in which Jews facilitated European and American consumption of luxury goods from the colonial setting, thereby contributing to the proliferation of consumer culture, the reshaping of class and gender

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Their Consumers in Eighteenth-Century England,” in *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650–1850*, ed. Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (Manchester, 1999); Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997); Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough, *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, 1996). Other influential works include: Burke, *Lifebuoy Men*; Antoinette M. Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley, 1998); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London, 1995); Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993). Useful discussions of this expansive subfield include: Richards, *Commodity Culture*; Mary Louise Roberts, “Gender, Consumption, and Commodity Culture,” *American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 817–44; Lisa Tiersten, “Redefining Consumer Culture: Recent Literature on Consumption and the Bourgeoisie in Western Europe,” *Radical History Review* 57 (1993): 116–59.

<sup>110</sup> Leora Auslander, “‘Jewish Taste’? Jews, and the Aesthetics of Everyday Life in Paris and Berlin, 1933–1942,” in *Histories of Leisure*, ed. Rudy Koshar (Oxford, 2002); Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires* (Bloomington, IN, 2003).

<sup>111</sup> The absence of attention to Jews' place in Britain's colonial economy is perhaps most striking in the few histories of Anglo-Jewry that take economic history particularly seriously. This lacuna can be explained, in part, because the existing, very fine studies of modern Anglo-Jewry—and, for that matter, modern European Jewries writ large—tend to explore Jewish history within the framework of national politics or economics. This is true of some of the best work on Anglo-Jewry, to wit: Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000* (Berkeley, 2002); David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture, 1840–1914* (New Haven, CT, 1994); Pollins, *Economic History of the Jews in England*; Bill Williams, *The Making of Manchester Jewry, 1740–1875* (New York, 1976). On Jews, opium, and oil: Maisie J. Meyer, *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Whangpoo: A Century of Sephardi Jewish Life in Shanghai* (Lanham, MD, 2003); Robert David Quixano Henriques, *Marcus Samuel: First Viscount Bearsted and Founder of the “Shell” Transport and Trading Company, 1853–1927* (London, 1960).



identities, and the expansion of modern global markets. Jews would continue to influence these phenomena throughout the twentieth century as traders of (among other things) diamonds, gold, and couture—but not as traders of feathers, for a precipitous crash of the market and the eventual nationalization of South Africa’s agricultural economy drove Jews out of the trans-Atlantic feather trade.

#### THE FEATHER CRASH

In January of 1913, the *New York Times* reported that “according to one of the larger manufacturers and wholesalers of ostrich feathers, there has not been a season in the last 32 years when the outlook for these goods was better than for the coming Spring.”<sup>112</sup> Indeed, 1913 proved a peak year for feather sales, but their popularity was not to endure long: feathers would soon be rejected by consumers on both sides of the Atlantic. This shift in taste was at once aesthetic, political, and economic. It was prompted by several related factors: the success of the antiplumage and bird protection movement; an emerging sense of austerity in women’s fashion catalyzed, in part, by the outbreak of the First World War; and the extensive oversupply of ostrich plumes. These dynamics propelled a cataclysmic crash of the ostrich feather market in late 1914, which quickly drove many in the industry into bankruptcy.

The campaigns of bird preservationists—combined with the support of consumers and disorganized resistance on the part of the millinery and feather trade—resulted in the adoption of a series of antiplumage bills in the United States and Britain.<sup>113</sup> Neither these bills nor the work of most bird preservationists were directed at the eradication of the ostrich feather trade; rather, they aimed to halt the obliteration of domestic wild bird species and the importation of tropical feathers. Ostriches were not a target for bird preservationists because the birds, in contradistinction to hummingbirds, herons, or egrets, for example, were farmed and not killed for their feathers: as advocates of the industry liked to point out, the cutting of ostrich plumes was “as painless as cutting human hair” or “trimming one’s fingernails.”<sup>114</sup> These distinctions mattered little to feather consumers. Once feathers were branded cruel and un-

<sup>112</sup> “Ostrich Plumes in Demand: Spring Outlook the Best in Thirty-Two Years—Labor Scarce,” *New York Times*, January 15, 1913.

<sup>113</sup> These include the American Lacey Act of 1900, Migratory Bird Act of 1913, the Tariff Act of 1913, and Britain’s Plumage Act of 1921.

<sup>114</sup> The oft-cited analogy with the cutting of human hair may be found in “Is Ostrich Farming Cruel?” *The Times* (London), August 17, 1886, 6; “No Cruelty to Ostriches,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1913; the second statement is attributed to the Jewish ostrich farmer and feather merchant Max Rose.

fashionable, women consumers were inclined to make no distinction between types of plumes or birds. In the wake of American adoption of antiplumage legislation in 1914, international demand for ostrich feathers fell, as did the amount these plumes could command at auction.<sup>115</sup> As the number and strength of bird protection laws grew, fashion journals and hat trade bulletins, which had so recently anticipated a surge in the demand for nonprohibited plumes, dispensed with the ornate, deep-brimmed hats that wealthy women in Europe and the United States had so recently celebrated, promoting, instead, more austere aesthetic options: a simple toque, a peaked cap adorned only with a ribbon band, or, in time, the ubiquitous cloche.<sup>116</sup>

Even before the full effects of bird protection legislation were felt, however, changes in the fashion world turned against feather wearing. In Europe and the United States, fashion was changing, and women's hats and clothes were becoming simpler, more utilitarian and emancipated. In addition to the antiplumage movement, the outbreak of the First World War was influential in catalyzing such shifts. The conflict in Europe pushed women into the workforce, stimulating demand for more utilitarian clothing and hatwear. Hats of the war era resembled the austere headgear of women's uniforms rather than the fanciful sculptures of the Edwardian era. The popularization of the motorcar had a further impact on women's hat wear. The enormous hats popular in 1910–12 were impossible to keep in place in an open motorcar, and elaborate feather accessories fared particularly badly in such circumstances.<sup>117</sup>

Transitions in fashion represented a threat to the ostrich feather industry that ostrich farmers and feather buyers could little control, though they strenuously tried to influence them through marketing and promotion. They were more culpable when it came to a third foe of the feather trade, oversupply. Farmers in Oudtshoorn District were rearing evermore ostriches, in great part because feather buyers, with the aid and encouragement of banks, were eager to engage in contract farming and informal speculation. The number of farmed ostriches in the Cape had more than doubled in less than ten years, a period in which

<sup>115</sup> This change may be tracked through monthly auction reports compiled by London's brokerage firms and published in the *Agricultural Journal of the Union of South Africa*. It was also described succinctly in *The Times* (London), where one report on the industry stated tersely: "The United States' law [of 1913] has had a marked effect on the London market. At the December sales there was a great drop in prices, while a vast quantity of plumage remained unsold." "The London Feather Sales," *The Times* (London), December 17, 1913, 23.

<sup>116</sup> This analysis is based, in part, on studies of trade and style bulletins held by Harvard University's Ernst Mayer Library, in particular, those of the Chicago Feather Company. Published journals of the millinery trade also track these evolutions in women's headgear. On the evolution of hat fashions in this period: De Courtais, *Women's Headdress*; McDowell, *Hats: Status, Style, and Glamour*.

<sup>117</sup> Board of Trade and Industries, "Report No. 55," 5.

the value of Cape feathers had nearly trebled.<sup>118</sup> Ostrich farmers in the Cape were also guilty of failing to diversify their gains, pouring most of their resources back into the industry by planting alfalfa and rearing more and more birds. When the value of the ostrich plume was high, investment in other agricultural crops declined in Oudtshoorn District. What is more, neither the region's ostrich farmers nor the government of the Cape invested in the district's irrigation system, which would have permitted crop diversification should the need arise.<sup>119</sup> Oversupply was not only the fault of farmers and feather dealers in the Cape. Brokerage firms and individuals in London and New York were stocking great quantities of feathers in anticipation of a rise in their value. From the perspective of farmers and feather merchants in the Cape, the hazard of foreign feather overstocking was particularly palpable when the American appetite for feathers began to dip.<sup>120</sup> Combined, these factors led the value of ostrich feathers to plummet in the late winter of 1914.

For feather buyers in the Cape and feather merchants in London the "feather crash" was precipitous. To understand its impact, we return to the story of feather merchant Isaac Nurick, whose experience of the feather bust is as illustrative as his experience of the feather boom. As late as March 1914, Nurick was still actively buying for London's June feather auction. Indeed, it appears that he invested over £30,000 in ostrich feathers from early January to early March of that year, with the goal of auctioning them in London in June 1914. Meanwhile, Nurick was also continuing to engage in contract farming in the early months of 1914. In partnership with several others, Nurick paid the Potgetier Brothers £7,273 for the plumage of 2,078 birds in February or March of 1914 and bought the plumage of 361 birds for £1,353 from O'Fourie & LeRoux some weeks later.<sup>121</sup> Alas, June feather sales in London and on the Cape saw a dramatic decline in prices, and many of the plumes offered were not sold. In their monthly report on the trade, the brokerage firm

<sup>118</sup> In 1913 there were 776,000 ostriches in the Union of South Africa, and over 1 million cubic pounds of feathers valued at just under £3 million were exported. *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>119</sup> In Oudtshoorn, there was little investment in irrigation reform during the feather boom, particularly relative to other regions of the Cape. In 1914, farmers were still relying on relatively primitive irrigation techniques that inhibited rotation to other agricultural products. Buirski, "Aspects of Material Life," 24, 30; B. G. Godlonton, *Oudtshoorn and Its Farms* (Cape Town, 1914).

<sup>120</sup> "Even should trade in the United States recover soon," reported a 1912 issue of the *AJUSA*, "it might be some time before we felt the benefit of it here, as, notwithstanding the huge and steadily increasing population of that country, the manufacturers there have such heavy stocks on hand at the present moment, it would take a considerable time before they would find it necessary to replenish them." "South African Produce Markets," *AJUSA* 3 (June 1912): 146.

<sup>121</sup> CPN INE, "Feather Book [1914]," 25 and 26. Some of these purchases Nurick undertook in partnership with one or more associates.

of Messrs. John Daverin & Co. relayed the bad news: "As head-gear, ostrich feathers are not worn at all in Paris or America, and hardly at all in England or the Continent; and even the extremely low prices at which feathers are being landed in England fail to tempt manufacturers to buy. . . . We cannot advise our clients to look for any improvement in the present state of affairs until some change in the fashions occurs, and no one can say when this is likely to happen."<sup>122</sup> Two months later, Isaac Nurick's business was in liquidation.

In personal correspondence with the author, Nurick's grandchildren have discussed Nurick's handling of the feather crash. More than one mentioned that Nurick was a proud man who could not bear to declare bankruptcy and insisted on honoring all of his debts.<sup>123</sup> By multiple accounts, he even used the estate of his wife Annie/Fanny Nurick (néé Sanders) to pay off his debts, despite the fact that she was suffering from breast cancer and they had eight children to support.<sup>124</sup> In fact, the collapse of Nurick's business was both messier and more unpleasant than his descendants recall. The correspondence of Isaac Nurick's liquidator, Arthur Bentley, reveals in painful detail the financial catastrophe Nurick faced. Much of Bentley's work entailed calling up promissory notes that Nurick had received or announcing the liquidation of I. Nurick & Co. to those in receipt of a promissory note bearing Nurick's name.<sup>125</sup> Exchanges between Bentley and Nurick's creditors, and between Bentley and those indebted to Nurick, indicate that after the value of feathers plummeted, Nurick was caught between the farmers whose future feathers he had promised to buy and the banks that had extended him credit to engage in contract farming. Because of the speculative nature of the trade, few involved in the ostrich feather economy—ostrich farmers, feather buyers, and banks alike—could easily pay or call up their debts.

One thorny legal battle handled by Bentley demonstrates well the conun-

<sup>122</sup> "South African Produce Markets," *AJUSA* 2 (January–June 1914): 118.

<sup>123</sup> Chana Biderman to author, November 17, 2004; Judith Landau to extended Nurick family and author, November 17, 2004.

<sup>124</sup> Judith Landau to extended Nurick family and author, November 17, 2004; Ann Harris (néé Schech) to author and extended Nurick family, November 23, 2004. These memories appear to be confirmed by archival record: on July 26, 1918, after the death of his wife Annie, Nurick oversaw the auction of the families' furniture, including even the oven door, for a total of £174.17. National Archives of South Africa's Cape Town Archive Repository (hereafter cited as NASA CTA), vol. 13/1/144, "Nurick, Annie. Liquidation and Distribution Account," "Copy of vendor roll of sale held at Oudtshoorn on the 26<sup>th</sup> July, 1918 by I. Nurick." Great thanks are owed to Lynn Thomas for obtaining copies of this and other archival documents from NASA.

<sup>125</sup> During the ostrich feather boom, feather buyers had routinely extended promissory notes in lieu of cash. In this, feather buyers were financially and conceptually supported by banks, foremost among them the Standard Bank, which had a branch in Oudtshoorn: J. A. Henry, *The First Hundred Years of the Standard Bank* (London, 1963).

drum unleashed by rampant ostrich feather speculation. The case involves a suit against Nurick on the part of the farming brothers Petrus Erasmus Smit and Daniel P. Smit. The Smits had been approached by Nurick's assistant Abelkop in July of 1913. Acting on behalf of I. Nurick & Co., Abelkop sold the Smits twenty ostriches, promising to buy the first plucking of the birds' feathers for £100. Abelkop further agreed that if the £200 mortgage on the Smits' farm was called up as a result of this transaction, Nurick would advance the Smits the requisite money. Eight months after the Smits bought the birds from Abelkop, they were pressed to pay their mortgage bond. However, the ostriches they had purchased were not yet ready to be plucked, and Nurick refused to advance them money enough to pay their bond. Two months later, Abelkop "did the plucking of [the ostriches] himself in so negligent a manner that in consequence thereof eight of the said birds died from exposure, to the value of seventy two pounds."<sup>126</sup> Abelkop's ineptitude, Nurick insisted, was his own doing, and Nurick himself was not to be held responsible.<sup>127</sup> Thus Nurick now demanded the money promised in return for his birds, while the Smits demanded that their promissory note be extended, that Nurick advance them money to cover their mortgage, and that Nurick also reimburse them the cost of the ostriches' upkeep. Meanwhile, because Nurick's business was in liquidation, the Bank of Africa had possession of the Smits' promissory note to Nurick. When this came due, the bank held Nurick responsible.<sup>128</sup> In response to inquiries about the status of the money owed him by the Smits, the Steynsburg notary public advised Nurick: "I do not think that you could expect to recover anything unless proceedings are instituted, and, even then it is a question what you could recover for debtors' farm is mortgaged very heavily . . . it is possible that both farm and loose assets may not realize sufficient [assets] to pay the bonds." A handwritten note on the side of this letter confided that the Smits were also in debt to another feather dealer, J. M. Joubert.<sup>129</sup>

Nurick's legal struggles with the Smit brothers represent only one of many difficult encounters that Bentley brokered after I. Nurick & Co. entered liquidation.<sup>130</sup> Bentley wrote to countless farmers in a position comparable to

<sup>126</sup> CPN INE, "Letter Book [1914]," "In the Court of the Resident Magistrate for the District of Steynsburg, In the matter between Arthur Bentley N. O. Plaintiff and Petrus Erasmus Smit and Daniel P. Smit, Defendants."

<sup>127</sup> CPN INE, "Letter Book [1914]," "From Joint Liquidator to Frank Rousseau [Notary Public in Steynsburg] Esq. Re: D. P. & E. Smit, 17 October 1914."

<sup>128</sup> CPN INE, "Letter Book [1914]," "Notary Public to Messrs. I. Nurick & Co., 29 July, 1914."

<sup>129</sup> CPN INE, "Letter Book [1914]," "Notary Public to Messrs. I. Nurick & Co., 4 September, 1914."

<sup>130</sup> The records of other legal battles Nurick was engaged in at this time are held by the National Archives of South Africa's Cape Town Archive Repository. See, e.g.,

that of the Smits, demanding they honor promissory notes that Nurick held in his possession. In response, he received requests for renewals and references to hard times. In the early 1920s, Nurick remained without income, reliant on the financial support of his sister, and in “very poor financial circumstances.”<sup>131</sup>

Nurick’s business failings were by no means exceptional. The feather crash, coupled with a devastating drought that lasted from 1914 to 1916, left countless Cape ostrich farmers destitute. In Oudtshoorn, thirty-four farmers and twenty-nine merchants claimed insolvency in 1915, compared to five and seven (respectively) who filed similar claims four years earlier.<sup>132</sup> There were Boer farmers who committed suicide rather than suffer the humiliation of losing their farms, while the fabulous “feather mansions” of Oudtshoorn were auctioned off for little more than the price of their doors and windows.<sup>133</sup> By 1916, the municipality was on the brink of bankruptcy; crime was rampant, especially by youth; infant mortality had risen dramatically; and poverty had become ubiquitous. With the ostrich and building industries obsolete, coloured and Boer workers were unable to find jobs in any industry but that of tobacco, which in turn meant that tobacco factories had no check on their wages and working conditions, both of which were abysmal.<sup>134</sup> New slums were even created in Oudtshoorn to house those dispossessed by the feather crash, many Jews among them.<sup>135</sup>

In the wake of the slump of 1914, for all but a very few Jewish families, the luxury of the ostrich boom was gone forever. There were, it is true, momentary highs in ostrich feather sales and this enticed some to stay in the business. However, while a few Jewish individuals or families—Max Rose, the Barrons, and the Klaas family among them—remained in the business of raising ostriches and/or selling ostrich feathers or parts, the industry would not permanently regain its footing until the end of the twentieth century. By then, a variety of forces had conspired to disperse and otherwise disintegrate Oudt-

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NASA CTA, vol. 2/1/1/757, “Illiquid case. Gideon Hendrik Van Zyl versus Pieter Jacob de Villiers and Isaac Nurick. Claim for the recover of money” and “Illiquid case. Isaak Nurick versus Philiop Cornelis Badenhorst, Action against breach of contract.”

<sup>131</sup> NASA CTA, vol. 13/1/144, “Nurick, Annie. Liquidation and Distribution Account.” Letter by Isaac Nurick to Grand Magistrate of Cape Town, January 10, 1924; letter by Oudtshoorn Magistrate to Cape Town Magistrate, October 13, 1924.

<sup>132</sup> Smit, *Ostrich Farming*, 45. On the Calitzdorp side of the Oudtshoorn District, 1,130 farmers were rendered destitute by 1916. Buirski, “Aspects of Material Life,” 76.

<sup>133</sup> Van Waart, *Paleise van die pluime*, 125, 35.

<sup>134</sup> Buirski, “Aspects of Material Life,” esp. Buirski’s chap. 4, “Urban Poverty 1914–27” and 78–85.

<sup>135</sup> H. Lückhoff, “The Little Karroo” (University of Cape Town, 1946), 254.

shoorn's Jewish community, rendering a renewal of the community's erstwhile glories unthinkable.<sup>136</sup>

A ghostly description of Oudtshoorn's Jewish feather merchants in the wake of the feather crash has been offered by the Yiddish dramatist Peretz Hirshbein, who visited Oudtshoorn during a trip to South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia in the early 1920s. He narrated his trip in a Yiddish-language travelogue serialized in the New York daily *Der tog* and subsequently published in book form. To Hirshbein, Oudtshoorn's Jews appeared lost and dazed in the wake of the feather crash, able to do little more than "wander the streets buying feathers from those who didn't have the strength to part with their beloved birds forever."<sup>137</sup>

Hirshbein's haunting picture is echoed in other sources. In 1940, Leibl Feldman concluded his Yiddish-language study of Oudtshoorn Jewry (*Oudtshoorn: Yerushalayim d'Afrike*) by suggesting that the "'Jerusalem of Africa' has nearly disappeared."<sup>138</sup> In 2004, Isidore Barron, a third-generation Jewish ostrich farmer, offered a more complete eulogy. Punning on the Yiddish appellation once tenderly given to Oudtshoorn, "Little Jerusalem," the ostrich magnate commented to me that "*alts vos is gebliben is di kleynkeit*": today, all that is left is the "littleness."<sup>139</sup>

Part of the tragedy of the ostrich feather bust, viewed from the perspective of Jewish history, occurred in the wake of the industry's collapse. In the years after the bottom fell out of the feather market, Jews were further disenfranchised from the industry—or, at least, from what future prospects it had—by increasingly nationalist-minded Boer farmers who blamed "middlemen" for the industry's implosion. Such expressions of discontent were voiced even as the crash of 1914 was unfolding. In the early months of 1914, the *Oudtshoorn Courant* published numerous articles by ostrich farmers that blamed feather buyers for starting the feather slump and accused them of benefiting from it at farmers' expense. Middlemen with contacts abroad, speculators, buyers, foreigners—all thinly veiled code words for Jews—were described in the paper as nefarious parties that should be barred from the industry in the future.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>136</sup> The dispersion and disintegration of Oudtshoorn's Jewish community in the second half of the twentieth century is ably described by Coetzee, "Immigrants to Citizens."

<sup>137</sup> Peretz Hirschbein, *Felker un lender: Rayze-ayndrukn fun Nayzayland, Avstralie, Dorem-Afrike, 1920–1922*, vol. 2, *Ale verk* (Vilne, 1929), 196.

<sup>138</sup> Feldman, *Oudtshoorn*, 127.

<sup>139</sup> Isidore Barron to author, March 24, 2004.

<sup>140</sup> For example, "The Slump in Ostrich Feathers," *Oudtshoorn Courant*, March 17, 1914; "The Ostrich Feather Trade," *Oudtshoorn Courant*, April 14, 1914. The mood and public discourse of this period is analyzed in Coetzee, "Immigrants to Citizens," 55–58.



It would take two decades for these hostile sentiments to translate into a transformation in the ethnic constitution of the feather industry. During this period, the racist and xenophobic Nationalist Party gained popularity in Oudtshoorn District and in South Africa more generally, based, in part, on its support for Afrikaner control over industry.<sup>141</sup> A central tenet of the Afrikaner nationalism of this period was support for the cooperative movement. Born of socialist and *volkish* nationalist sentiment and influenced by the antisemitic and xenophobic Greysheet movement, the cooperative movement fostered an exclusively Afrikaner dominance of agriculture. As it gained popularity and political power, the cooperative movement succeeded in squeezing most remaining Jews out of the ostrich industry. Today, the few Jews who remain in the business remember the cooperative movement with evident disdain.<sup>142</sup>

#### ETHNICITY, TRADE, AND CONSUMPTION

In his provocative book *The Jewish Century*, Yuri Slezkine has offered one of the first theoretical analyses of Jews' relationship to trade in the modern period. Slezkine argues that because of their geographic mobility, facility with commerce, linguistic dexterity, and inherent otherness, Jews have always been "model moderns": in substance no different from other groups who occupied similar commercial roles—among them the Roma in Europe, the Lebanese in Africa, and certain Indian castes—but particularly adept at excelling in this regard.

My own research offers a rather different view of Jews' relationship to transnational commerce. Though Jewish merchants undoubtedly shared certain qualities with non-Jewish merchants, I would argue that their differences cannot be erased. Lebanese, Greek, and Chinese merchants were, like Jews, among the most visible small-scale merchants in southern, western, and central Africa, but these other groups did not enter the ostrich feather trade.<sup>143</sup> On the other

<sup>141</sup> *Report of the Ostrich Feather Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Ostrich Industry, Including Two Minority Reports: Presented to Both Houses of Parliament by Command of His Excellency the Governor-General* (Cape Town, 1918); Board of Trade and Industries, "Report No. 55."

<sup>142</sup> Such disdain surfaced in conversation with Isidore and Carol Barron (March 26, 2004) and in oral histories with Isidore Barron and Markus Monty conducted by Daniel Coetzee in 1999.

<sup>143</sup> S. A. Albasu, *The Lebanese in Kano: An Immigrant Community in a Hausa Society in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods* (Kano, 1995); Floyd Dotson and Lillian O. Dotson, "The Economic Role of Non-Indigenous Ethnic Minorities in Colonial Africa," in *Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960*, ed. Peter Duignan and L. H. Gann (Stanford, CA, 1988); Toyin Falola, "The Lebanese in Colonial West Africa," in *People and Empires in African History: Essays in Memory of Michael Crowder*, ed. J. F. Ade Ajayi, J. D. Y. Peel, and Michael Crowder (London, 1992); Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban, 1910–1990* (Portsmouth, NH, 1995);



hand, Sephardi Jews, who were well represented as shop owners and traders in southern and central Africa, and, perhaps more importantly, were crucial middlemen in North Africa's ostrich feather industry, entered the trade of ostrich feathers in South Africa in very small numbers.<sup>144</sup> These Jewish and non-Jewish merchants did not penetrate the feather trade because they lacked dimensions of human capital that Lithuanian Jewish émigrés possessed—skills that rendered this population well suited to trade in general and to trans-Atlantic feather trading in particular. Lithuanian Jewish feather merchants who came to dominate feather buying and selling in the western Cape were, as we have seen, in command of practical skills acquired in Eastern Europe, where Jews had long been tied to agricultural economics and processing industries. What is more, because they were part of a mass migratory movement, these Jewish émigrés possessed familial and commercial contacts across the Atlantic, in the metropolises of Europe and the United States where the vast majority of feather consumers resided. Timing was also a factor that facilitated these Jews' entry into the feather trade. The mass migration of Jews from Eastern Europe to the Cape coincided with the surging popularity of feather wearing. This trend availed unemployed Lithuanian Jewish immigrants in South Africa an expanding industry in which a few pioneering predecessors already had a foothold. In sum, certain concrete and historically contingent factors differentiated Lithuanian Jewish merchants from their non-Jewish and other Jewish mercantile peers, allowing this community and no other to "fall into feathers."

In analyzing Jews' relationship to modern mercantile culture and commerce, I would suggest that it is historically unsound to conflate Jews' involvement in different commodity chains. Given the intricacy of the story of Jewish feather traders, we would expect an equally complex historical foundation to

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Albert Habib Hourani, *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration* (London, 1992); Dana April Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers: The World of East African Asians, 1750–1985* (New Delhi, 1996); Maynard W. Swanson, "The Asiatic Menace: Creating Segregation in Durban, 1870–1900," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 16, no. 3 (1983): 401–21; R. Bayley Winder, "The Lebanese in West Africa," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 4, no. 3 (1962): 296–333.

<sup>144</sup> I explore the history of Sephardi and Mediterranean Jews' involvement in the feather trade in Stein, "Mediterranean Jews," and *The Pursuit of Plumes*. On Sephardi traders in southern Africa: Gaby E. Benatar, "El kal Sefaradi de Lubumbashi (En El Zaire)," *Los Muestrros*, no. 22 (1996); Jacqueline Benatar and Myriam Pimienta-Benatar, *De Rhodes à Elisabethville: L'odyssée d'une communauté Sépharade* (Paris, 2000); Roger Breun, "Rhodes, It's a Long Way," *Los Muestrros*, no. 32 (1998); Elisa Franco-Hasson, *Il était une fois, l'île des roses* (Brussels, 1995); Yitzchak Kerem, "The Migration of Rhodian Jews to Africa and the Americas from 1900–1914," *Los Muestrros*, no. 47 (2002); Sergio Itzhak Minerbi, *From Rhodes to Africa: The Jews Who Built the Congo, Mr. Elie Eliachar Annual Memorial Lecture* (Jerusalem, 1989); Moïse Rahmani, *Shalom Bwana: La Saga des Juifs du Congo* (Paris, 2002).

undergird Jews' (or any other ethnic mercantile group's) participation in other commodity chains that operated in and through modern colonial contexts. Jews were influential traders of oil, rubber, diamonds, sugar, tea, and coral, for example, but the story of each of these commodity networks, like the story of the global feather trade, was inflected by (among other factors) race and class relations particular to the regions in which the commodity was extracted and/or refined, by the relative stability or volatility of the commodity in question, and by the particular history of the merchants involved. Following Leora Auslander's recent lead, historicizing Jews' involvement in any of these commodity chains would require the scrutiny of relationships "between people and things in the abstract, and . . . under particular forms of economy and polity."<sup>145</sup>

What is required is to historicize Jews' involvement in the expansion of transnational capitalism in the modern period without viewing Jews as primarily destined to fulfill this role (i.e., without falling prey to antisemitic stereotypes) and without erasing what is unique about their involvement in commodity cultures. This, in turn, requires paying more attention to ethnicity than have most scholars of commodity chains, and more attention to transnational commerce than have most scholars of Jewish studies. We need, in other words, to think about commodity cultures, ethnic cultures, and subethnic cultures as being shaped over time and in dialogue with one another, at once rooted in local contexts and enmeshed in a transnational socioeconomic web.<sup>146</sup>

This article has already made two additional central points. Despite silence on the topic by historians of modern Jewry, Jews facilitated the creation of capitalist networks in the colonies that served consumers in Europe's and America's metropolises. Jewish feather traders were not passive vectors "through whom European capital was invested," as Hannah Arendt had it, but were intricately situated in the economic relations of colonial southern Africa and imperial Europe. Second, while Jewish ostrich feather merchants in the

<sup>145</sup> Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," *American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (2005): 1015–45.

<sup>146</sup> Works of scholarship that fuse interests in cultures of consumption and ethnicity that have informed this study include: Andrew Zimmerman, "A German Alabama in Africa: The Tuskegee Expedition to German Togo and the Transnational Origins of West African Cotton Growers," *American Historical Review* 110, no. 5 (2005); Burke, *Lifebuy Men*; Natasha Eaton, "Excess in the City? The Consumption of Imported Prints in Colonial Calcutta, c. 1780–1795," *Journal of Material Culture* 8, no. 1 (2003): 45–74; Michelle Maskiell, "Consuming Kashmir: Shawls and Empires, 1500–2000," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 1 (2002): 27–65; Priti Ramamurthy, "Why Is Buying a 'Madras' Cotton Shirt a Political Act? A Feminist Commodity Chain Analysis," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 1 (2004); Parna Sengupta, "An Object Lesson in Colonial Pedagogy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 1 (2003): 96–121; Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985).

Cape helped shape export-oriented markets that were sponsored by the imperial government and that disadvantaged Boer and coloured populations, they ought not be uncritically subsumed into the categories of white, European, export-oriented capitalists, as labor histories of the region have tended to do. These terms need to be disaggregated in much the same way as have other ethnic categories employed by scholars of southern Africa.

Reconstructing Jews' involvement in specific commodity chains may serve to fundamentally alter our sense of the role Jews played in the expansion of European colonialism and global capitalism and highlight the importance of ethnicity in the configuration of modern commerce. These insights suggest fascinating meeting points for scholars of material culture, colonialism, and modern African, European, and Jewish history. What better landmark to navigate this complex and transnational terrain than the feather of a bird that cannot fly.