Ritual Reconstructed Project, 2014–2015

Searle Kochberg

End of Project Event, JW3 (Jewish Community Centre, London, UK), November 24, 2015. Funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.

In *The Savage Mind* Claude Lévi-Strauss explains how mythological thought and rites are continuously broken down and rebuilt again through new constructions of already existing sets of events, and how rituals serve to bring unity to previously separate groups. This makes ritual particularly fertile ground for bricolage—Lévi-Strauss’s term for tinkering: the (re)working of found materials to piece together new structures, identities, and rituals.

On November 24, 2015, at London’s JW3—the Jewish Community Centre—a yearlong Jewish Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and Intersex (LGBTQI) research project culminated in a bricolage “happening” of ritual objects, photographs, storytelling, rabbinical dialogues on “queering religion,” and an evening screening of the project’s five LGBTQI Jewish ritual films—all part of the Ritual Reconstructed/Connected Communities project, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. In its efforts Ritual Reconstructed has in no small way been facilitated by Liberal Judaism, which in the UK has led the way on LGBTQI inclusivity by being responsive to social need and by being “practical in so many ways,” to quote Rabbi Janet Darley.

As a filmmaker, I have had the great pleasure in the last four years of working with the LGBTQI Jewish community on three big projects: my film-based PhD,
My Jewish London; the Rainbow Jews project (funded by the UK National Lottery Heritage Fund); and now the Ritual Reconstructed project. What has struck me from the beginning is the way this community has—since the 1970s—indeed “tinkered” to create its own symbols and ritual, all to bring a sense of togetherness and to “pump up individuals with emotional energy.” The philosophy behind the LGBTQI ritual activities of the Ritual Reconstructed project is essentially Reconstructionist, based on the ideas of Mordecai Kaplan. It is an approach to Jewish custom and belief that aims toward communal decision-making.

One of the films screened at JW3 was Pride Seder, a record of the 2015 eve-of-London Pride Seder at South London Liberal Synagogue. An orange takes center stage at this seder ritual, along with other “foreign” queer objects to be tinkered with at this LGBTQI bricolage event: a drag queen’s high-heel shoe, a brick, foreign “fruits,” rainbow-colored ribbons. The orange on the seder plate...
FIGURE 2. The LGBT Pride Seder plate at South London Liberal Synagogue is full of references to Stonewall 1969—the Trans high heels, the brick, the rainbow colors—with the adjacent orange referencing an LGBT Passover Seder plate. © Mary Humphrey.

FIGURE 3. Congregation and crew filming the Pride Seder at South London Liberal Synagogue, June 2015. © Mary Humphrey.
is a key ritual motif for many LGBTQI Jews. Indeed, the Ritual Reconstructed logotype incorporates this image. Where does the orange motif come from? As Rabbi Janet Burden has commented on www.ritualreconstructed.com, “Some years ago, a group of students at Oberlin College wished to make a statement about Jewish inclusiveness... Either they, or a Jewish feminist called Susannah Heschel, had the idea of using an orange to symbolize inclusivity: It was made up of many segments, but it formed a whole... [that shows] that no one should be excluded from the life of our Jewish community.”

Jean Rouch’s ethnographic films foreground the creative partnerships of the filmmaker, the “participant observer,” and the community being represented. The films we made together for Ritual Reconstructed attempted to live up to Rouch’s ideal of a creative interaction and synthesis. Ritual events were organized from within the LGBTQI Jewish Liberal community. I, in turn, organized camerawork and editing with my crew at the University of Portsmouth. All the stakeholders—both in front of and behind the camera—then discussed and agreed on strategies to “ethno-show,” “ethno-look,” and “ethno-think.” Once the creative approach had been determined, the scene was blocked (almost like a filmed dance would be), and the filming commenced.

For filming a ritual, I used two lightweight cameras—one for close hand-held shots and another for wider master shots. Mikes were placed on booms to provide maximum flexibility, especially for rituals that involved movement. All these filming techniques aimed at avoiding any unnecessary disruption of the ritual. Participants were encouraged to explore and perform rituals that were either already evident in LGBTQI Jewish Liberal practice or created spontaneously at the moment of filming—evidencing a true bricoleur’s tinkering with everyday objects and incorporating them into religious rituals.

Before or after the filming of a ritual, talking-head interviews were recorded with the principal participants. These relied on semi-structured questions that were drafted beforehand by Professor Margaret Greenfields (the principal investigator of Ritual Reconstructed) and then discussed with the rest of the academic and community team to ensure agreement regarding direction and format. At the editing stage, the interviews were intercut with the filmed ritual to highlight the salient points of the participants as well as the filmmaker’s intent. All stages of the Ritual Reconstructed project process represented an on-going, meaningful, creative “ethno-dialogue” between filmmaker and participants.

Greenfields said immediately after the JW3 event that
Ritual Reconstructed has been a truly co-produced, collaborative, community-led project. It has been a huge privilege and immense pleasure to participate in this important exploration of LGBTQI Jewish identities, as we’ve crafted narratives, films, and performances and collectively wrestled with important theological, well-being, and equalities concepts which we hope will resonate with Jews of all sexual orientations as well as members of other faiths who enter into these timely discussions.

For further information regarding this project visit the website: www.ritualreconstructed.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Searle Kochberg is a maker and teacher of documentary film. His films focus on space, memory, and identity, and have included *Irene Runge: My Way* (2002), *Leaving the Table* (2007), *L’Esprit de l’Escalier* (2010), and *Dream Life of Debris* (2014). He is currently a PhD candidate at the School of Creative Technologies, University of Portsmouth, UK. searle.kochberg@port.ac.uk

Notes

Ritual Reconstructed is a collaboration among Margaret Greenfields, Buckinghamshire New University; Searle Kochberg, University of Portsmouth; E. J. Milne, Coventry University; and Surat Shaan Knan, Liberal Judaism UK.

5. The term “seder” derives from the Hebrew word for “order”; the Pride Seder followed some of the logic of the order of a Passover seder.
In his polemical films and writing on cine-ethnography, the celebrated visual anthropologist Jean Rouch made it clear that filmmakers must throw themselves into the ritual they are experiencing and recording. They must participate, “ethno-look,” and “ethno-think.” In turn, communities—which tend to modify their behavior on camera anyway—should use the opportunity to “ethno-show and ethno-think.” Ideally, in a democratic exchange of experiences, an “ethno-dialogue” is established between maker and subject, and knowledge is “the result of an endless quest where ethnographers and those whom they study meet.” See Jean Rouch, “On the Vicissitudes of the Self: The Possessed Dancer, the Magician, the Sorcerer, the Filmmaker, and the Ethnographer,” in Ciné-Ethnography, ed. and trans. Steven Feld (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 87–101.