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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

THE LAST GALICIAN SWITCHBOARD

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

DIGITAL ARTS AND NEW MEDIA

by

James Forest Reid

June 2022

The Thesis of James Forest Reid is approved:

Professor Mark Nash, chair

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2022

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ABSTRACT

The Last Galician Switchboard

By James Forest Reid

The Last Galician Switchboard is an interactive multi-screen video installation that follows a switchboard operator haunted by family left behind in Eastern Europe. The piece incorporates familial letters and excerpts from Yiddish theatre, literature, and folklore to offer an interactive glimpse into life during wartime, Jewish experience, and forced relocation. Upon entering the installation room, participants can interact with an analogue switchboard to listen to audio recreations of historical communications between Jewish refugees during the first World War, voice-acted excerpts from Yiddish folklore, and remastered ethnographic recordings. Simultaneously, participants can watch a collage of thematically related archival stock footage projected on three different screens. This thesis project merges fictional and documentary sources in order to create an accessible understanding of a complex culture haunted by stories of resistance, perseverance, and survival.

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to Milton and Alan Reider.
When the two of you passed away on the same night, my friend told me it was
because my Uncle needed a buddy on the other side.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge that many friends and colleagues helped me to produce *The Last Galician Switchboard*. Firstly, I would like to thank my collaborator Patrick Stefaniak for being the lead programmer on *The Last Galician Switchboard* and for talking me through the many technical crises that emerged while creating this installation. Thank you to Laura Boutros, Dave Crellin, Carl Erez, Taylor Womack, Rey Cordova, Rose Klein, Patrick Stephenson, Rory Willats, and Shelly Reider, whose voices gave life to this project. Thank you to Nathaniel Deutsch for writing an incredible catalogue text for this project and for pointing me to many valuable research sources. I am also thankful for Colleen Jennings and Rory Willats whose technical support allowed this project to premiere on time. Moreover, I would like to thank my mishpokhe, especially Marcia Indianer, whose family genealogy and newsletter formed the foundation and inspiration for this project, and Simon Indianer whose beautiful and heart-wrenching letters were the backbone of the script.

I would like to thank the faculty at UCSC, especially my thesis committee Professor Mark Nash, Professor Marianne Weems, Professor Isaac Julien, and Professor Rick Prelinger; I am appreciative of the support and insights you have offered me. A special thanks to Mark and Isaac for allowing me to use the Isaac Julien lab space to host this project. I would also like to thank Bennett Williamson for advising me throughout my two years at DANM.

I am thankful to have met such a talented and kind group of peers at DANM. I would especially like to thank Mohamadreza Babee, whose friendship and support are

directly responsible for this paper being completed, Nicki Duval for playtesting early iterations of the project, and Michael Becker for always creating opportunities for artists to show work. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, my partner Alex, and my pet rat Matzah!

Introduction

The Last Galician Switchboard is an interactive multi-screen video installation that follows a switchboard operator haunted by family left behind in Eastern Europe. The piece incorporates familial letters and excerpts from Yiddish theatre, literature, and folklore to offer an interactive glimpse into life during wartime, Jewish experience, and forced relocation. Upon entering the installation room, participants can interact with an analogue switchboard to listen to audio recreations of historical communications between Jewish refugees during the first World War, voice-acted excerpts from Yiddish folklore, and remastered ethnographic recordings. Simultaneously, participants can watch a collage of thematically related archival stock footage projected on three different screens. This thesis project merges fictional and documentary sources in order to create an accessible understanding of a complex culture haunted by stories of resistance, perseverance, and survival.

In this thesis paper, I contextualize the source materials embedded in *The Last Galician Switchboard* and offer a description of the creative process behind making this project. I begin with a discussion of the historical, fictional, and folkloric sources before moving on to a review of some pertinent literature on Jewish ethnographic work and contemporary discourses on haunting. Lastly, I elaborate on how the project was conceptualized and produced over the course of my two-year education in the Digital Arts and New Media program at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Source Context and Significance

In this section, I discuss the source materials embedded within *The Last Galician Switchboard*. These source materials, ranging from fiction to folklore to historical documents, are essential to this project, as not only are they directly incorporated into the script, but they thematically the work itself. The texts are taken from familial letters, Yiddish folklore, Tanakh, and travelogue diaries from Galicia during wartime. I knew from the start I wanted the piece to interweave historical documents with folklore. I intended the setting of a switchboard station to act as a frame to contain fragments of other stories within it.

The practice of compiling stories within stories is common in Jewish folklore and literature. This formatting of nested stories guided my process of integrating a myriad of different sources. In the introduction of the folklore collection “Stories within Stores,” Penninah Schram details the prevalence of nested stories within the Jewish oral and folk traditions. “As we look around the world,” Schram writes, “we can see that the design or structure of this type of story-inside-a-story is everywhere in nature, in personal relationships, in conversations, in sermons and other speeches, and in many of the fairy/folk tales that are in the Jewish oral tradition, as well as in universal folk tradition.” Schram continues, “These stories-within-stories, by offering us recursive stories, hold up a mirror us so we can examine their meanings and by extension, also interpret outlives refracted through that mirror endlessly bouncing off other mirrors” (Schram 2).

In Jewish mysticism, texts made up of multiple sources and multi-level analysis are ubiquitous phenomena. For instance, The Zohar, the main text of the Kabbalah, is described by Gershom G. Scholem as “not one book under the accepted sense of the term, but a complete body of literature which has been united under an inclusive title” (Scholem 213). Shir-ha-Shirim (the Song of Songs) is another example of a key text to Jewish mysticism, an important scripture that “in its earliest stages [...] was probably not a unified work at all but a number of individual lyric poems sharing contexts, themes, and motifs” (Falk xiv).

The forms of literary analysis that are used to understand The Zohar and Shir-ha-Shirim also adhere to a similar layered structure. For example, the P-R-D-S (*pardes*) system of literary analysis that comes from the Jewish mystical tradition offers a multi-threaded way of understanding stories. The four parts of the *pardes* system include “*pshat*, the literal level; *remez*, the allegorical level; *crash*, the agaric level; and *sod*, the mystical level” (Schram 22). The structure of the Sefirot, which comes from Jewish mysticism, also offers a method for understanding multiple simultaneous levels of a text. Some of the aspects of the Sefirot that can be used include, Understanding, Wisdom, Power, Love, Splendor, Endurance, and Foundation. When discussing these interlocking aspects of the Sefirot, Green says, “The Kabbalist inhabits a cosmos of interlocking and interpenetrating realms. The physical structures of the ‘lower world’ reflect the dynamics of ‘higher’ spiritual worlds and embody their energies. ‘Above’ and ‘below’ exist in an analogical relationship to each other” (Green 109). Through the rungs of the Sefirot, we can

understand various separate aspects of a source as well as those aspects' relations to each other. These forms of analysis were crucial for finding the thematic through-lines in the various sources I was placing next to each other.

One of the sources I used was Shir-ha-Shirim, which comes from the Tanakh (The Hebrew Bible). Two lovers call to each other in this text which is coveted by Jewish mystics. Shir-ha-Shirim has been interpreted as God calling to the Jewish people, as Tiferet and Shekhinah, divine aspects of God seeking to be united, and simply as a collection of erotic poetry. It is speculated that commentary on Shir-ha-Shirim led to the development of the concept of "Shekhinah," the feminine aspect of God and one of the ten rungs of the Sefirot (Green 94). In his commentary on the Zohar, Green states, "Shekhinah acts as an intermediary between 'upper and lower worlds'" (Green 94). Like a switchboard operator, Shekhinah patches "prayers to God above" (Green 96), facilitating an intimate relationship between God and one who is praying. Shir-ha-Shirim is thematically relevant to my work as it depicts conversation and the intermediation of the female voice. This scripture is also important to my project because of its symbolic significance to many works of Yiddish literature and theatre, including *The Dybbuk* by S. Ansky.

Another source that I drew from was the English translation of Khurbn Galitsisye (The Enemy at his Pleasure), the diaries of playwright and socialist revolutionary S. Ansky during his time delivering aid to the Jewish populations of a war-torn Eastern Europe. In one of the passages I incorporated into my project, Ansky describes a surreal scene in which he witnesses glowing Hebrew letters in the

middle of the night. “The rings of fire grew closer and more intense. I saw a large fire nearby, and I headed over. The mounds of sleepers and other wood were blazing around the depot. It was a clear night with a full moon shining in the starry sky. I turned back and saw something fantastic, stone slabs, red, burning with Hebrew letters glowing.” What at first seems to be a magical moment out of Yiddish fiction reveals itself to be a terrifying scene of destruction coming out of a war-torn landscape. This leads Ansky to poetically reflect on past generations of Jews witnessing this approaching destruction not only of their physical homes but of the culture, customs, and lifestyles of the shtetl. “At first I couldn’t understand what I was seeing, But then I realized: this was a Jewish cemetery. The glowing gravestones were reflecting the flames. It was an extraordinary spectacle as if generations - centuries- of Jews had returned from the past to the mystical moonlit night, to gaze with firey eyes at the horrors closing in on their shtetl” (Ansky). In a way, Ansky is predicting the radical shift in Jewish culture that will come in the wake of this mass destruction and displacement. These passages are useful in both understanding Ansky’s drive to comprehensively document and preserve Jewish customs and culture that he witnesses being destroyed before his own eyes, as well as for providing context for the landscape which my family’s letters came from.

Ansky’s commentary on the burning graveyard also reveals the way in which haunting is a lens through which Ansky comprehends the violence around him. A story of spiritual possession that I incorporated into my project came from a mid-seventeenth-century Yiddish folktale, “The Tale of the Evil Spirit in Korets During

the Turmoil of War (Prague, 1655). One of the earliest documented instances of possession by a dybbuk, the story offers us an early look at the symbolic meaning of spiritual possession in the Jewish community. The translator of this text Joachim Neugroschel offers a few interpretations of the text in regards to violence and gender,” Could the possession then have been an internalization of the massacres, whereby the exorcism drove the murderers (evil spirits) from the Jewish body? The girl is punished through no fault of her own, while in some other possessions, the victim is being punished for an (often sexual) sin. Does the vulnerability of the girl’s situation symbolize the helplessness of the Jews against their killers?” (Neugroschel 61). Neugroschel makes a claim for spiritual possession as internalization and interpretation of violence, an argument similar to Ansky’s vision of transmigrating souls and their return to their burning graves.

It was important to incorporate “The Tale of the Evil Spirit in Korets During the Turmoil of War” into *The Last Galician Switchboard* because it offers an early folkloric example of a story within a story. It also is thematically relevant because it centers on a woman who acts as a communication intermediary between a Rabbi and the dybbuk. In the essay “Love and Death in a Contemporary Dybbuk Story: Personal Narrative and the Female Voice,” Tamar Alexander breaks down the structure of a Dybbuk tale, a genre which “The Tale of the Evil Spirit in Korets During the Turmoil of War” is a forerunner of. “The main event in these narratives,” writes Alexander, “is the spirits story. This actually functions as a story within a story, and it too has a fixed structure ” (Alexander 69). Alexander continues by expounding on the gendered

component of spiritual possession, positing “The victim performs a double function, both passive and active: she becomes the vessel for the spirit, the conduit for the spirits narration; but she is at the same time an instigating force who manifests her personality through those powers” (Alexander 72). The usage of a female voice as seen in “The Tale of the Evil Spirit in Korets During the Turmoil of War” is akin to that of a switchboard operator, a focal point of this thesis project.

Although these fictional sources were influential to the conception of this project, the initial inspiration for *The Last Galician Switchboard* came from a set of familial letters from Eastern Europe from 1915 to 1920. The letters depict my relatives’ personal anguish, and pleas for help as the continent is ravaged by war, famine, and disease. While the war raged on across Europe, my family, like many other Jewish families, endured the burden of violence and forced relocation. Many of the sources I have described so far represent works important to Jewish culture in Eastern Europe; however, these familial letters give insight into the lived experience of the people who carried that culture. While I am unable to respond to these letters, I hope that their incorporation into my project acts as a form of contextualization, remembrance, and preservation.

The first letters (circa 1914) start with usual greetings and light asks for money, but over the course of the next five years increase drastically in desperation. These letters are the thematic backbone of my thesis project because they depict a disconnect in communication between generations of a family. “We hope you do not forget us here in Galicia,” my great-great-grandfather Simon Indianer wrote in 1918

to his children in America after years of never receiving a response. It is ambiguous as to whether my family in America had not responded to these letters or if their letters had just never reached my great-great-grandfather Simon Indianer. Soon the letters take a more desperate tone as Simon illustrates a scene of disposition and suffering: “Dearest children! Do not give up so long as you still have a sign of life from us do everything possible to sustain us because we are, pitifully, in helpless circumstances— no house, furniture or household utensils such is a catastrophe I never imagined.” I incorporate these lines into the project not to solicit my audience’s pity. Instead, I use them to ask the project’s participants to bear witness to a history of ethnic persecution, a documentary glimpse into life during wartime, a phenomenon that has persisted in Eastern Europe and the rest of the contemporary world.

All in all, my usage of cultural texts and religious scriptures, in addition to my personal archive of familial letters, serves to form a thematic fabric for *The Last Galician Switchboard* as an interactive project that seeks to provide a second life to forgotten histories. This thesis merges fictional and documentary sources in order to create an accessible understanding of a complex culture fraught with stories of resistance, perseverance, and survival.

Literature Review

In this section, I discuss scholarly discourses pertinent to *The Last Galician Switchboard*. I begin with how my project connects to S. Asnky’s ethnographic work and to his vision of cultural revival or “oyflebn”. I then go on to compare concepts of haunting presented in The Super Futures Haunt Collective’s essay “Before

Dispossession, or Surviving It” and “The Hauntology of the Digital Image” by Charlie Gere and explore how these concepts of haunting manifest within Yiddish media as well as how they appear as a response to absencing in *The Last Galician Switchboard*. The collective of these academic discussions was influential to the conception and development of my project.

In *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement*, Jewish studies scholar Nathaniel Deutsch translates Ansky’s two-thousand-question ethnographic leaflet and discusses Ansky’s motivations and methods for ethnographic material collection and preservation. When Ansky traveled into the Pale of Settlement, his intent was to preserve and elevate the culture, folklore, and minhagim (customs) of the Jewish population. Ansky’s populist vision of Jewish culture is an inspiration to me because it emphasizes the importance of the people’s traditions as a form of Oral Torah and gives a model for artistically celebrating and preserving them.

At many points throughout the history of Judaism, there has been a fear that the accumulation of oral knowledge due to existential threats will be lost, and so an effort is made to preserve it by compiling and writing it down. S. Ansky had a vision of Jewish cultural preservation and ethnography that went beyond just collecting and transcribing; he saw the artistic repurposing of collected materials as an essential part of the preservation. Nathaniel Deutsch posits that “In general, Ansky was far from endorsing a naive return to tradition. Instead, he intended the Yiddish verb *oyfleben* (to revive) to be understood in a different sense, one closer to Barbara Kirshenblat-

Gimblett's theory of 'heritage,' in which traditions are given a 'second life' through their exhibition or performance. Rather than a re-creation of the past, therefore, the revival that Ansky hoped to inspire would treat Jewish folk traditions as the raw material for new forms of Jewish cultural production — that is, a kind of renaissance.... to become the wellspring or Jewish creative artists of the future” (Deutsch and Ansky 36). *The Last Galician Switchboard* seeks to fulfill Ansky's vision by repurposing materials from the oral and written Jewish tradition, among them ethnographic recordings captured by Ansky. In *The Last Galician Switchboard*, materials spanning thousands of years in origin are recast into new contexts and put into dialogue with each other.

Beyond historical and cultural discourses around Jewish traditions, I pay equal attention to contemporary scholarship on digital arts and the ways in which my project borrows from these sources. Particularly, I am interested in the concept of “hauntology” and how haunting is manifested in digital and analog technologies. A main argument of this thesis paper attends to how technology, particularly communication technology, is haunted; it is haunted by the technology which preceded it, by the communication which occurred within it, and by the laborers whose accumulated knowledge from operating it becomes imbued into it.

In the essay “The Hauntology of the Digital Image” by Charlie Gere, he states, “technicity is hauntology, in that technical artifacts haunt their users with the possibility and actuality of absence, of both their creators and of other users. This is also true of language itself, which is always inherited” (Gere 205). Throughout this

essay, Gere explores embedded information within language and early digital art. This information, which is encoded in words, letters, bits, and “glyphs,” offers us another form of haunting. Stored within the ways in which we communicate with each other are remnants of dead languages, past conversations, and the underlying operations of the communication medium. In discussing the history of cybernetics and telecommunications, Gere argues that these technologies “invade” our lives in the way ghosts do (Gere 224). Whether we are invaded by disembodied voices from phone calls or by the hidden data that lurks beneath our text messages and emails, we are constantly surrounded by invisible information which has died and been reborn into a component of our communication.

Like the invisible data that haunts our current telecommunications, the often overlooked and overworked switchboard operators of the 20th century played an essential role in connecting people, and yet their own ability to communicate was often limited due to their alienated relationship with the callers whose conversations they facilitated. When Stud Terkel’s interviewed telephone operator Sharon Griggins as part of a collection of interviews for his book *Working*, they discussed the contradiction that the job requires a lot of speaking, but little genuine human communication occurs. Griggins says, “you get to feel just like a machine” and only have “seven or eight phrases that you use.” The job sees the very act of speaking commodified; one becomes alienated from the isolated sound of their voice.

A work of fiction that envisions a contrasting view from Griggins interview is the 1937 film *Telephone Operator*. The film’s director Scott Pembroke imagines a

scenario in which a switchboard operator is thrown out of this repetitive loop, and their overlooked occupation becomes the linchpin of a community in need. When a flood occurs, a switchboard operator played by Judith Allen uses the switchboard to provide disaster relief information and updates, as the switchboard becomes the sole means of communicating throughout the town. It pulls the occupation out from being what Slavoj Žižek would call “unknown knowns” of our society (Cubitt 277); from invisible labor necessary for the operation of the society to a heroic role where the worker’s interaction goes beyond the “eight phrases” Griggins speaks of. Similar to *Telephone Operator*, *The Last Galician Switchboard* stages a disaster scenario which is the catalyst for a switchboard operator to regain a sort of autonomy over their voice and have the opportunity to communicate honestly.

The Last Galician Switchboard uses switchboards to patch the dead into the living to answer unanswered letters of desperation and to connect the present with the past that haunts it. Haunting is a theme that permeates many popular pieces of Jewish media, from the classic case of spiritual possession seen in Ansky’s *The Dybbuk* to Tevye’s nightmare sequence in *Fiddler on the Roof*, where his ancestors communicate with him from beyond the grave. Though prevalent, haunting is not a uniquely Jewish phenomenon. In the essay “Before Dispossession, or Surviving It,” the Super Futures Haunt Collective presents haunting as a response by dispossessed people. They define dispossession not only as the act of being forced from one’s lands but “how human lives and bodies matter and don’t matter—through settler colonialism, chattel slavery, apartheid, making (bodies) extra legal, immoral, (and)

alienated” (Morrill et al. 5). Drawing theory from Black and Indigenous communities in the Americas, the Haunt Collective also argues that dispossession is not something that simply happens at one point in time. Meditating upon Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou’s statement that “we can only be dispossessed because we are already dispossessed” (qtd in Morrill et al. 5), the authors contemplate the linearity of dispossession, challenging a chronological viewing and what it means to already be dispossessed before dispossession. If one is dispossessed, how can one retaliate against that dispossession? Super Futures Haunt Collective argues that “The opposite of dispossession is not possession. It is not accumulation. It is unforgetting. It is mattering.” (Morrill et al. 2). *The Last Galician Switchboard* heavily draws from this concept of “unforgetting” as it attempts to materialize my family’s history of dispossession by repurposing their letters of desperation and giving a voice to them.

Like the Super Futures Haunt Collective, the acclaimed Yiddish author Issac Bashevis Singer draws connections between haunting and cultural erasure when discussing the possible total disappearance of the Yiddish language in a 1965 article for *The Forverts*. He writes, “a Yiddish writer is dead. He moves around like one of my phantoms, a corpse who either ignores his own death or is not yet aware of it” (Singer). In this essay, Singer often refers to himself as a ghost and one who writes ghost stories. Aware that he writes in a language that, in 1965, is seen as dying, Singer argues that all languages are constantly dying and being reborn, and it is the job of the writer to extend the life of the language (Singer). Writing in Yiddish is, therefore, both the act of a ghost and an act of “unforgetting.” It is a ghostly act

because it involves interfacing with a language whose decline was the result of genocide, assimilation, and the politics involved with inventing a nation-state. Yet, for the same reasons, it is an act of “unforgetting” because imbued within it are the voicings of those struggles and all which came before.

While concepts of “unforgetting” and cultural revival can be drawn to Ansky’s ethnographic work, they also emerge in his fictional writings. The phenomenon of haunting as a form of mattering/”unforgetting” is particularly apparent in Ansky’s short story בריוו פון יענער וועלט (“Letters from the Beyond”) in which a dead man’s grievances are voiced from the afterlife. The story is told through a series of letters, all addressed from Motke Khabad (RIP), and in the letters, Motke sarcastically compares his suffering in life to his current existence in Hell. He sees life through the lens of hellish suffering and compares life in hell to the mundane details of life on Earth. He jokes that he at least doesn’t have to pay rent on his coffin and that no one in Hell asks for passes, birth certificates, or residence permits. *Letters from the Beyond* is an example of haunting relevant to *The Last Galician Switchboard* because the haunting in the story manifests itself through a contemporary form of communication.

The Last Galician Switchboard is a new media work that addresses the haunting of the dispossessed and the haunting embedded within communication technologies. The work continues the lineage of the authors, playwrights, and poets of a once vibrant “Yiddishland” whose work explored symbols from Jewish mysticism, assimilation, and ancestral haunting. The work engages with the themes of haunting

by returning and repurposing important cultural texts from the past, repurposing past technology and referencing the laborers who operated them, and by materializing the buried and unanswered pleas of my family.

The Creative Process

The first iteration of *The Last Galician Switchboard* was created in the Fall of 2020. Around that time, my parents moved out of the bay area, and in the process of helping with their move, I came across “The Indianer Mishpokhe,” a collection of newsletters from my mom’s family in the 1990s. The collection details contemporary familial events such as births and deaths while also including reflections on memories from the past, genealogical research, and translations of familial letters from “the old country.”

Later on, while waiting out the CZU fire at my partner’s relative’s house, I finally took the time to read through the Indianer Mishpokhe newsletters. Previous knowledge that I had about my family in the form of fragments and off-hand comments slowly came together as I worked through the newsletters. The newsletters contained scans and translations of familial letters from the beginning of the twentieth century. Within these letters were repeated messages begging not only for funds but for a mere response to know the receiving party was alive. While reading through the letters, I imagined what it must have been like to be haunted by these letters long after they were sent and what it meant for my family members to hold onto them. It led me to envision a project that played out like an episode of the *Twilight Zone* (FIG. 1, in the vein of “Long Distance Call” or “Night Call”); I imagined a switchboard operator

haunted by confusing calls containing foreboding messages, as the episode progressed it would become clear the operator was being haunted by family left behind and that that the messages came from letters she never responded to.



FIG. 1: Title card to the episode of the *Twilight Zone*, “Night Call” (1964)

Based on this concept, I created the first iteration of *The Last Galician Switchboard* for Assistant Professor Elizabeth Swensen’s DANM 250E course. I took fragments of my family’s letters and placed them into a hypertext switchboard matrix (FIG. 2) using the interactive fiction software Twine. Many of the elements from this draft remained in the final product. This version was an interactive but purely text-based story that played out like a “choose your own adventure” novel. After a brief introduction that set the scene, the user was given the opportunity to patch into any of the nine phone lines. These phone lines contained short dialogues I had written and excerpts from my family’s letters. The narrative framing was the same in this draft as in the final project; the switchboard operator patches into local lines and warns that a

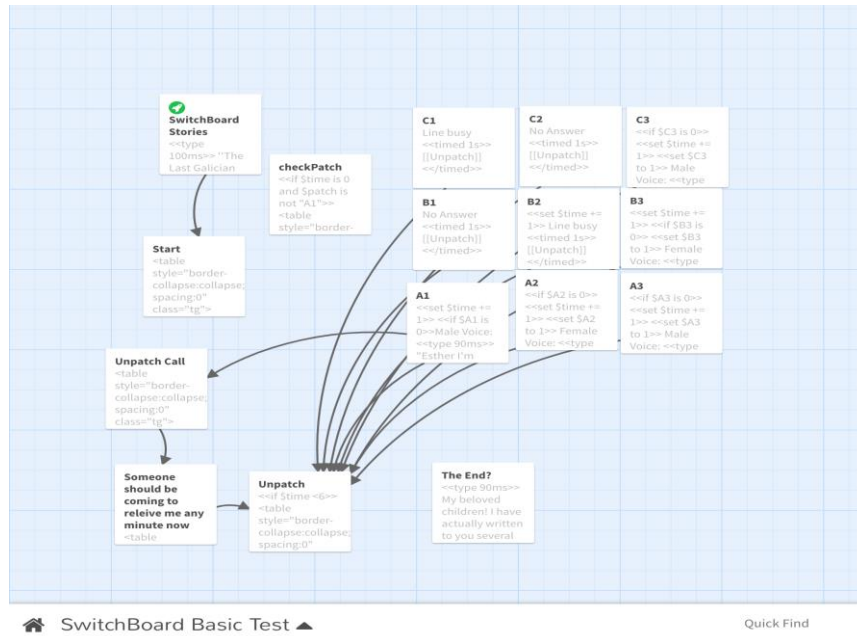


FIG. 2: The hypertext matrix I created in Twine

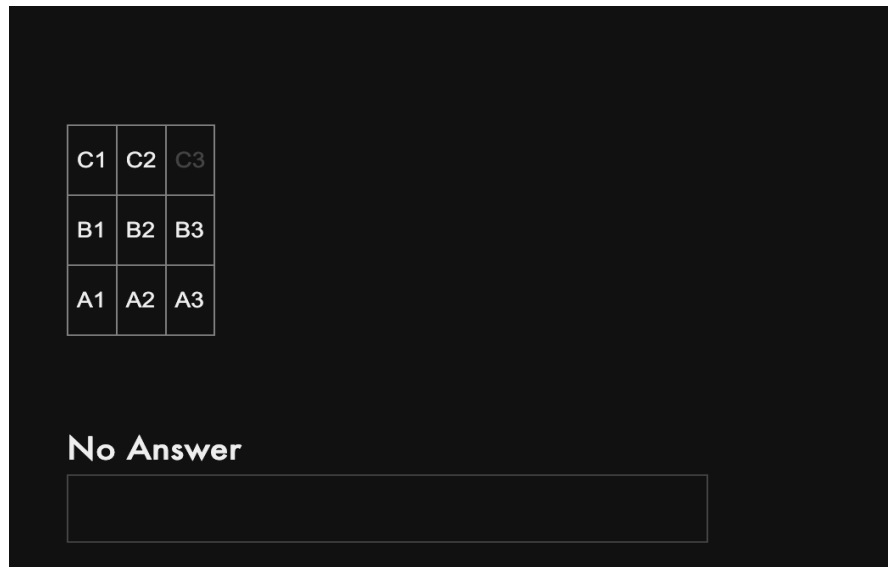


FIG. 3: A text-based switchboard that served as the interface of my Twine demo
 fire is incoming, and that person on the receiving end needs to evacuate and, in response, gets fragments of the familial letters.

Surprisingly what took the most time in this draft was creating a text-based visual switchboard (FIG. 3) with flashing animations to indicate when a call could be patched into. Alphanumeric combinations flashed in a grid, and users were able to type them into a textbox to “answer” the incoming calls. My biggest takeaway from this draft was that without additional context being provided, the narrative and themes were difficult to understand. Moreover, the act of repurposing these familial letters of anguish left me feeling deeply uncomfortable; I felt that I needed to learn more about the historical and cultural context of the familial letters if I were to do anything meaningful or respectful with them.

Once I had determined the topic of my thesis research, the first step I took was to enroll in Professor Jonathan Levitow’s undergraduate Yiddish language course. I had already had an interest in Yiddish literature and had made some artistic adaptations of Yiddish poetry; however, my research was hampered by my lack of knowing the language. Although I read as many translations of Yiddish works as I could get my hands on, it felt as if there was a whole cultural heritage locked away by this language barrier. Even though it has been a difficult and time-consuming endeavor, learning Yiddish has opened up a portal to over a millennium of Jewish history and culture.

The other simultaneous research path I took involved Jewish mysticism. When I was reading classic Yiddish works such as *Di Mishpokhe Mashber* or *Der Dybbuk*, I could sense that I lacked the context to fully understand the materials. Reading contemporary analyses of these works, such as *Dybbuk, Subtext, and*

Context, helped me understand the importance of symbols from Jewish mysticism in these works, so I started reading books about Jewish mysticism. Gershom Scholem's scholarship on this topic was immensely helpful for understanding and decoding elaborate symbolic structures built up over centuries. The deeper I got into Jewish mysticism, the clearer it became to me that in order to understand it better, I needed a much deeper knowledge of the Torah. Foundational works in Jewish mysticism like the *Zohar* are largely made up of commentaries on the Torah. These recursive research rabbit holes cropped up again and again during my process of making *The Last Galician Switchboard*; luckily, in the process of falling into them, I have been able to grasp onto a handful of sources that were incredibly meaningful to the production of the project and to my own personal spiritual development.

I came back to the concept of *The Last Galician Switchboard* in Fall 2021 and proposed it as my thesis topic. This time I had a vision of the project as a radio play and physical multi-media installation. I began fleshing out the script I had worked on in the previous year, expanding the main scenes and interweaving fragments of Yiddish folklore with my familial letters.

In the Winter of 2021, I did an independent studies course with Professor Nathaniel Deutsch, the Director of Jewish Studies and the Director of the Humanities Institute at UCSC. Professor Deutsch had already translated multiple works related to Ansky's ethnographic expeditions and therefore was a great resource for directing me to fiction and non-fiction writings similar to my family's letters from Galicia. This opportunity provided me with the historical context I needed to better understand my

family's letters, and it also led me to find more text that I would directly incorporate into my project.

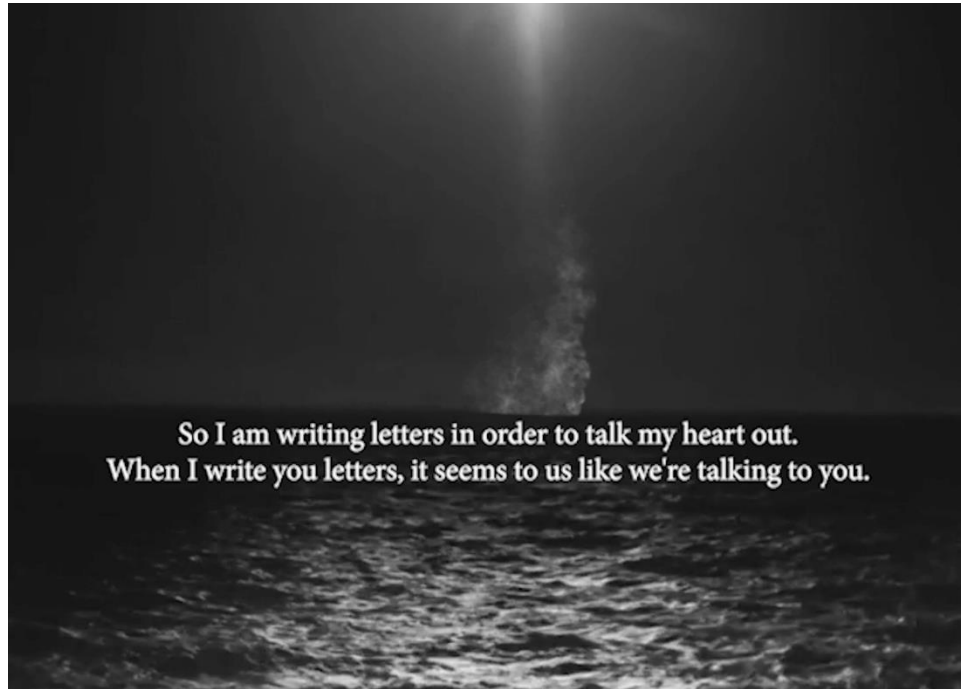


FIG. 4: Still from *The Last Galician Switchboard*, 2022.

While I was doing this research with Professor Deutsch, I was simultaneously creating my first drafts of the project as an installation. After some experimentation with the form, I decided to create the installation as a three-screen setup, with the primary visual component being made up of repurposed archival footage. Similar to my past archival creative works, I incorporated visual materials from the Internet Archive's 35mm collection and Prelinger Archives. I edited and superimposed clips from these collections and combined them with my script. When pairing videos with the script, I tried to steer away from literal representations of the script and instead selected ambient footage, which gestured toward certain thematic elements of the source materials. Using this footage allowed me to juxtapose two archives, one of

Jewish history and of analog technology, and explore the potential meanings that emerged from their interaction. Additionally, placing this 35mm film footage into a digital installation offered another opportunity for the past to haunt the present. I used the game design software Unity to create an interactive framework for playing these video clips in a non-linear fashion.

While trying to program this interactive video playback system in Unity, I soon reached a point where I was way out of my technical depth, so I reached out to my friend and DANM alum Patrick Stefaniak to help. Patrick was able to help me create a matrix that contained all of the video clips I created and a UI with flashing numbers to indicate which lines could be interacted with. Eventually, we created a system in Unity where the center screen had a layout of all the lines a user could patch into; one could use a computer mouse to click on any of the numbers on the center screen, and the corresponding video clips would play on either the left or right screens.

I eventually became dissatisfied with using a mouse as the main interface of the project as it clashed with the aesthetics of the footage and made the interactions unintuitive. Therefore, I decided to create a physical interface for the project, which would be based on an old switchboard. While doing research on switchboards, I found a cheap one for sale on the website Etsy. I realized it would be easier to repurpose this old office switchboard from Etsy than to create one from scratch. The switchboard arrived at the start of spring break, and I immediately began taking it apart (FIG. 5). I decided to use a Makey-Makey to translate the analog inputs into a

signal the computer could decipher and an Arduino to turn LED lights on and off (FIG. 6). Taking apart and rewiring the old switchboard was a far more complicated task than I could have ever imagined. Luckily my father, who is a metal worker, was

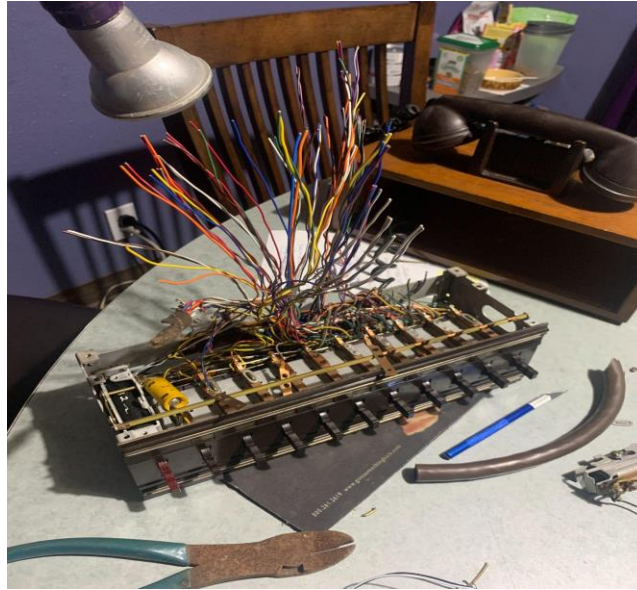


FIG. 5: The old switchboard from Etsy disassembled

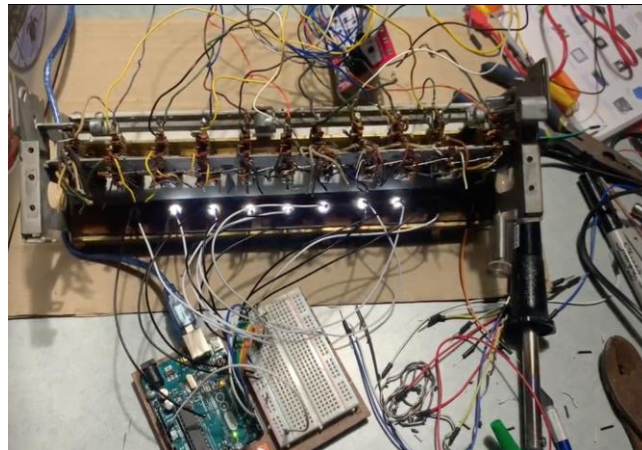


FIG 6: The old switchboard from Etsy rewired
able to offer a hand in the disassembling process of the old switchboard, and by nothing short of a miracle, all of the shotty soldering I did managed to work.

Having completed the physical elements of the installation, I began reaching out to classmates and friends to be voice actors in the project. The main challenge was to find actors who knew Yiddish. Not having access to such actors led me to rapidly scale down the script and use English translations in the place of original Yiddish texts. With the voice acting implemented, the project was ready for exhibition.



FIG. 7: *The Last Galician Switchboard*, UCSC DANM 2022 Exhibition, the Isaac Julien Lab, Digital Arts Research Center, University of California, Santa Cruz, April 22, 2022. Photo by Willow Longbrake.

The Last Galician Switchboard premiered in the Isaac Julien lab at UC Santa Cruz on April 22nd, 2022. The physical switchboard stood on a podium towards the center of the room, and on the center screen a video with footage of a switchboard office and other various telecommunication technologies played (FIG. 7). LED lights inside of the physical switchboard flashed to indicate when a line could be patched

into. If participants pressed the corresponding button above the LED lights (FIG. 8), a video would play on either the left or right screen. The voice acting and sound effects from that video clip played through the telephone on top of the switchboard. Two speakers bordering the center screen played back the main soundtrack of the piece. The piece's duration was eight minutes and twenty seconds and played on loop from 12pm to 5pm until the DANM thesis showcase's closure on April 30th.



FIG. 8: *The Last Galician Switchboard*, UCSC DANM 2022 Exhibition, the Isaac Julien Lab, Digital Arts Research Center, University of California, Santa Cruz, April 22, 2022. Photo by Willow Longbrake.

The exhibition was a valuable opportunity to recognize the project's limitations and future potential. The main issue I noticed was that some participants were confused about how to interact with the switchboard. In the future, I will write out clearer instructions and also fix the bugs in the code so it is more apparent when

one needs to press a button. Moreover, I would love it if the project were to be made available to the public in a Jewish cultural institution, and I would be happy to scale the project to match another venue. I have also considered releasing a desktop version of the project that would allow users to interact with the project without the physical switchboard. This will open up *The Last Galician Switchboard* to wider audiences around the world.

Conclusion

The Last Galician Switchboard started as a personal exploration of cultural heritage and buried histories. Upon examining the topic closely, I soon realized the importance of creating an artwork that memorializes such forgotten histories, particularly at a time when violence against minority populations remains at large. In addition to violence, these forgotten histories also carry with them rich cultural materials which can serve as inspiration for new artworks.

My project combines digital art with analog technology to create a gateway into past lived experiences from the twentieth, including ethnic persecution and forced relocation. My goal with this project was to acknowledge this dispossession and offer a place for it to matter. *The Last Galician Switchboard* stands as a reminder that art can act as an archival medium for retelling the stories of the past and contextualizing the present. Such a reminder, I hope, can facilitate further dialogues about the importance of looking back upon lost fragments of history, however personal they might be.

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