Drew University

College of Liberal Arts

On the Threshold:

Rituals of Renewal in Jewish Space and “Crip Time” Through a Lens-Based Practice

A Thesis in Studio Art

by

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Abstract

In this project, I investigate Jewish ritual through the lens of chronic illness, attending to spiritual views on disability, healing, and the body. Working in a lens-based practice, I center Jewish ideas of ritual as a mechanism for both spiritual renewal and a means to bring visibility to the invisible within the ritual of making itself. To this end, I investigate Jewish cleansing rituals in order to fully situate the historical and cultural place of these practices and their shifts into more contemporary, intersectional contexts. My paper draws from philosopher Paul Ricœur's ideas on "traces," investigating how artists can participate in a type of subversive documentation of illness to create nonexploitative representation that produces meaning through absence and indirect portrayals of the body. I make photography and video work within the space of my home, documenting found and constructed moments in which light illuminates and shadows conceal, framing a new, in-between space.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Rory Mulligan, Professor Jeremy Blatter, and Professor Kim Rhodes for acting on my committee and supporting the development of this project. All of my gratitude to my family and friends for their support and encouragement. Thank you especially to my mother for her participation in the process of making the photographs.

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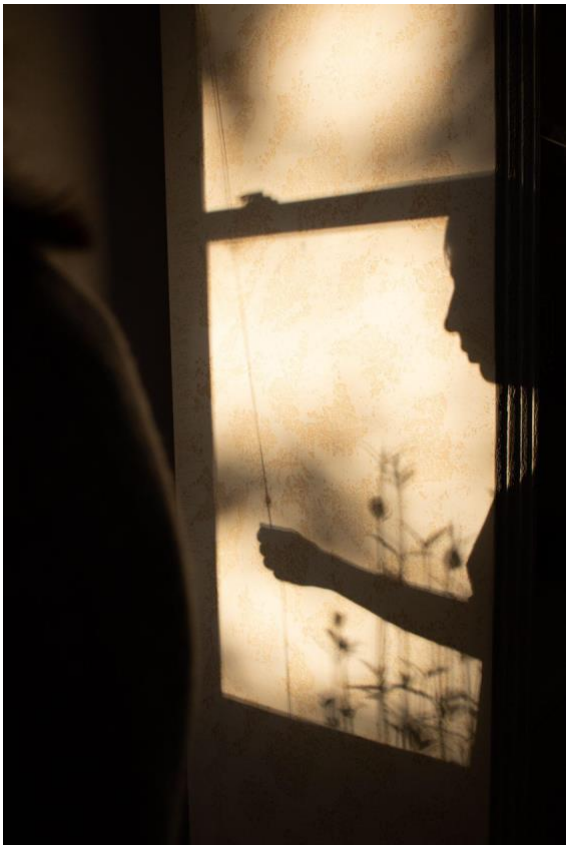
I. Introduction

I am interested in traces, the moment when something fleeting becomes visible. I uncover traces when I make a photograph or video. When I refer to traces, I build on the "notion of the *trace*," articulated by philosopher Paul Ricœur in his 1984 book *The Reality of the Historical Past*. In that work, Ricœur is interested in the trace's relationship to history as a remnant that might, in its material existence, operate to stand in for the past (Ricœur 2-3). Art historian Alexandra Stara, in her essay "Traces of Trauma: The Photography of Ori Gersht," deepens this understanding, determining the trace to be a remainder that "capture[s] the ambiguity and obliqueness which are essential for the understanding of something predominantly absent, something that has passed, yet also formative of the present and therefore still somehow here" (Stara 184). In the context of photographic theory, traces, as a condition of visibility, allow for absence to recall the persistence of trauma through the image form. In the context of trauma studies, Stara sees this as not only connected to trauma studies but also embedded in Jewish photographer Ori Gersht's work. For Stara, this kind of creative intervention is "poised between revelation and concealment, between a 'bringing-to-appearance' … and a 'making strange' …, which eschews full disclosure as inadequate for the communication of the complexity of its meaning" (183). Through photographic manipulations of nature and landscape, Gersht achieves this by working in spaces where historical traumas occurred and originated, making photographs of "overexposed, … ghost-like" trees and landscapes where a "blurring of form" occurs (182-3).

In my own work, the body, in its indirect portrayal, is obscured, both located and displaced by light and covered by shadow, fabric, and other materials that stand between camera and subject. Figures are reframed through traces and ritual interactions transported through and across time, or inherited. In this way, what is revealed through the appearance of a limited body becomes a projection of self, reflecting an uncertain and unstable truth in the work's treatment of identity, which is indisputably Jewish. This is evocative of a multitude of Jewish practices in which coverings, often using textiles, become important rituals. My work considers how, especially through material signs like these, Jewish practices become transportive; for instance, an entrance through a doorway with a *mezuzah* allows for an entrance into Jewish time. These ideas led me to the following question: What does it mean to "make visible" in Jewish thought and tradition?



(Figure 1) Avianna Miller, *Untitled*, archival inkjet print, 36 × 24 in., 2022

Focusing specifically on Jewish ritual in my research, I investigate ritual in relation to photography and video as well as ritual's place in living with chronic illness. Pinpointing shifting definitions and ideas of ritual in a Jewish context, what emerged most for me were continuous, shared ideas of Jewish ritual as a fluid practice. My objects of exploration involve, but are not limited to, material articles of both explicit or implicit Jewish associations, everyday

interactions that might subconsciously involve ritual practice, the demarcation of Jewish homes as sacred spaces through ritual objects and practice, and the link between physicality and mentality in ritual acts of healing. Working at a similar intersection of illness and documentation, British feminist photographer Jo Spence, following her breast cancer diagnosis, developed a practice of phototherapy (Dennett 224). Spence's photography project, which engaged self-portraiture, proposes the medium of photography as a form of healing by turning the camera toward the photographer. This system of coping afforded Spence with a means to suspend time in the face of illness and envision futurity while acting as a paradigm for how photography can mediate healing through ritualistic practice.

In photography and video, light and time are the primary material factors. As a medium, photography is ubiquitous and can often be informal. On the other hand, rituals are often highly sacred and formal. There is a certain tension between photography and ritual; at times, making records of rituals is taboo, while at other moments, the involvement of photography is central to the celebration of a ceremony. The camera is quintessential for containing time and space, and here in my work, definitive actions of reaching or resting, opening or closing (as in Figure 1), taking away or putting back, or the sun rising or setting are countered in the stillness of images and the endless loops of videos.

I will begin this discussion by describing my process for making photographs and video work. This will be followed by an examination of Jewish ideas of space, time, and ritual cleansing that inform my practice.

II. Photographic Practice

I work within my home space in New Jersey to make photographs and videos using primarily a DSLR camera; the home is a meeting place for spiritual connections to my understanding of Judaism and a shifting relationship to my body. I explore pockets of natural light that appear in the spaces of my home, investigating abstracted segments of my mother's body, namely picturing hands as an indication of mobility, as they interact with objects and surfaces (as in Figure 2).

(Figure 2) Avianna Miller, *Untitled*, archival inkjet print, 10.75 × 7.5 in., 2022

Sunlight is a guiding force in my work. Sunrise and sunset operate as markers of Jewish practice, and sunlight is also considered to be a source of healing within the Jewish tradition, central to numerous miraculous tales of recovery that appear in the Torah. On the other hand, shadow is seen as a form of protection, the removal of which can signify death.

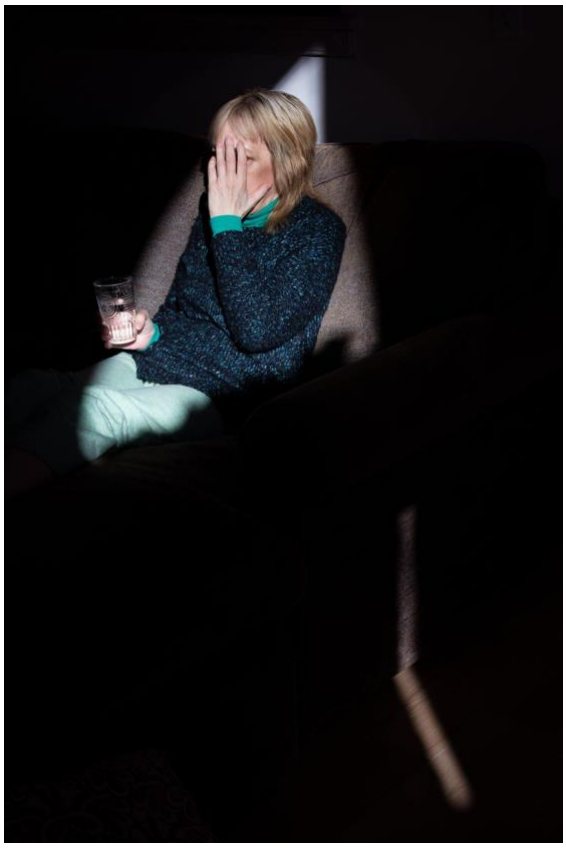
Considering this spiritual meaning, I work solely with natural light, seeking out meaning in this unstable, raw material. In setting my work within the space of my home, I imagine the house to be its own ecosystem with a unique system of time, guided by its daily cycle of allowing sunlight inward. I make my work in the early morning and the evening, observing the shifting light source of these points of the day. I work to catch areas of light and the shadows

they inevitably create that might otherwise be missed, shifting and changing as the day progresses. I open doors and windows, blinds and shades, within the home, searching for new light to imagine renewed spaces through. In this process, I imagine myself to be creating a map of the home and its familiar spaces in flux, sometimes returning to the same spaces to make and remake photographs. The traces that I aim to catch are fleeting, and photography is a powerful tool to preserve these moments. Each time I return to a space, the interactions with light are different, yet familiar. This, in a way, marks the act of photographing with natural light as an overarching ritual, as what is recorded by the camera becomes entirely dependent on a closeness, a prior immersion into the space and its intricacies.

The healing properties of sunlight draw me to work through and with its instability. Morning light has a heavier, brighter presence but is entirely unstable, constantly shapeshifting and gliding across surfaces, often before an area can even be staged. I take advantage of this movement in my videos, editing them to loop so a beginning and end point become one and the same as they cycle. In this way, the videos operate on imagined time, their elliptical nature marking out a duration that is both dictated by and removed from the rules of normative time, while preserving the ephemerality of light into a cycling loop. Afternoon light has its own unpredictability, sometimes producing a briefly lived golden cast while at other times ending the day with a duller, more diffused ambiance. While the qualities of the light I capture at times vary, I tend to edit my images according to a high contrast palette. My manipulation is usually minimal as I seek to properly balance the photographs for color and light, though my prints do tend to favor a deep, rich black in conjunction with bright, illuminated tones.

I am interested in interactions between these moments of light and objects and gestures that invoke ritualistic ideas for me. These ideas embody my Jewish identity through the material form of traditional Judaica and articles that hold an implicit Jewishness, objects which are imbued with a spiritual quality when they come to life in Jewish spaces. Here, the ordinary becomes of great importance, transforming objects based on their proximity to ritual function and the involvement of those who inhabit the space they exist within.

I work collaboratively with my mother to imagine ritual spaces built upon generations of tradition. In their staging within the intimate home space, they emerge from, as travel writer and explorer Freya Stark describes it, "a place where every day is multiplied by all the days before it" (qtd. in Tuan 144). These conjured spaces, operating simultaneously through and around the unstaged presence of natural light, explore ritual as a grounded yet abstract personal practice that can be made material through reinterpretations of objects and acts. Just like light occurs similarly throughout the home during a given season, rituals occur over time in the same locations in the home, aided by familiar objects.



(Figure 3) Avianna Miller, *Untitled*, archival inkjet print, 36 × 24 in., 2023

In *Untitled* (Figure 3), my mother is illuminated by outdoor light filtering through a window and entering the space. A crescent spotlight is cast upon her, isolating her amongst

an otherwise deep darkness of shadow. Early morning light makes the figure visible, highlighting her upper half. Still, her face is beyond the viewer's access; she has covered it with her hand. Either she has been holding her hand there for some time, averting the camera's gaze, or a momentary gesture has been captured. The ambiguity here, in which a definitive action is made still, allows for a moment removed from time. A glass containing water is held in my mother's other hand, meeting the bright light to form a slight glow. Looking beyond the figure, further space is indicated by a small strip of light near the lower right hand of the image, which bends at a slight angle where floor appears to meet furniture.

III. Rituals of Imagined Space, Time, and Liminality in Jewish Thought

In the preface of the book *Reinventing Ritual: Contemporary Art and Design for Jewish Life*, based on an exhibition of the same name, American Judaic scholar Arnold Eisen broadly discusses ritual, describing its presence in "attempts to fill … [his] space and time on earth with sacredness and meaning" (Eisen XI). He also notes how "Jews have long created sacred space and marked sacred time with ritual forms and objects designed to order, beautify, set apart, and ennoble" (XII). Thus, these ritual spaces are built upon generations of tradition in which what is relevant to ritual has been almost entirely determined by the relationship between materiality and practice.

Adding to this notion, art historian Daniel Belasco writes: "New rituals … draw from the well of thousands of years of tradition. By this measure, all Jewish ritual is ancient and contemporary, familiar and radical" (Belasco 2). This flattening of time through ritual form recalls ideas Jewish studies scholar Ellen Umansky and religion studies scholar Dianne Ashton

describe in relation to poet Emma Lazarus's work: "The sense of Jewish spirituality that emerges from Lazarus's poems is one rooted in her deep sense of connection to the Jewish people—past, present, and future" (Umansky and Ashton 69). Rabbi Nahman of Breslov speaks further of the illusory qualities of time in a Jewish context, proclaiming that "one should rather aspire that which is beyond time" (Swirsky 15). For me, working with time-based media becomes circular in Jewish ritual, and ancestral practice and future thinking join as one in the present to create a still moment of contemplation. Belasco situates this linkage across time:

> An expanded and nonhierarchical view of Jewish ritual is composed of scores of specific actions: eating, drinking, counting, smelling, lighting candles, praying—physical acts that serve a larger symbolic or legal matrix. These verbs, these actions of identity, constitute the systems of exchange that modulate difference and embodied subjectivity. Jewish ritual practice, or 'Jewish action,' does not only link us to a remote divinity, but is embedded in everyday life, providing a wealth of meaningful forms and materials that formalize transitions, enhance ethical awareness, link past to present, negotiate politics and authority, and trigger ethnic pride. The power of ritual is its special metaphorical resonance that produces meaning in transformations of contemporary life. (3)

According to these ideas set forth by Belasco, there is no set occasion where ritual might present itself; instead, everyday living as a Jewish person sees ritual appear in each and every exchange and practice of being.

The concept of "crip time" relates to this idea of ever-present traces, which carries with it a kind of embedded history and cultural temporality. "Crip time" designates an alternate temporality experienced by disabled and chronically ill individuals, which transcends the rules of normative, linear time. As a widely used concept in disability studies, "crip time" refers to a necessary flexibility of time for existing in a world centered around able-bodiedness. In her 2017 nonfiction essay "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time," women and gender studies scholar Ellen Samuels deepens an understanding of this temporal relationship, stating that "*crip time is*

time travel" (Samuels). In following with this, "crip time" is expansive, allowing one to move seemingly backwards and forwards through notions of past, present, and futurity. I relate this to a Jewish temporality, which departs from normative time in its following of the Hebrew calendar to dictate the beginnings and endings of rituals, practices, and religious occasions. Periods of rest are marked out in the cycle of each week, with the Sabbath offered as a departure, a dedicated time of rest. In my work, though a specific temporality is marked out by quality of light as an indicator of time of day, the photographs and videos otherwise become removed from time, or otherwise timeless. Thus, each image invites a departure from everyday, normative structures through an emphasis on what has always been present only made further visible through illumination.

In the particular context of a Jewish home, moments of the everyday and the ordinary assume the spiritual capacity to become "vessels" for ritual. Religious studies scholar Vanessa Ochs describes this effect in her 2007 book *Inventing Jewish Ritual*:

> The telephone is a telephone, but for the Jew who has a sick friend living far away, the phone is a holy vessel used in the practice of *bikur holim*, the commandment to connect to the sick. All the equipment one uses in housecleaning— cleansing powder, mop, cleansing solutions, and a vacuum cleaner— is just cleaning equipment. But in the Jewish home where *Shabbat* is observed by cleaning one's home beforehand, we have in the cleaning equipment holy vessels that create and point to *Shabbat*, tangibly, experientially, and sensually. In each case, we have objects that are endowed with meaning, memory, and sacred purpose. In sacred service, they are not changed, but they have the potential to become charged, so to speak. We could say these ordinary objects compel us to engage in acts of consecration. (107)

Jewish interactions with ritual are informed not just by practice but through an engagement with objects that become Jewish within the context of their use and environment as part of a tangible connection to the spiritual realm through a meaningful expansion of everyday gestures. Photographer Hannah Altman also addresses everyday Jewish objects and practices in her work.

In Altman's photograph titled *Pressed Into Flesh* (2018), an apple imprinted with a Jewish star is highlighted by a spotlight. The apple, which is already important to some Jewish holidays, becomes imbued with spiritual meaning through the inscription of a Jewish symbol on the fruit and the lighting, which casts a spotlight around the object, projecting onto the wall in a halo-like effect.

While Judaica and ordinary objects that I have coded to be Jewish within my own indexical language for making are important to my work, I am especially interested in how ritual presents itself in a Jewish culture of materiality as well as how ritual and space establish one

(Figure 4) Avianna Miller, *Untitled*, archival inkjet print, 15 × 24 in., 2022

another. Ochs describes it as such: "Within Jewish homes, objects, people, and even times of day and seasons of the year interact in a fluid process. Objects make a home Jewish by ritually

animating Jewish life and by absorbing it in specifically Jewish ways" (Ochs 96-7). In my images, qualities of materiality participate in a kind of Jewish object lesson: objects act as both concrete proof of tradition and ceremony while also carrying with them traces of actions, rituals, histories of human interaction, or, as religious, gender, and Jewish studies scholar Laura Levitt identifies in her 2020 book, *The Objects That Remain*, trauma (14-5). As humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, "Objects anchor time" (187). Through this notion, I view objects as portals, grounding one for as long as they are one's possessions to a kind of known and visible history that reacts to a spiritual heritage that cannot be seen.

(Figure 5) Avianna Miller, *Untitled*, archival inkjet print, 10.75 × 7.5 in., 2023

In his consideration of ritual in its material forms and manifestations, Belasco notes, "Ritual is formalized and symbolic performance, already close to art" (2). Ritual inherently has a material quality as a kind of art form, and thus the material manifestations of rituals place them in even closer proximity to art. Belasco also remarks how "Ritual sacralizes the everyday through the separation of sacred from profane. The act of covering performs that task by inserting a layer to create categories and distinctions," as demonstrated in Figure 5 (11). Curtains and blinds appear in my work as a kind

of scrim (as in Figures 4, 6, and 7), demarcating an in-between space through what is revealed and what remains hidden by the material. Whether this separation is performed to architecture, object, or the body, Belasco further states that "By covering, truth or essence becomes contingent on exterior presentation" (11). Finding resonance in this idea in Figure 6, the figure, my mother, is covered by a mauve window blind. At the same time, a shadow forms on the blind. The shadow cloaks the figure, blurring boundaries between person, wall, and blind; thus, ambiguity is created surrounding where the figure stands, when in fact she is hidden between the window pane and the blind.

(Figure 6) Avianna Miller, *Untitled*, archival inkjet print, 10.75 × 7.5 in., 2023

(Figure 7) Avianna Miller, *Untitled*, archival inkjet print, 10.75 × 7.5 in., 2022

Similarly, I play with the bodily qualities of a curtain in Figure 7, where the fabric is pulled back to reveal a section of roof and trees through the window. At a first glance, the outward turn of the curtain might be confused for an outstretched arm. Areas of reflection mask out areas of the window, creating a slight haze that conflates the interior space with the outdoor scene. Similarly, in a photograph from Elizabeth Hibbard's 2017-2019 series *Swallow The Tail*, an interior window curtain opens up onto the scene of a yard, where a figure has physically aligned themselves with a row of hedges by sticking their head into them. Reflections of the curtain and couch project onto the glass, breaking up the illusion of this fragment of the outdoors and reifying the photographer's removed indoor location as limiting further context surrounding the unusual subject.

The Jewish act of hanging a *mezuzah* on a domestic door frame comes to mind as revealing a similar effect in its material relationship to a site-specific ritual. Belasco locates this tradition in the context of art making:

> Artists have found the mezuzah case … to be an especially versatile object for the demarcation of Jewish space. With the current interest in the physical actions of ritual, they are more interested in how people interact with the object than the meaning of the scroll … The act of hammering the nail is more significant to a practice-based Jewish identity than the text inscribed within. (34)

Here, Belasco emphasizes how the gesture of hanging a *mezuzah* and presenting it on a doorpost reflects a desire to make Jewish space visible, revealed in the sheer physicality of this act. I would argue that this visibility is heightened by interactions with the displayed object, notably the ritualistic touching of the *mezuzah* upon passing through a space marked by it. In her essay "The Mezuzah: American Judaism and Constructions of Domestic Sacred Space," poet and

author Erika Meitner discusses further how an object like a *mezuzah* can hold the power to mark a space as both ritualistic and Jewish:

> If sacred space is a place set apart, then the home unquestionably qualifies as a personal, private center set apart from public space. But for Jews the home is a ritualistic center as well … There is no more important space in Judaism than the home; the vast majority of Jewish ritual practices and observances are carried out here, and the mezuzah acts as a gatekeeper—the first marker that delineates this sacred space from the rest of the world. (Meitner 183)

While the *mezuzah* is a material object, its application in the home embodies a spiritual quality that creates distinction between the domestic space and the world outside; thus, through its material existence, it notes a change in space. Jewish studies scholar Elizabeth Shanks Alexander describes in "Ritual on the Threshold: Mezuzah and the Crafting of Domestic and Civic Space" how when *mezuzot* are affixed to doorposts, they are understood to be "places of transition that both open up to the world beyond the household and seal off the household, creating intimacy and offering protection" (Shanks Alexander 101). In this sense, the house acts as a kind of sanctuary, reified by tangible protective amulets and ritualistic designators of space. As Vanessa Ochs notes in her essay "What Makes a Jewish Home Jewish?," "In Judaism … the spiritual is material. Without things, in all their thingness, there is no Passover, only an idea of Passover; and a faint and fuzzy idea it would be … Things denote one's belonging, one's participation, possibly one's convictions" (Ochs 493). For a practicing Jew, Jewish rites and ceremonies are often conducted through material means within the home, which, in its privacy, becomes this "sacred space" (Meitner 183). I am investigating this notion of space in this body of work as I think about the setting of my work as an imagined, impossible space.

I work in a space that, at times, suspends itself between inside and outside, a space that does not exist strictly beyond the photograph. Qualities of the outside become projected inward

as sunlight, the predominant source of light in my work, enters through windows, casting shadows, or traces, of the outdoor New Jersey landscape across the interior surfaces it rests upon, as is demonstrated through the stormy interior of Figure 8. At other moments in my work, the double glass of windows reflects the inside outward and reveal through their transparency a reflected yet obscured image of the outside.

Notions of liminality and thresholds appear in Jewish thought, characterized most concretely through specific defining acts and objects. The action of lighting ceremonial candles, whether for Shabbat or another ceremonial occasion, is marked by sundown and thus creates a distinction in time during "the liminal moments when day meets night and when profane time meets holy time" (Allen). With this act of lighting emerges a sense of importance, defined by its creation of a measurable moment in time when one is meant to cease all else for ritual. Illumination calls for visibility and, by extension, looking. By the same notion, a *mezuzah* is not just a marker of space but a demarcation of a threshold, lending visibility to where space both begins and ends while existing in its own, rather ambiguous, space.

(Figure 8) Avianna Miller, *Untitled*, archival inkjet print, 24 × 17.5 in., 2022

The physicality of the house and the body have been inextricably linked in Jewish ideology since the early eighteenth century.

Medical historian Robert Jütte discusses physician Tobias Cohen's "'living house' metaphor" in *The Jewish Body: A History*; in this turn away from predominantly Kabbalah-influenced medicine, the biological body and the idea of a Jewish body are imagined akin to a home in its structure and anatomy, with Hebrew letters assigned to body parts and organs (Jütte 11-3). In the chapter "The Woman as House" of Talmudic scholar Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert's 2000 book *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, the author discusses further biblical metaphors and subsequent rabbinic interpretations of the body in relation to home and architecture, with a specific interest here in gender dynamics. After detailing various patriarchal views that prescribe women akin to the home as an object, Fonrobert reveals feminist notions of space, such as that of scholar Verena A. Conley reading French theorist Hélène Cixous's work: "Cixous displaces the old phallocentric architectural metaphor of woman-as-house. She suggests the proximity of the mother-as-house but without doors, with open arches overlooking the sea" (Conley qtd. in Fonrobert 66). I visualize the domestic space through a similar feminist lens, with the house as a space for creating self-imposed separation, staging renewal, and dismantling an able-bodied myth.

In Figure 9, the back of my mother's head is seen to the left of an arched window. Both the figure and the window are surrounded by a dark, shadowy space. Only the figure's head and part of her back are visible: the rest of her body has disappeared into the darkness. Despite there being limited visual information about the setting of this image, the window and its mauve blind clue a viewer into this being an interior domestic space. The figure and window's shape begin to mimic one another, with the lighter tones of my mother's hair recalling the light blue sky seen

(Figure 9) Avianna Miller, *Untitled*, archival inkjet print, 24 × 17.5 in., 2023

through the upper portion of the window, the head. Her shirt has a horizontal line running through it, just as the window rail can be seen halfway through the sheer fabric of the blind. Here, body and architecture become reflections of one another. The windows are important here, acting as a kind of peephole to the outside world from a comfortable distance. From the figure's positioning to the left of the window, it is unlikely that they gaze through it. Rather, there is comfort to be found in knowing that there is natural light entering the space through the windows that surround the subject on both sides, suggested by the bright cast on her back.

IV. Spiritual Cleansing and Renewal Through Ritual Form

Within the conceptual framework of my photography and video work, I am particularly interested in Jewish rituals of spiritual cleansing and renewal. These types of rituals are often placed in proximity to personal and mental healing and, in their existence, ground my practice in a Jewish recognition of illness. One can look to *tashlich*, which occurs around Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, as one such example of ritual as a clearing practice. This is an annual ritual of atonement, in which bread crumbs are traditionally cast into a moving body of water as

a means for letting go of sins. Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell offers further meaning to this ceremony, noting how we are not just to "cast out the crumbs of last year's deeds," but also to attend to "the memories of wounds sustained and inflicted, the remnants of conversations that hurt instead of healed," all while "distinguish[ing] between what must be cast off and what must be cherished and preserved" (*Four Centuries* 273). I imagine this symbolic process in relation to chronic illness, serving as a model for clearing the extensive, built-up traces of the everyday and beginning anew, all while acknowledging and honoring that which is being released. Light acts as an important mediator here; in rituals employed to let go of sins, remorse, or regret, one is "lightening" a burden. Metaphorically, then there is a simultaneous act of bringing out of shadows and to the surface, thus making visible. The two (light and dark) are posited as somewhat of binaries in Jewish thought. 20th-century Hebrew poet Rahel Bluwstein begins her poem "To Feel the Darkness" with the lines "To feel the darkness hammer on the eyeballs; / To thrust blind fingers into empty space" and concludes with "Until the day breaks through the window-pane" (Swirsky 61). Here, light is a pleasant interruption to an otherwise indistinguishable space, but there also seems to be an understanding of darkness as having a palpability that can only be understood in anticipation of daybreak.

Another such cleansing ritual, the ceremony of *bedikat chametz*, occurs before Pesach. Traditionally, Jewish people will seek out and remove all traces of *chametz*, or leavened food products prohibited during the holiday, from their home (Miller). Though this is typically a tangible process, one can also understand this Passover tradition to transcend beyond the physical. In the article "Sustaining Our Spirits: Spiritual Study/Discussion Groups For Coping

with Medical Illness," psychotherapist Israela Meyerstein describes how an individual in the group's experience with illness can inform an alternate view of this ritual practice:

> In one of the sessions around the time of Passover, the theme of examining 'emotional chametz' was discussed. Chametz refers to the unleavened bread discarded before Passover. Symbolically it can refer to nonuseful thoughts, behaviors, and habits worth letting go … Heather's illness forced her for the first time to take care of herself. This exercise of confronting 'emotional chametz' helped Heather feel deserving of doing some new things for herself without guilt. (218)

I find this idea of clearing away that which is invisible to others to be just as, if not more significant than, following the practice of cleaning physical matter from the home. Reflecting similarly on *bedikat chametz*, Torah scholar Avivah Zornberg says, "I think about those things that are not so easy to scrub away, and perhaps just by enacting this physical work that one becomes more focused on what needs attention in order to clear passages" (Tippett). I am interested in this extension of physical action to mental clearing.

In her thinking toward a definition of ritual, anthropologist and filmmaker Barbara Myerhoff concentrates more broadly on the implicit physicality of ritual. She refers to ritual as acts, or actions, noting that the latter word "'is indicated because rituals persuade the body first; behaviors precede emotions in the participants'" (qtd. in Belasco 2). Belasco expands on this further:

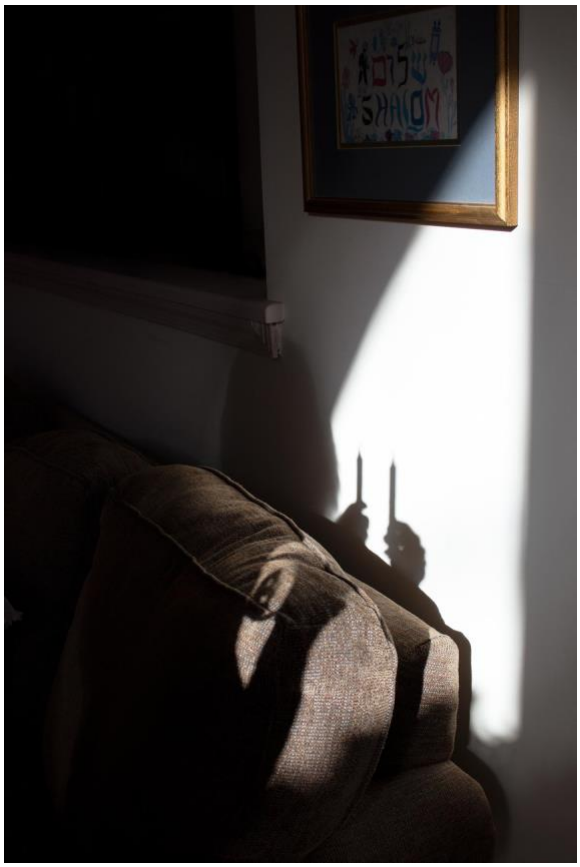
> Contemporary artists focus on Judaism as a lived, organic experience, not one fixed in text or custom, by identifying the physical acts that embody rituals and removing them from their familiar or unspoken position to bestow new meanings. They disconnect the actions of ritual from their symbolic intent and repurpose them for unexpected connections and harmonies. (Belasco 4)

Here, gestures can stand in for their original ritual acts, revising and defamiliarizing these customs to fulfill new needs and purposes. My photographs and videos perform a similar function, allowing the ritual form to become expansive. In *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's*

Spirituality: A Sourcebook, Laura Levitt describes this effect within another type of ritual that encounters a physical act, that of the *mikvah*, which entails *tevilah*, a full ritual immersion into water as a form of purification:

> Healing is a process. This *mikvah* ceremony is distinct in that it represents one of the few ways that I have been able to attend to my spiritual as well as my physical and emotional healing … My body was violated by rape. The *mikvah* offered me a place to acknowledge both that violation and my desire to heal. My need for ritual was very real. I needed to do something concrete to express my psychic and physical pain as a Jewish woman among other Jewish women I am close to. (Umansky and Ashton 321-322)

Physical action is important to Levitt as a means for connecting with a kind of spiritual catharsis. There also emerges, through the ritual form, a connection to other Jewish women and a demarcation of a physical cleansing ritual space within the *mikvah*. As Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg states in *Reinventing Ritual*, "Rituals create change … How could we not want to develop rituals to help us recover from rape or to give us strength as we begin chemotherapy?" (Belasco 84). Thus, one could consider it central to Jewish thought to rewrite rituals and perform them differently in order to meet shifting needs for healing and renewal, amongst other purposes for holding space for ritual. Similar forms of Jewish ritual involving ablution include *netilat yadayim*, a hand washing that occurs upon waking. The idea behind this practice is to ward off any trace of death that may have emerged



(Figure 10) Avianna Miller, *Untitled*, archival inkjet print, 10.75 × 7.5 in., 2022

while one was asleep. In *Untitled* (Figure 11), a ritual hand washing is about to be performed for the holiday of Pesach, with a water pitcher tipped in anticipation. I imagine a more sustained version of this daily ritual, in which hands on their own represent an unending link to water as a means of not only purification but also of staying grounded in being awake, and thus, alive. Ultimately, the meditative qualities of ablution rituals offer a means for making renewal and cleansing practices visible, which my work considers through an ever-shifting lens of chronic illness.

(Figure 11) Avianna Miller, *Untitled*, archival inkjet print, 24 × 18 in., 2022

Water and light are interconnected through their purification properties, interacting in transparency and illumination as they leave traces of their presence. I imagine them coming together in a photograph as in Figure 12, this image of a cloth embroidered by and passed down through my ancestors. The satin blue fabric of a curtain on the other side of the door seems to push against the windows of the door in a water-like fashion, "flooding" the space outside. Meanwhile, the edge of the embroidered cloth begins somewhere beyond the door, threaded through the threshold as if "water" has just begun to "flood" into the room. Light cast in the shape of a window illuminates this meeting of fabric and threshold, crossing over both elements of the image.

Elements of the body, especially limbs, have become important to my work in interacting with the material as I seek to understand living with a condition that is somehow simultaneously perpetual and erratic. I work to interpret this experience through studies of the material that give visual form to notions of spiritual clearing and renewal. Hands in gesture, interacting with objects found in my home, reinforce connections to person, place, and action. At other times in my work, a human presence is suggested, leaving behind a trace of a body in space, like in *Untitled* (Figure 13), where someone has assumedly positioned a piece of amethyst on the ground and into the light, though it is unclear whether the light or the object came first. As Rabbi Ruttenberg discerns, "It is not the case that all rituals inscribe themselves directly onto the body, but the body itself is a powerful site for ritual" (Ruttenberg 85). I see the body as a vessel for carrying out gestures and acts that point toward ritual through references to mobility and limbs. I am influenced by filmmaker Maya Deren's 1943 short film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Figure 14). Deren, who has Jewish roots, weaves shadows and close-up gestures into the images of this film. With the majority of the plot taking place in a domestic setting, Deren's shots tend to favor fragments of the body to indicate

(Figure 12) Avianna Miller, *Untitled*, archival inkjet print, 10.75 × 7.5 in., 2022

movement and interaction within objects in these spaces that drive the enigmatic narrative of this experimental film forward.

(Figure 13) Avianna Miller, *Untitled*, archival inkjet print, 24 × 17.5 in., 2023

When a figure appears in my photographs it is always my mother, a referencing of self through the representation of her. In the space of an image, with her face never fully revealed, her arm becomes my arm, her hand my hand. I imagine a bridging of generational histories through our personal connection, resemblance, and a likeness to our ancestors. In this way, she embodies the trace, a subject that becomes self-reflective through suggestion and representative of multiple moments of time through a singular image. Working in a similar tradition of representing his parents in domestic spaces, Jewish photographer Larry Sultan's 1983–1992 series *Pictures from Home*, Sultan features his parents, Irving and Jean, in the various homes they occupy throughout the duration of this series of both candid and

(Figure 14) Still from Maya Deren, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943 (0:32)

staged photographs. Especially relevant here is the 1984 photograph *Dad on Bed*, in response to which Irving reportedly asked, "… [W]hose truth is it? It's your picture but my image." Larry responded to this through an admission that "There are no clear lines – I don't know where you stop and I start" (Sultan 160). I am interested in this kind of an indirection happening in my work, in which my staging and directing make my mother's image mirror-like, reifying her as an extension of myself that conflates both image and meaning through the medium of photography.

V. Conclusion: The Ritual of Making

To view the work is to participate in an assembled ritual. Ideas of liminality and ambiguous space also pervade the sequencing of my work; transitional space is marked across the work through transitional images that meet in the middle, separating and reconnecting moments of the day (see Figure 15). In sequence, this body of work can be read from right to left or left to right. There is also an effect of the images looping, mirroring the seemingly

(Figure 15) Example sequence of three digital photographs, 2022-2023

endless cyclical nature of the day to day, sunrise to sunset. My video work involves a similar experience, looping again and again until start and end points become almost indistinguishable. This elliptical nature preserves the instability and ephemerality of light as conditions of the medium that can be manipulated into the time-based video form.

Light, as both a central component of the medium of photography and my practice, dictates a certain speed and urgency with which I must arrange my practice around. Ultimately, light makes the images, deciding when I can work and when I must wait. Due to these conditions, my photographic practice takes on its own ritual form, dictated by the natural cycles of the day and seasonal changes. As Rabbi Ruttenberg remarks, "For, whether we are consuming them literally or metaphorically, whether we are marked by them in a more concrete or less tangible way, rituals become us, and we become our rituals" (Ruttenberg 92). For my practice, the ritual process of manifesting the trace results in images that have themselves become remainders through their photographic indexicality. Thus, in what is revealed and what is hidden in my work, I consider that which can become visible within the ritual of making (Miller).

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