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*Striae Re-Negotiated: The Self-Definition of the Yiddish-Speaking
Jewish Community in the Era of Mexico's Raza cósmica*

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*Striae Re-Negotiated: The Self-Definition of the Yiddish-Speaking Jewish Community
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ABSTRACT

This essay examines Mexican Jewish documents through which that community navigated the political terrain of post-Revolution Mexico. Central to this discussion is tension between Jewish desires to become part of this new nation and the imperative to remain a discreet cultural and religious community. I first examine the pressures of assimilation in 1920s Mexico exemplified by José Vasconcelos' 1925 *La raza cosmica* and then probe the Yiddish-speaking Jewish community's response and self-definition in relation to a rapidly developing nation, using two case studies: the Jewish community's political position publicized in the 1929 *Asociación de Jóvenes Israelitas de México* bulletin and the relationship between Yiddish poet Itzhak Berliner and muralist Diego Rivera.

From approximately 1910 to 1920, Mexican society experienced a profound, and violent, transition from Independence Era, *criollo*-dominated state to the establishment of the post-Revolutionary democracy extant today. The transition necessarily involved the reframing of society and the fostering of a new form of national identity emphasizing solidarity and unity. This nationalism, the subject of governmental campaigns, re-defined the “Mexican people” as a racially homogenous new nation in which the identification of ethnic or religious minorities was uncharted territory. In this essay, I examine selected examples of Mexican Jewish documents through which that community navigated the social and political terrain of post-Revolution Mexico. Central to this discussion is the tension between Jewish desires to become part of this new nation through political activity and the imperative to remain a discreet cultural and religious community. I begin by describing the unique pressures of assimilation in 1920s Mexico exemplified by the infamous racist tract *La raza cósmica* (The Cosmic Race), published in 1925 by Mexican politician and educator José Vasconcelos. Having provided, through the lens of *La raza cósmica*, a brief introduction to the tenor of identity politics in 1920s Mexico, I will then explore how the Yiddish-speaking Jewish community responded to this national development and positioned itself in relation to a rapidly developing nation. My analysis rests on two case studies, one of communal origin and the other of individual production. First, I examine the Jewish community’s political position as established and declared in the 1929 Spanish section of the Yiddish bulletin of the *Asociación de Jóvenes Israelitas de México* and begin to describe the links between these political positions and post-revolutionary identity. Second, I consider the relationship between Mexican Yiddish poet Itzhak Berliner and the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, focusing on the former’s adoption and adaption of the strains of *indigenismo* in the latter’s cultural production and indigenism. Neither analysis is exhaustive, but, together, the two provide an understanding of the complications of navigating Mexican/Jewish identity in the early 20th century.

Pre-revolution Mexico was not a colonial state because Mexican independence from Spain was achieved as a result of the War for Mexican Independence. That war, which began in 1810 and ended in 1821, established a struggling state originally including vast territories in what is now the Southwestern

and Western United States. However, despite that independence, 1920s Mexico represented the first attempt to govern this country as a constitutional democracy. While Independence Era Mexico was proclaimed an empire (or a series of empires), post-revolutionary Mexico followed a new model of government, one that, ideally, if not in practice, sought to empower all of the people in the various classes of Mexico, building a radically more progressive nation after various incarnations of hegemony based on race and class.

The mythology of the revolution was one of lower class struggle. The revolution began as a coup d'état by Francisco Madero, who was declared president in 1910 after overthrowing dictator Porfirio Díaz. Madero's coup was a response to a fraudulent election, but his governing period was short-lived, as he was subsequently ousted by conservative general Victoriano Huerta. However, the beginning of the revolution, a series of governmental transactions, is overshadowed in the mythology by what occurred after 1913, namely the rise to prominence of several revolutionary heroes, most famously Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, each of whom created his own fighting force and initiated a period of frenetic and disorganized battles. A third, allied army led by Venustiano Carranza created the 1917 Constitution of Mexico and established a fragile democratic government which would then, despite substantial fluctuations to the left and right, strengthen and remain firmly in place.¹

Post-revolution, Mexico underwent a transformation in identity as the shapers of this new government sought to create a Mexican national "type," a symbol of the new nation. The movements toward this new type were symptomatic of a progressive trend in Mexican politics which would continue through the Second World War under the leadership of presidents Álvaro Obregón (1920-24), Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-28) and the three presidents generally regarded as Calles' puppet leaders during the 1928-1935 *maximato* ([Emilio Portes Gil](#), [Pascual Ortiz Rubio](#), and [Abelardo Rodríguez](#)), and Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). The campaign focused on a simplified sense of acculturation, as Magnus Mörner

¹ There are many distinguished scholarly histories of this period which provide critical analyses of the origins and mythology of the revolution. Among these are Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and Enrique Krauze, *Mexico: Biography of Power: A History of Modern Mexico, 1810-1996*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997).

has termed it, to complement, or match, the miscegenation already occurring on a large scale in Mexico.² This process was centuries-old in Mexico: viceregal social norms had allowed for diverse racial mixing, dividing the Mexican population into sixteen distinct racial categories or *castas*. However, the complex terms of this mixing were made illegal in independent Mexico. After independence, one racial type became dominant in an understanding of Mexican society: the *mestizo*, the result of the coupling of Spaniards (colonial or peninsular) and indigenous Americans. The *mestizo* would continue to symbolize the unique racial make-up of Mexico through the revolution and would prove to be the building block of a purposeful campaign to create a strong national identity in post-revolutionary Mexico.

The campaign for this new type was perhaps most famously waged by the Mexican muralists, under the supervision of Vasconcelos, the newly-returned exile to Europe who would be appointed by Obregón as Rector of the National University and then Minister of Public Education in 1920.³ Vasconcelos famously invented the phrase “*Por mi raza hablara el espíritu*,” often translated as “The spirit will speak for my people” and, to this day, it remains the motto of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM).⁴ Historian Enrique Krauze writes that “few recognized the quasi-religious overtones of [Vasconcelos’] words.”⁵ However, what Krauze does not note are the racial elements of this phrase, a major part of Vasconcelos’, and the new nation’s, project. The term that Vasconcelos uses, often translated as “people,” is also the Spanish word for “race.” While Krauze’s translation is valid, it bears mention that the concept of “people” here is not that of “*gente*,” a relatively neutral term, or “*pueblo*” or “*nacion*,” both of which would describe a sort of politically-bounded

² Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967).

³ A reader interested in Vasconcelos should begin by consulting three major scholarly studies: José J. Blanco, *Se Llamaba Vasconcelos: Una Evocación Crítica*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977); Itzhak Bar-Lewaw, *Introducción Crítico-Biográfica a José Vasconcelos (1882-1959)*, (Madrid: Edición Latino Americana, 1965); and Itzhak Bar-Lewaw, *José Vasconcelos: Vida y Obra*, (México: Clásica Selecta Editora Librera, 1966).

⁴ Krauze, 393. In his introduction of a 1979 translation of *La raza cósmica*, Didier Jaen translates the UNAM motto as “The Spirit shall speak through my race.” While the English quoted above is more common, Jaen’s translation, just as valid linguistically, if not more so, allows an easier transition to the questions of race and identification I intend to raise in this paper. Didier Jaen, “Introduction,” José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Didier T. Jaen. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), xiv.

⁵ Krauze, 393.

community, but, rather “*raza*,” distinguishing Vasconcelos’ imagined community as racially and ethnically-defined.⁶

In 1925, Vasconcelos published his famous *La raza cósmica*, in which he elaborated a utopian vision of racial blending that would create a final hybrid “cosmic race.” This cosmic race, by including all distinctive ethnicities in its prerequisite miscegenation, seems to eliminate those distinctions.

Vasconcelos’ project in *La raza cósmica* was a nationalistic one. The cosmic race was none other than that of the *mestizo*, but Vasconcelos saw this Mexican type as the result of an impressive amount of hybridization, writing that the *mestizo*, or the “Ibero-American,” was not simply the product of the “people of Atlantis” or the “red man:”

His soul resembles the old Mayan *cenote* [this term refers to the natural sinkholes into which Mayans threw offerings—both human and non—intended for their gods] of green waters, laying deep and still, in the middle of the forest, for so many centuries since, that not even its legend remains any more. This infinite quietude is stirred with the drop put in our blood by the Black, eager for sensual joy, intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust. There also appears the Mongol, with the mystery of his slanted eyes that see everything according to a strange angle, and discover I know not what folds and newer dimensions. The clear mind of the White, that resembles his skin and his dreams, also intervenes. Judaic striae hidden within the Castilian blood since the days of the cruel expulsion now reveal themselves, along with Arabian melancholy, as a remainder of the sickly Muslim sensuality. Who has not a little of this, or does not wish to have all?...In this manner, a sensitive and ample heart will be taking shape within us... and we foresee something like another head that will dispose of all angles in order to fulfill the miracle of surpassing that sphere.⁷

As is obvious from this extended citation, Vasconcelos’ concepts and understanding of race were as myopic as his vision was expansive.⁸ However, his text reveals the deep concern about race in Mexico

⁶ For a reader familiar with Mexican history, this concept with relation to Vasconcelos is no surprise, given his later identification with Fascist causes and consequent expulsion from Mexico. However, as Adina Cimet writes, “During his years in public life, the ideological racial hierarchy that he promoted was either veiled to most or acceptable to some. It was only in the 1930s, when his political standing had weakened and he felt his personal power threatened, that his original distaste for other cultures took the form of a very clear anticommunism, anti-Americanism, and, finally, a vitriolic anti-Semitism.” Adina Cimet, *Ashkenazi Jews in Mexico: Ideologies in the Structuring of a Community*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 19.

⁷ *La raza cósmica*, 22.

⁸ As Jaen writes, it is far easier to dismiss Vasconcelos’ writings than it is to examine them seriously. Vasconcelos was often vague as in, for example, his failure to answer the question of whether his cosmic

after the revolution and, more importantly for this essay, the manner in which the dialogue around race would maintain and even strengthen existing racial and cultural hierarchies. Vasconcelos' vision is a Catholic one, in which Jewish and Muslim religious traditions are obsolete, present only in weakened, trace form. Jews are mentioned only once more in Vasconcelos' text, when he describes the "Hebrew race" in terms analogous to that of all races which have not reached their full potential: "The Hebrew race was, for the Egyptians, nothing more than a miserable caste of slaves. Yet, from that race was born Jesus Christ."⁹ Vasconcelos continues to affirm the earlier implied obsolescence of the Jews, stating that they were not able to commune with gentiles and thus receive Christian revelation, language that, in the context of this book, the goal of which is full communion, can only be interpreted as derogatory.

I cite Vasconcelos' text here not necessarily as a direct influence on the Jewish community, but, rather, as an indication of the political milieu of post-revolution Mexico. The search for a new Mexican type was focused on a varied spectrum of racial philosophies, but all reflected a desire to create a cohesive national community. Vasconcelos' theories are perhaps the most stringent in terms of racial conformity, but they emerge from a real and ubiquitous desire to understand and promote a national racial type. The allegorical or symbolic type for Mexico would be defined not by race alone, but also by religion, class, and political stance, despite the fact that the intellectually elite shapers of this identity did not pertain to the type they would exalt. Perhaps the best example of this type is the *campesino*, or rural

race would bring about the "Aesthetic Age" he described, or vice versa. Jaen writes that Vasconcelos' central goal of *mestizaje* "led to unfortunate misinterpretations of his book, both by friend and foe. His essay has traditionally been taken as a racist theory for the encouragement of a people with deeply rooted feelings of inferiority... [but] how can one bring up scientific arguments to reject a utopian fantasy?" (Jaen, x).

Jaen is, to some degree, correct. Vasconcelos' text is not a scientific one, and it would be ridiculous to expect that his utopian vision would be entirely articulated. However, the text is, fundamentally, about race, and, even if we excuse the racist assumptions that might be a product of Vasconcelos' milieu, his dream of a cosmic race in which European Christian thought is dominant is just that, a dream of racial hegemony. This, of course, does not mean that Vasconcelos' project should be dismissed by scholars, but it should be analyzed as the hierarchically-inclined document that it is.

⁹ *La raza cósmica*, 35.

worker, which, as Christopher Boyer has written, occupied a privileged place in Mexican politics as both a symbol of the basic unit of national society and of revolutionary potential.¹⁰

These campaigns for cohesion, no matter how superficial or deceptive, were nonetheless powerful in their advocacy of the *mestizo* and shaping of Mexican consciousness. Racial assimilation, however, is not a neutral concept, nor is it entirely positive, as Vasconcelos conceived of it. The hierarchy implicit in Vasconcelos' theories is socially conservative, and his narrow definition of the cosmic race was dangerously exclusive. His argument calls for the end of all minority populations through assimilation into his cosmic race, which combines the *logos* of Western European, Catholic civilization with a primitivized *pathos* of all other cultures, dominated by the indigenous peoples of the Americas. In the national path to this ultimate *mestizo*, then, where could a community with no desire to assimilate position itself? This question was absolutely central to Mexico City's Jewish community in the years following the revolution: in a veritable whirlwind of national identity politics, this community struggled to position itself along overlapping racial, social, cultural, and religious spectra.

In 1929, the bulletin of the *Asociación de Jóvenes Israelitas de México* (abbreviated "Y.M.H.A.", reflecting the organization's ties to the Young Men's Hebrew Association in the United States), published only in Yiddish from its conception in February 1927 until it ceased publication in 1931, included a section of articles in Spanish defining the place of the organization, as well as that of the community it represented, in Mexican society. These Spanish-language articles were the only text published by the Y.M.H.A. accessible to the non-Yiddish-speaking community and, thus, the unique site for the Y.M.H.A. to describe their place in a highly politicized society, in rapid development only one decade after the end of the Mexican Revolution.

The bulletin was a monthly publication during its print run, featuring only a few pages of articles, all, with the exception of the January 1929 Spanish section, in Yiddish, a small number of photographs of clubs within the organization, and a substantial number of pages of local advertisements for all manner of

¹⁰ Christopher R. Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920-1935*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), i.

goods. The title of the publication changed throughout its existence: In 1929, it was called “*Undser Wort*,” a title that reflected the European roots of its readers and publishers and was translated in an advertisement in the Spanish section that read: “‘*Nuestra Palabra*’ es leída por todas nuestras Clases Sociales y sus anuncios son el 100% eficaces” (“‘Our Word’ is read by all of our social classes and its advertisements are 100% effective”).¹¹ The founders of the Y.M.H.A. in Mexico, however, were recent immigrants from the United States. Their paper had originally been published in English, during the 1910s, but, by the end of the 1920s, *Undser Wort* had become a Yiddish publication, indicating what sociologist Adina Cimet has called a search “for a life with meaning: ‘We brought with our habits, concepts, a thirst for spiritual life. Who will satisfy all this?’”¹²

Cimet notes that *Undser Wort* was, during the 1920s, highly concerned with a Zionist mission. In fact, despite the general leftist affiliation of the Ashkenazim in Mexico, *Undser Wort*’s emphasis on support for settlements in Palestine gave the impression that the Jewish community was strongly and actively Zionist.¹³ The Y.M.H.A. was also closely associated with centrist politics and a conservative desire for the Jewish community. It represented one pole of a spectrum of attitudes toward assimilation, opposed by socialist-oriented integrationist Jews whose goal was to “mexicanize” their own population and create an entirely new, and, in their opinion, unproblematic identity.¹⁴

This resistance to assimilation makes the international goals of the Y.M.H.A. unsurprising. Under a heading of “*Nuestros deseos para 1929*” (Our Desires for 1929), is a list dominated by foreign policy goals:

That the Kellogg Pact will be a true Peace Pact and will not share the fate of Wilson’s fourteen points plan.
That the sessions, reports, conferences, and congresses of the League of Nations will no longer be melodramas or serenades of eternal love.
That the Monroe Doctrine will be well-understood by China.

¹¹ *Byuletin von Y.M.H.A.*, no. 13 (Enero 1929), 6. Dorot Jewish Division, Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, New York Public Library.

¹² *Ashkenazi Jews in Mexico: Ideologies in the Structuring of a Community*, 37.

¹³ *Ibid*, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 77.

That “Mister” Johnson—famous inventor of the no-less-famous quota—will invent something better: a quota for English immigrants to Palestine... A quota for North American immigrants to Venezuela, a quota for Galician immigrants to Poland. That neither the swampy ancestral homeland of the Hebrew Colonists in Russia nor that in Palestine will be touched.¹⁵

These international goals were wide-ranging. Particularly salient in them was a desire for the United States to take an increasing leadership role in world politics while becoming more transparent about its own immigration policies. The critique of the United States’ Emergency Quota Plan is particularly pointed, and the obvious bitterness toward that plan is interesting, given the editors of this paper were Jews who had successfully immigrated to the United States and left of their own accord. However, despite that bitterness, a thread of optimism can be seen in this section of the paper, in which the members of the Y.M.H.A. demonstrate their engagement with international politics and express some hope that the power systems in place will lead the world in the correct direction through constructive interaction.

While Cimet writes about the Zionist agenda of *Undser Wort*, what is clear here is a sort of pluralistic “pro-Jewish” agenda. The editors of the bulletin express their desire for the protection of Middle Eastern and Russian Jewish homelands—Palestine and Birobidhzan—in the same breath and without apparent bias between the two. Further, in their critique of Johnson’s quota plan, they betray sympathies and affinities with a third geographic region, that of Latin America, their actual home. While this critique of North American hegemony in Latin America is not equivalent to their repeated desires to secure Eastern European and Palestinian Jewish homes, what may be gleaned from the prioritization of Venezuela here is a desire for global stability and, with it, recognition of the Y.M.H.A.’s members’

¹⁵ “Que el convenio Kellog sea verdaderamente un Convenio de Paz y no corra la misma suerte que los catorce difuntos puntos de Wilson...
Que las Sesiones, Informes, Conferencias, y Congresos de la Liga de Naciones dejen de ser melodramas o serenatas de eterno amor...
Que la Doctrina Monroe sea bien comprendida por la China...
Que “mister” Jhonsen [*sic*]—famoso inventor de la no menos famosa ‘quota’—invente algo mas genial...
Una cuota para los IN(sic?)gelses a Palestina...
Una cuota para los Norteamericanos a Venezuela...
Una cuota para los Galicianos a Polonia...
Que a los Colonistas Israelitas en Rusia no les toque suelo pantanosos, no a los de Palestina—rocas...”
Byuletin von Y.M.H.A., 2.

incorporation into their local political culture. They were not unilaterally focused on Palestine and a Zionist cause, or even on Palestine and Russia, from where they had originally come. Rather, they understood themselves as engaged on a global level to secure safety and stability wherever they were.

The next section of goals, noticeably shorter, deals with domestic politics providing increasing evidence for this understanding of the Yiddish-speaking Jews as incorporating themselves into their own geographical locality. Their priorities were cultural and political:

That the “Toreo” [bull-fighting ring] will become an open-air school and the “Torreros” [bullfighters] will become vegetarians.
That the National Theater will be completed.
That Petroleum will not be the only base of the national budget.
That the public education budget will supersede all others.¹⁶

The first goal can be interpreted metaphorically as a call for peace in a country still dealing with the fallout from the Revolution. However, it is also a specific cultural reference which adapts the language of and supports none other than Vasconcelos. Vasconcelos had resigned from his post as Minister of Education in 1924 in protest of President Plutarco Elías Calles, elected in that year and in office until 1928. During his tenure as Minister of Education, Vasconcelos waged a public campaign against bull-fighting, positioning it as a symbol of barbarism in Mexico, reportedly proclaiming publicly in 1922, “While there are bullfights in Mexico, there will be no civilization.”¹⁷ This statement, of course, has many levels of meaning. It can be interpreted literally, and, as in the Y.M.H.A. bulletin, it can be understood as deeply culturally significant, demonstrating Vasconcelos’ notion that Mexico was crude, uncivilized, and in need of a political movement to counter the radicalization of its government.

The creators of the Y.M.H.A. bulletin continue to express their support of Vasconcelos’ mission in the goals stated above: the development of the National Theater was a major goal of Vasconcelos as

¹⁶ “Que el ‘Toreo’ se vuelve a escuela al aire libre y los ‘Torreros’ vegetarianos.
Que el Teatro Nacional lo vemos terminado.
Que el Petroleo no sea la única base para formular el presupuesto Nacional.
Que el Presupuesto de Educación Pública supere a todos los demás.”
Ibid.

¹⁷ William A. Ross, *Sunrise in Aztec Land*. (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1922), 220.

Minister of Education, both in terms of the completion of a building project and the implementation of a program that would send actors into rural communities to provide educational tools and perform nationalistic programs on par with the mural campaigns.¹⁸

The next goal in the sequence is a more dramatic affirmation of the Y.M.H.A.'s support of Vasconcelos against the *callista* government. Despite leaving office as a result of a one-term limit on the Mexican presidency, Calles continued to control the series of Mexican presidents who served until 1935, in a period called the *maximato*, a term derived from Calles' nickname "*Jefe máximo*" (Highest leader). The *maximato* is notable for a number of dramatic policies, most significantly Calles' domestic battle against the *Cristeros*, Christian rebels who opposed his anti-clerical policies, and the waves he made internationally with his advancement towards the expropriation of the Mexican oil industry, which would not be fully implemented until 1938 under President Lázaro Cárdenas. Thus, by expressing their hope that oil would not be the major contributor to Mexico's financial health in the year 1929, the publishers of the Y.M.H.A. bulletin were aligning themselves very clearly with the end of the political spectrum represented by the anti-*callista* politicians.

What should come as no surprise is that, in 1929, Vasconcelos was running for president of Mexico and was the only viable opponent to Calles' handpicked-candidate, Pascual Ortiz Rubio. Vasconcelos' campaign was, as historian Enrique Krauze has written, "one of the most impressive and broadly inclusive democratic campaigns in the history of Mexico."¹⁹ Krauze goes on to explain that Vasconcelos assembled "'battalions' of university students" and called on the sympathies of the middle class and intellectuals; one might assume that this broad effort is what leads Krauze to describe the campaign as "democratic." However, considering Vasconcelos' pan-Americanist viewpoint and Christian biases, his campaign might be re-characterized "populist," in that Vasconcelos represented the interests of several large groups of people, but the philosophies that continued to guide him would not situate him to

¹⁸ Felicia Hardison Londré and Daniel J. Watermeier, *The History of North American Theater: The United States, Canada, and Mexico: From Pre-Columbian Times to the Present*. (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), 336.

¹⁹ Krauze, 429.

represent all Mexican citizens. His extensive campaign was the culmination of years of stalwart opposition to Calles, marked by Vasconcelos' repeated repudiation of Calles' government and his successor, Álvaro Obregón, assassinated before he could assume office in 1928. With their goals for 1929, the editors of the Y.M.H.A. bulletin made their political sympathies clear. Their last wish, the prioritization of the national education budget, reinforces beyond a doubt their allegiance to Vasconcelos.

The position of these Yiddish-speaking Jews is thus made apparent in this short section of text, and it complicates their place in Mexican society. The alliance of the Yiddish-speaking community and Vasconcelos as presidential candidate is not an entirely comfortable one. The fact that the Y.M.H.A. bulletin was published almost entirely in Yiddish signals a separation of that community from the general population. That separation does not have positive or negative value, but it does suggest an independent identity most strongly demonstrated in language. Thus, the Spanish section of this paper, in idiom alone, might indicate a sort of linguistic intersection, a moment in which the organization's multivalent and developing national identity extended in a new direction. However, the overwhelming dominance of Yiddish in the publication and the absence of any Spanish in the issues preceding and following the January 1929 issue makes evident the fissure between a community invested in its own insular development and a politician whose goal was a united, ethnically-harmonized electorate.

This fissure might be further complicated by an analysis of the rest of the 1929 Spanish section and its implications in the context of the politicized cultural life of Mexico in the late 1920s. The Spanish section includes an article singling out the painter Diego Rivera for praise. Rivera spent most of 1928 in Europe, first in Paris and Berlin and then, more significantly, in the Soviet Union. He departed Mexico for what would be a ten-month trip in August of 1927 and arrived in Moscow in time to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution.²⁰ The artist had, after the beginnings of a tumultuous relationship with the *Partido Comunista de México* (Communist Party of Mexico, hereafter, PCM),

²⁰ Patrick Marnham, *Dreaming with his Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 200. Marnham also notes that Rivera fiercely denied plans to travel to Paris, which he termed bourgeois and where he had worked during the Mexican Revolution. While the language with which Marnham describes Rivera's persona is often overly congratulatory, the dates he provides for Rivera's travels are well-established.

rejoined the party in 1927 and would remain a member until 1929, when he would receive his final expulsion in part because of his much-advertised association with Leon Trotsky, who would come to Mexico in the mid-1930s as a guest of the painter and remain there until his 1940 assassination.

Rivera and Vasconcelos represent an interesting juxtaposition in the 1929 Y.M.H.A bulletin Spanish section, particularly in light of their interaction in the early 1920s. As Minister of Education, Vasconcelos almost singlehandedly created the Mexican Muralist movement of which Rivera was the most famous participant. The relationship between Rivera and Vasconcelos is difficult to characterize, as is the degree of influence of Vasconcelos on Rivera's murals. As Patrick Marnham writes in his biography of the artist, Rivera was "careful to compliment his patron, Vasconcelos."²¹ Vasconcelos was Rivera's greatest supporter and the reason that the artist's early career was possible. However, both Rivera, in his often bombastic autobiography and Marnham, in his only slightly less so biography, mention several situations in which Vasconcelos had a direct influence on the content of the murals, bearing responsibility for both conceptions and revisions. Most compelling for this case may be Vasconcelos' assertion that Rivera's very early mural, *Creación* (Creation, 1921), in the theater of the *Escuela Preparatoria*, in which Rivera depicted the acculturation of pre-Columbian and Spanish religious symbols and racial types, a response to Vasconcelos' charge to depict a "universal theme," was not "Mexican enough."²² At another time, Vasconcelos had required the removal of the text of what Rivera called "a revolutionary poem" from the *Secretaria de Educación Pública* (Ministry of Public Education, hereafter, SEP) mural cycle Rivera completed in 1928.²³

Perhaps because of his absence from Mexico for much of 1928 and because of his then-allegiance to the PCM, Rivera does not seem to have publicly supported a candidate in the campaign for the Mexican presidency in 1928-1929. However, his presence in the PCM was highly publicized, perhaps mostly by Rivera himself, whose self-mythologization was a major part of his lifelong success. He was

²¹ Marnham, 163.

²² *Ibid*, 162.

²³ Diego Rivera and Gladys March, *My Art, My Life: An Autobiography*. (Dover: Courier Dover Publications, 1991), 81. Disagreements between Rivera and Vasconcelos recounted late in the artist's life should take into account the latter's dramatic shift to the right around the outbreak of World War II.

no less public about his disagreements with the harmonious vision of Vasconcelos, whose populist vision would not have included the statements implied in such revolutionary visions as Rivera's *En el arsenal: Frida Kahlo repartiendo armas* (In the Arsenal: Frida Kahlo Distributing Arms, 1928), a section of the SEP murals in which the artist's wife Frida Kahlo is shown clothed in red and dispensing weapons to workers beneath a Soviet flag.

Thus, it seems unlikely that the Y.M.H.A., in a section strongly advocating the policies of Vasconcelos, would offer high praise to Rivera. However, the creators of the bulletin did just that in a Spanish-language article entitled "*Diego Rivera: El pintor contemporáneo mas grande de México*" (Diego Rivera: The Greatest Contemporary Painter of Mexico), written by M. Verlinsky, editor of the Y.M.H.A. publication. The article begins with a brief discussion of "Mexican curiosities," which, the author notes, "are well-known and appreciated abroad."²⁴ After explaining that these objects produced in Mexico are often indicative of their various regions and thus engaging, while not explicitly, the notion of the "folk" in Mexican art, Verlinsky places Rivera within the context of a series of well-known Mexican artists, such as Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo) and José Clemente Orozco. Significantly, each of these artists is tied specifically to a spirit of *mestizaje* in Mexico. Dr. Atl, a landscape painter whose assumed name, from the Nahuatl word for "water," linked him to pre-Columbian language, is described as "multi-form. Like his *nom de guerre* (Atl-water), he can be catalogued as a pre-cursor to the Mexican Revolution in his artistic style."²⁵ In turn, Orozco, the stubbornly apolitical muralist whose fame was second only to that of Rivera,²⁶ is described as an artist above all others, superior to the Renaissance painters—"he resembles Masaccio, but he is more forceful in his drawings and more grandiose in his ideas"—and to pre-

²⁴ "Son de mucha fama y muy apreciadas en las extranjeras" *Byuletin von Y.M.H.A.*, 7.

²⁵ "Multiforme, como su nombre de guerra (Atl-agua), se puede catalogarse como uno de los precursores de la revolución Mexicana en su aspecto artístico." *Ibid.*

²⁶ It is curious that the third muralist of "Los tres grandes" (The Big Three), David Alfaro Siqueiros, is not included here. Siqueiros had rejected any commissions from the Ministry of Education beginning in 1924, when he allied himself quite radically with Communist causes, and his public image was far more checkered than that of the other two muralists. His activist work in the late 1920s would lead to his imprisonment and expulsion from Mexico, and it may be that the extreme nature of his political involvement made him seem like a "fringe element," to use a contemporary term, to the greater community in the 1920s. Further, his often violent disagreements with Rivera may have made him seem inappropriate for comparison.

Columbian Americans, as his mural *Omnisciencia* (Omniscience, 1925) is described as “the most vigorous painting that has been executed in America, and since before America was America.”²⁷

That mural, painted over a staircase in the *Casa de los azulejos* in Mexico City, is an allegory of union and knowledge: divine hands surround two nudes, labeled the “eternal man and woman,”²⁸ who are positioned to represent, respectively, activity and repose and flank a woman from whose hands, clasped in prayer to the sky, come rays of light. All three figures have somewhat indigenous features, most dramatically seen in the profile of the eternal man, and dark skin. The mural is, analogous to *La raza cósmica*, a vision of a harmonious union of opposite virtues. While Vasconcelos combined a European *logos* and indigenous *pathos*, Orozco, having painted blended racial types, combines the active and passive, physical and mental, without tying them to racial extremes.

Verlinsky then moves on to the subject of his article, Diego Rivera, beginning by heaping praise onto Rivera’s SEP mural cycle. Verlinsky first singles out the section he calls “*La mano socialista fulmina al Militarismo, al Capitalismo, y al Clericalismo*” (The Hand of Socialism Strikes Dead Militarism, Capitalism, and Clericalism, 1924).²⁹ Verlinsky goes on to note that this trio, which might be termed the “anti-Revolutionary trio,”³⁰ is again the target of Rivera’s anger in an image of the burning of Judas (1923), placed elsewhere in the building. Verlinksy continues, praising Rivera’s depictions of revolutionary Mexican figures and summarizing much of this expansive mural project, covering several courtyards, hallways, and staircases. In all capital letters, Verlinsky quotes a note in the center of Rivera’s mural *El primero de Mayo* (The First of May, 1923): “True civilization will come with harmony

²⁷ “Se parece a Masaccio—pero es más fuerte en su dibujo y más grandioso en su concepciones” “Omnisciencia es la pintura más vigorosa, que se ha ejecutada en América, desde antes que América fuera América.” *Byuletin von Y.M.H.A.*, 8.

²⁸ Jorge Alberto Manrique, *Una visión del arte y de la historia*. (Mexico: UNAM, 2001), 204.

²⁹ Verlinsky names this section, over the staircase of the “Court of Labor,” based on the motif in the left section of the composition. However, the entire section is more commonly referred to as “The Mechanization of the Country,” by which name it is referenced in Desmond Rochfort, *The Murals of Diego Rivera*, (London: Journeyman, 1987), 35.

³⁰ I use this term to call attention to the symmetry between this anti-populist group and the oft-illustrated “Revolutionary trio,” a term used by art historian James Oles to summarize the *campesino*, urban worker, and bureaucrat often seen in leftist Mexican art, much later in the company of a soldier. For example, see James Oles, ed., *Gritos desde el archivo* (Mexico: UNAM, 2008).

of men with the earth and amongst men.”³¹ Finally, Verlinsky ends his article by discussing the difference between Rivera and other painters:

While other painters paint aristocrats, Rivera paints the people. The others paint what is rotten in society...; Rivera idealizes, symbolizes, adores, teaches, stimulates, and educates the public...And for this reason has the Soviet Government ultimately invited Rivera to come to Russia to teach modern painting to that country.³²

This last section, of course, refers to Rivera’s trip to Soviet Russia in 1927 and was probably written prior to Rivera’s sudden expulsion from Soviet Russia in 1928 as a result of his much-advertised sympathies both to Trotsky and to a spectrum of artistic styles, including those of the avant-garde.

This expulsion did nothing to diminish Rivera’s fame in Mexico. He was emblematic of the post-revolutionary education system and his renown in Mexico and abroad, particularly in the United States, cannot be underestimated. His adaption to and manipulation of the system of arts education and commissions in Mexico, which would later inspire critique by entire generations of artists were both masterful and total.³³ In fact, his personal influence was so great that the 1924 resignation of Vasconcelos had virtually no effect on Rivera’s artistic trajectory. Within a few years of returning to Mexico after the revolution, he had established his own celebrity far exceeding that of his government patron.

Rivera’s status as a symbol of the new Mexico should thus be considered as a powerful element in the decision to publish Verlinsky’s article. Forging an alliance or the appearance of an alliance between this painter and the Yiddish-speaking community would not necessarily have been understood as support for Rivera’s far-leftist politics. Indeed, it seems ironic that an article praising Rivera’s image of capitalism under attack would be included in a publication almost overflowing with advertisements for

³¹ “La verdadera civilización será la armonía de los hombres y la tierra y de los hombres entre si.”

³² Mientras los otros pintan aristócratas, Diego Rivera lo hace del pueblo, los otros pintan lo podrido de la sociedad... Diego Rivera idealiza al pueblo, lo simboliza, lo adora, lo enseña, lo estimula, lo educa...Por eso ha de ser que el Gobierno Soviet invito últimamente a Diego Rivera, para que vaya a Rusia a enseñar a aquel país la pintura moderna.” *Byulletin von Y.M.H.A*, 8.

³³ The most famous of these critiques was levied by the artist José Luis Cuevas against what he termed “The Cactus Curtain”: José Luis Cuevas, “La cortina de nopal,” cultural supplement “Mexico en la Cultura,” *Novedades*, 1956. Republished in Patrick Frank, ed., *Readings in Latin American Modern Art*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 187-193.

commercial endeavors. Acclaim for the image of the attack on capitalism as carried out by the “hand of socialism” is even stranger considering the Y.M.H.A.’s aforementioned opposition to the nationalization of foreign interests in the oil industry, which, when finally implemented, was the most aggressive Socialist policy of the Mexican government.

Rivera’s power as a symbol of *mexicanidad* seems to have superseded any concerns over his ideology, but another aspect of his symbolic status might have been even more important in relation to the Jewish community. By all accounts, Rivera was supportive of the Jewish community of Mexico, often claiming to have been part-Jewish (*converso*). Later, in the face of controversy over the Jewish Question stirred by Nazi propaganda in Mexico, he would make a very strong statement to that effect:

This slogan, “Mexico for the Mexicans,” means nothing. It is of Fascist origin and most stupid. It is nothing but the propaganda of German capitalists who are in competition with American capitalists. The slogan really should be “Mexico for the Germans”... and as for the spread of anti-Semitism, that is not possible here, since eighty percent of the Spaniards who came to this country as a result of the conquest of Cortes were Jews, and, consequently, we’re really half Indian and half Jew.³⁴

Although Rivera granted the above interview to the *New York Times* a decade after the Y.M.H.A Spanish section, his statement in 1938 was consistent with, if more strongly-worded than, his rhetoric through the 1920s. Significantly, in the 1938 statement, Rivera adopts his commonly used language of oppression: he pits warring international capitalists against everyday Mexicans, born of the union of Jews persecuted by the Inquisition and Indians cruelly dominated by the Spanish.

It may be that an affinity for Rivera within the Jewish community was forged in this sphere of oppression and ethnic origins. Rivera’s public statements legitimized the existence of a Jewish community in Mexico and, further, rooted that community in the very conception of the modern Mexican people. By invoking the Inquisition, he also seems to engage in a syncretic practice familiar to students of his work. In his murals, Rivera famously combined Aztec and Christian religious and cultural symbols to define the *mestizo*. Here, he implicitly ties the Jewish community to the oppressed Indian communities

³⁴ “Lays ‘Nationalism’ to Nazis in Mexico: Diego Rivera Charges Fervor for Isolation Is Cloak for German Propaganda,” *New York Times*, (6 February 1938), 30.

in Mexico. The flexibility of the revolutionary language would also have allowed for the “Indians” invoked by Rivera to become stand-ins for the rural peasants who, despite his residence in an urban center, were his most common motif.

Lest this connection seem abstract or distant, we might examine a project in which these dynamics are called into play: a collaboration between the Mexican Yiddish poet Yizhak Berliner and Rivera, himself. That collaboration, a book of Berliner’s poems published in Yiddish with illustrations by Rivera as *Shtot fun Palatsn/Ciudad de Palacios* (City of Palaces) in 1936, is a fascinating document of the relationship that one Jewish poet came to feel with his new home country and its cultural life.³⁵ Berliner was born in Lodz, Poland, in 1899 and immigrated to Mexico in 1921, where he sold images of saints to the local population of Texcoco, just outside Mexico City, to support himself. Several sources note that he grew a moustache “to be mistaken for a Mexican,” a humorous but also poignant comment on the existence of a European immigrant in Mexico.³⁶ He befriended Rivera by 1934, at which point the artist drew his portrait.³⁷ Berliner had been publishing in Yiddish since his arrival in Mexico, albeit with some problems: he attempted to create a Yiddish publication with Latin characters in 1922, as there was no Yiddish type available in Mexico.³⁸

³⁵ All Yiddish transliteration into English is that used in the Library of Congress cataloging system. The original Yiddish version of this book is: Yizhak Berliner, *Shtot fun Palatsn: Lider un Poemes*, (Mexico: Der Veg, 1936). The book has been translated and reproduced in English: Isaac Berliner, *City of Palaces: Poems by Isaac Berliner and Drawings by Diego Rivera*, trans. Mindy Rinkewich, (Basking Ridge: Jacoby Press, 1996).

Interestingly, art historian Gannit Ankori notes that Berliner, who always wrote in Yiddish, had to translate his poems into Spanish for Rivera so that the artist could create appropriate illustrations. Ankori also notes the profound influence of Rivera’s project with Berliner on his then-wife, Frida Kahlo. Gannit Ankori, “The Hidden Frida: Covert Jewish Elements in the Art of Frida Kahlo.” *Jewish Art*, vol. 19/20 (1993/94), 224-247.

³⁶ Becky Rubinstein writes, “se dejó crecer el bigote para confundirse... con el mexicano...” Becky Rubinstein, ed., *Tres Caminos: El Germen de la Literatura Judía en México*, (México: Ediciones El Tucán de Virginia, 1997), 27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 28. The portrait is included as the frontispiece to *Shtot fun Palatsn*. Rivera was also a good friend of the Yiddish poet Jacobo Glantz; they conversed in Russian. (*Ashkenazi Jews in Mexico: Ideologies in the Structuring of a Community*, 78).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

In 1927, the American *Forvertz* presented a Yiddish lettering set as a gift to the Jews in Mexico and thus created the conditions for the publication of Yiddish newspapers. *Ibid.*, 36.

Shtot fun Palatsn is a series of poems dedicated to travel and rootedness, on the one hand, and, on the other, to a sort of lost glory symbolized by the pre-Columbian ruins of the Valley of Mexico, where Berliner lived, with obvious parallels to his experience of exile. The first poem of the book, entitled “On this Side of the Ocean,” is a haunting description of the natural beauty and social injustices of Mexico, ending with a deeply personal stanza:

On this side of the ocean
I have struck deep roots;
though my home is a distant strange land
I am wrapped in a sun-woven weave,
I feel comfortable with the shirt on my back,
I feel comfortable with the life that I lead...
Like an eagle in flight, on the hunt
speeding over giant mountains,
I too fly and I soar
bearing bright days with me
to gild the song that I sing.³⁹

While perhaps lacking subtlety, the text is full of emotion, and the problem broached by Berliner in his work is clear: despite the ambivalence with which he views the political structures of his adopted home, he has adopted it fully. The title he chooses for the book, “City of Palaces,” refers to a traditional name for Mexico City but is here highly ironic. Berliner’s home is not the glorious city it once was but, rather, as he details in subsequent poems, the site of hunger, violence, poverty, illness, and despair. The poems and illustrations are the products of observation of that city. They were inspired by Sunday walks during which Berliner and Rivera cemented their friendship and traded views on social policy. Rivera’s thirteen line drawings are executed in a simple style characteristic of the artist’s sketchbooks, as is obvious from a comparison between a drawing of a drunk man facing the text of Berliner’s “Tepito”⁴⁰ and the many

³⁹ *City of Palaces: Poems by Isaac Berliner and Drawings by Diego Rivera*, 2.

⁴⁰ The title of this poem refers to the site of a huge flea market and to what is perhaps the most dangerous of the neighborhoods in Mexico City, now in the area of Cuauhtémoc.

sketchbooks filled with figural studies by the artist.⁴¹ Easily legible and universal in appeal, they stand in contrast to Berliner's often discursive poetry.

The poem that is most interesting from the standpoint of Berliner's experience of rootedness is "Teotihuacan," an ode to the Aztec site of the same name just north of Mexico City. In that poem, Berliner speaks directly to the pyramids of Teotihuacan, writing:

Perhaps you have the steps of my great great grandfather upon you
and my blood bears the heritage of a secret from afar,-
Do my origins lie buried beneath your stones
in their endless, timeless silence?-

As if this reference to a pre-Columbian origin is not obvious enough, Berliner asks, a bit later in the poem:

You pyramids-
Were your builders Egyptians,
Phoenicians,
Jews, perhaps?-

The poet continues to describe the harm done to the world by the Spanish Inquisition, whose goal, amidst "[scaring] the world with wild Indian stories," was "to erase/these nations from the earth."⁴²

In this poem, the question of *indigenismo* and *mestizaje* among the Jewish community is writ large: Berliner knows that these pyramids were not built by Jews and that his ancestors did not walk the territory of the Americas, but, in an example of the same sort of syncretism that I attributed to Rivera earlier in this essay, he elides the Jewish and Indian experiences and posits the existence of his roots in a mythologized Aztec site. That he continues by noting the persecution of both peoples by the Inquisition seems to be both an echo of Rivera's comments and a signal that this oppression unites the two peoples and, by implication, the *mestizo* Mexican with the Mexican Jew.

⁴¹ These drawings can be seen in the imperfect but still valuable catalogue of Rivera's work, Olivier Debrouse, and Torrijos E. Franco, *Diego Rivera: Pintura de Caballete y Dibujos*, (México: Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana, 1991).

⁴² *City of Palaces: Poems by Isaac Berliner and Drawings by Diego Rivera*, 10-11.

Interestingly, the book and Berliner's poetry, more generally, were subject to criticism from a spectrum of viewpoints. The Mexican Yiddish poet Jacobo Glantz, resolute in his desire to consider the future and jettison the past, expressed himself thusly:

I will not solder links
of a broken chain
I am tired of singing
what time must forget...⁴³

Glantz roundly criticized Berliner for his attachment to a world of the past, but, at the same time, as Cimet writes, "Others criticized Berliner as 'too Mexican,' and saw him as betraying his roots by concentrating on alien problems."⁴⁴ This polarized critique serves as further reinforcement of the tenuousness of the national identification of this community.

According to Cimet, Glantz found Berliner's references to "wandering" particularly distasteful.⁴⁵ Cimet writes that Glantz's comments to that effect were evidence that he had misunderstood Berliner's wandering as a reference to the old country, when, in fact, it described a sort of mental state. While she does not invoke his name, specifically, Cimet's reading may be informed by Edward Said's important work on the concept of exile, in which a psychological exile is linked to but separate from a physical exile.⁴⁶ While Said's poignant, highly personal essay requires more articulation than he provides, the fissure that he suggests between the physical and spiritual states of exile may be productively applied to Berliner's case.

The poet, while accepting Mexico as his home, particularly in 1936, when the threat of European Fascist governments was already very real as a result of the beginnings of Hitler's rise and, more so, the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, explored the points of discomfort inherent in the full adoption of a nation immersed in its own foundational mythology. Rivera, with his well-known collection of pre-

⁴³ *Ashkenazi Jews in Mexico: Ideologies in the Structuring of a Community*, 80.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 81.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 80.

⁴⁶ Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 173-186.

Columbian art and even more famous exaltation of the Indian as the ancestor of the Mexican people, was able to do what Berliner was not: elide, without subtlety or recognition of inherent inconsistencies, his current state with a history from which he was, in fact, detached. Rivera lived in a modern Mexico wholly separate from the mythological pre-Hispanic past he imagined. However, it was Berliner's physical separation from the very land of his birth and his resulting distance from the mythic roots of his adopted home that made those historical fissures apparent. Berliner was settled in Mexico, but he was a wandering Jew because of his inability to comfortably situate himself within the nationalist campaign of his time.

In this paper, I have attempted to contribute to an understanding of the position of Yiddish-speaking Jews in Mexico during the country's rapid nationalist formation. The process of *mestizaje* in Mexico was neither natural nor seamless, but, rather, the invention of a highly-racialized political campaign waged across the political spectrum, left to right, in an attempt to unify a country which, in the pre-Columbian, Viceregal, and Independence Eras, had been both fragmented and stratified along ethnic and economic lines. The radically jingoistic tone of the discussion of the *mestizo* in the first decades after the establishment of the 1917 Constitution of Mexico, manifested most prominently and cohesively in the ideology of Vasconcelos, necessarily created a need for the definition of the Yiddish-speaking Jews as a determinedly separate minority community with a relationship to the greater political establishment and population. The community was defined by language, and its relationship with greater Mexico required linguistic intersections: most obviously, the Spanish section of a Yiddish newspaper and a Yiddish poet's translation of his work into Spanish for the sake of a Mexican artist, and, more subtly, the adoption of Mexican political metaphor and the meeting of expressions of grief conceived in Yiddish with the Mexican visual language.

This study is not, of course, a survey of the time period. Neither is it a historical analysis of the specific Yiddish publications referenced. This sort of survey is most fully realized in Cimet's *Ashkenazi Jews in Mexico: Ideologies in the Structuring of a Community*. Further and more extensive work in this area should include, first and foremost, a more detailed explanation and examination of the Yiddish

newspapers, and, second, a more comprehensive attempt to do what I have begun here: that is, to understand the direct relationship between the Jewish Community and the majority among which they lived. The linguistic intersections I have chosen are not the only ones which can be analyzed, and the group of which they could be considered a part merits further scholarly attention. Lastly, the struggle for self-definition of the Jewish community which I have started to describe might be viewed within the context of other contemporary ethnic minority communities in Mexico, all of which would have been engaged in the struggle to remain current faced with an ideology that would have declared them obsolete.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ This language of obsolescence has obvious affinities to the concept of Jewish anachronism in Medieval Christian Europe most vigorously explored in Jonathan Elukin's dissertation. Jonathan M. Elukin, *The Eternal Jew in Medieval Europe: Christian Perception of Jewish Anachronism and Racial Identity*. Diss. Princeton University, 1994. Elukin explores many moments of intersection between Jewish and Christian communities in which the historical position—and relevance—of Jews after the advent of Christianity is called into question. This framework for the understanding of Vasconcelos and the Mexican campaign is far beyond the purview of this paper, but, considering Vasconcelos' close adherence to a Catholic hegemonic system, a productive study might be conducted with regard to this notion of Jewish anachronism in Catholic thought as a context for Vasconcelos' theories.

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