

CARIBBEAN ARCHIPELAGIC MEMORIES:

Entangled Jewish Dominican histories on Kiskeya-Hispaniola

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ABSTRACT: During World War II, the Caribbean islands were one of the few places of refuge for Jews fleeing the Nazi regime. Many intended the Caribbean to be a short stopover; however, Jewish refugees started a new life and established self-sufficient communities whose Jewishness was entangled with the histories and memories of the islands. This article examines Sosúa through the lens of archipelagic memory, here operationalised in two interrelated ways as mobility and mnemonic currents. Drawing on interviews, go-alongs and archival research conducted between 2020 and 2022, this article investigates how these experiences are remembered through an archipelagic memory defined here as both the movements of people, goods, and ideas across the islands, and the circulation of narrative connections and shared cultural repertoires that link past and present. Focusing in second-to fourth-generation descendants, I trace how memories of the Shoah, colonialism, slavery, Trujillismo, and anti-Haitianism intersect in ways that reveal both solidarities and silences. The analysis shows that Kiskeya-Hispaniola, as a shared yet divided island, becomes an ‘intra-archipelagic’ space where selective remembering shapes notions of Dominicanness, Jewishness, and belonging. By bringing these entangled histories into dialogue, the article highlights the potential of archipelagic memory to foster differentiated solidarities that acknowledge connection without eliminating difference. By following both movements and mnemonic flows, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how Caribbean histories are made, remade, and selectively remembered across archipelagic networks.

KEYWORDS: Jewish exile; Dominican Republic; Haiti; Caribbean islands; archipelagic memory; ethnography.

Introduction

“The Dominican community loved the Jewish people. It was like they were born together. When the Jewish people came here, they were respected and loved. It was like a marriage. We gained a big family,” said Benny Katz in a conversation in his house in Sosúa in March 2020.¹ As a son of a German Jewish displaced person, he was born in Puerto Plata and grew up in the small Dominican coastal town of Sosúa. Benny Katz’s father, Martin Katz, came to Sosúa as part of a humanitarian settlement project in 1940, aged twenty-two, and married the Dominican Rosa Reyes, who followed her husband’s Jewish religion. Although Benny Katz had one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent—while both practiced Judaism—he was

¹ All non-English quotes in this article have been translated from German or Spanish into English by the author, who is fluent in all three languages. Some of the persons mentioned in this article have chosen a pseudonym.

always raised as a Jew. This meant that he was circumcised, celebrated his bar mitzvah, and observed all the Jewish commemorations and holidays mandated by the Torah. Benny Katz also continued this tradition in his current marriage to Alicia Katz Garcia-Carvalho, whose Jewish grandfather, Luis Carvalho, came from Portugal after also escaping the persecution in the late 1930s. In Sosúa there has predominantly been tolerance and openness, and respective cultural and religious roots have been preserved. Benny Katz's father was very involved in the settlement's dairy cooperative, and he also wanted to be more involved in "his" Sosúa by running for mayor in 2006. If Benny Katz had won the election, he would have gone down in history as the first Jewish mayor in the Dominican Republic. Four years later, Ilana Neumann (Gilad, 2013), also a Jewish Dominican, did become mayor; like Benny Katz's father, her Austrian grandfather Manfred Neumann found refuge from the Nazis in the Dominican Republic (Dillmann, 2006). This welcoming spirit and the bond between Sosúa's non-Jewish residents and the newly arrived European Jews at the time is still manifest in the small Dominican coastal town in many ways today. Sosúa's Jewish chapter is remembered across generations. Various monuments, street names and, more recently, murals reflect this part of history and its entanglements with other historical events in the city. And transcultural and transreligious projects have also emerged in Jewish Dominican families; most of these projects are characterised by mutual appreciation and by demarcations too.

In this article, I aim to bring these entangled ideas, discourses, and practices into conversation with one another and show how they form an archipelagic narrative of the Caribbean that "also disrupt[s] easy histories of mainland and islands, by remaining outside the frameworks of mainland narratives" (Joseph, 2020, p. 193). This narrative also becomes efficacious beyond the islands and shifts into continental space, where it opens up new kinds of archipelagic memories. Accordingly, islands, continents, and the sea are not seen as entities, but as the result of complex sociohistorical and epistemological entanglements through mobilities shaped by dynamics. In this vein islands can act as reference points for collectivisations that form both inside and outside the island(s). Following Luca Raimondi and Ananya Jahanara Kabir's (2024, 12; 19) definition of archipelagic memory as a connective logic that resists continental closure, I treat Sosúa as one node in a wider Caribbean network of Jewish histories. These histories circulate not only through migration routes but through enduring family narratives, commemorations, and (symbolic) geographies that link multiple island and coastal spaces.

To investigate the abovementioned entangled narratives, I draw on surveys from my research stays in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Austria, and the US between 2020 and 2022. I use a reflexive and reconstructive perspective (Dausien, 2004) to explore ethnographically individual memory practices and family narratives. In total, thirteen biographical interviews with persons from seven families over three generations currently living in Sosúa, Santo Domingo, Miami, San Diego, Los Angeles, Vienna, and Linz were conducted,² as were ten expert interviews with representatives of different institutions in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and the US. Further, I carried out "go-alongs" (Kusenbach, 2008) in Sosúa with descendants of former settlers, which offered embodied insights into how specific places

² I refer to the first settlers of the settlement project as the first generation. If settlers entered the country together with their children, I refer to the children as the second generation, even if they immigrated at the same time as the first generation (see also "Das Problem der Generationen" by Karl Mannheim ([1928/29] 1970).

such as streets, cemeteries, or building, function as anchors for individual remembering.³ Numerous informal conversations with people involved on-site gave me further insight. Since the individual memory work (Kuhn, 2000) of the present is shaped by the experiences, narrated, and remembered past, I gained additional background information in the Archivo General de Nación in Santo Domingo. I operationalise archipelagic memory here in two interrelated ways: first, as mobility, I refer to the material movements of people, goods, and ideas across islands and coasts (Erll, 2011); and second, as mnemonic currents, I describe, based on the experiences of second- to fourth-generation immigrants, the narrative connections and shared cultural repertoires that circulate between these spaces and link the past and the present.

In the remaining sections, I provide a historical account of the Jewish Caribbean migration and bring it into dialogue with ethnographically derived memories. Thereby I foreground the abovementioned mobilities and currents to show, how routes of migration and exchange are mirrored in the ways memories themselves travel, overlap, and transform across the Caribbean archipelago and beyond. I will first outline my theoretical approach, which refers to archipelagic thinking and multidirectional memory. In the second section, I contextualise the historical background of Jews settling in the Americas and Hispanic Caribbean islands (Figure 1). Third, I provide insight into the entangled histories and memories based on various multifaceted family stories that are rooted in the Dominican Republic. In the fourth section, I draw on these stories to explore Dominicanity in light of the shared island of Kiskeya, colloquially also known as Hispaniola (Figure 2). In the fifth section, I discuss “the island” as a crossroads between a place of refuge and traumatisation against the backdrop of ethnographic fieldwork. Finally, I present concluding remarks and discuss the Caribbean islands as a space of convergences amid an archipelagic memory.

I. Theoretical approach: Archipelagic memory

Various Caribbean islands, among others Dominican Republic, Cuba, Curaçao, and Jamaica, were shaped by both Jewish exile and colonialism, which led to entangled and fragmented references. In this context, Marianne Hirsch spoke of postmemory as a point at which different historical worlds of imagination meet multidirectionally (Hirsch, 2008, p. 106; Rothberg, 2021).⁴ This shared place with different narratives, memories, and histories is, following Édouard Glissant, characterised by proliferating roots that converge in a vertical structure (Glissant, 2009, p. 30). In the case of the Caribbean archipelagos, their peoples have such an abundance of origins and memories that their roots are not (only) grounded in the past but shoot outward, to other islands in the present (Gilroy, 1993). Just as each island in an archipelago is interconnected to other islands (Stratford et al., 2011), human cultures must learn to turn toward other cultures, indeed, to simply turn toward others. In this vein, Glissant argues for a view of the humanities as an interconnected, multifaceted network since the “entire world is creolising and becoming an archipelago” (Glissant, 1997, p. 194).

³ A go-along is a perception-oriented walk in which selected persons are accompanied in their everyday routines. It provides information about individual memory sites and the shaping of these persons' own everyday memory practice (Kusenbach, 2008, p. 352).

⁴ Postmemory is understood “as a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 106). Michael Rothberg defined multidirectional remembering as a memory that is not competitive but productive, subject to a certain dynamic, and to be understood as dialogical and complementary (Rothberg, 2021, p. 27). Postmemories can be understood as a particular version of multidirectional memory (2021, p. 313).

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Figure 1 – Map of Northern Caribbean showing positions of main islands and southern tip of Florida (top left of image) (Google Maps, 2025).

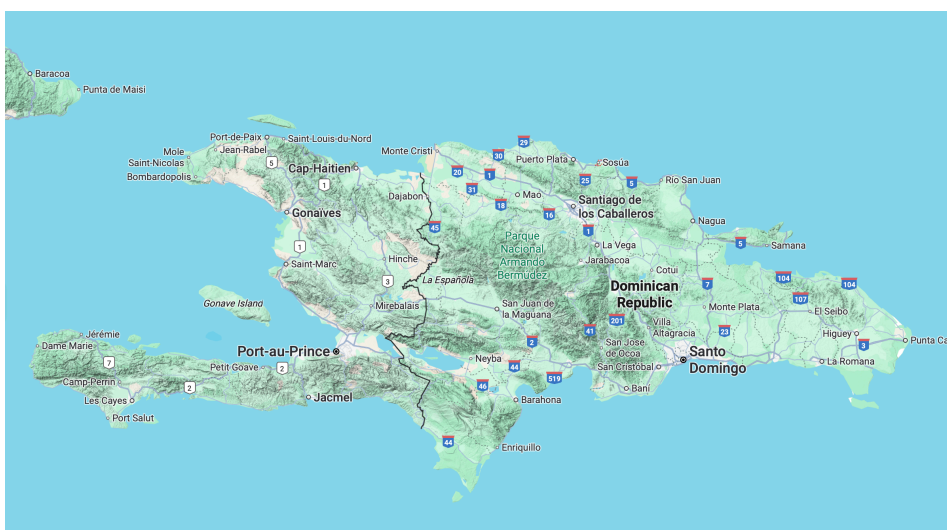


Figure 2 – Map of Kiskeya-Hispaniola (showing position of Sosúa on the mid-north coast of the Dominican Republic) (Google Maps, 2025).

The recently coined concept of archipelagic memory (Rajkomar, Raimondi & Murday, 2022) expands this vision by foregrounding the sea as a medium of relation and mobility. Drawing from Glissant's (2021) rhizomatic relationality and Rothberg's (2009) multidirectional memory the concept describes how memories circulate across oceanic worlds, not in isolation but through currents of relation (Raimondi & Kabir, 2024). Rather than seeing islands as discrete and cut off, this approach, as Luca Raimondi and Ananya Jahanara Kabir

(2024, p. 12) emphasise, applies a “connective logic” born of lived archipelagic experience to the study of memory, thereby resisting the “zero-sum” logic of competitive memorialisation (2024 p. 15).

The approach to archipelagic thinking can thus be understood as tentative and relational. It directs attention to the detail and the interwoven and to that which gave rise to continental thinking—for example, a view of the big picture—in the first place. According to Glissant, archipelagos were the real beginning of continents whose perspective is still dominant and that continue to view themselves as global centers, while archipelagos are consistently underestimated (Glissant, 2021, p. 40-41). As Meghan Gorman-Da-Rif (2024) shows for both Caribbean and Indian Ocean contexts, archipelagic memory is shaped by fragments, traces, and the palimpsestic layering of histories. In this sense she brings in the example of Derek Walcott’s (1993) image of the broken vase reassembled, or Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor’s (2019) use of the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, which highlights scars as sites of beauty and resilience, to figure survival and belonging in Indian Ocean Island worlds (Gorman-DaRif, 2024, pp. 24-25). Archipelagos are thus a rich collection of diversities and represent a critique of any assumed unity; rather, Glissant emphasises the pluriversal, that is, the bringing together of shared histories and cosmologies and the reciprocal relationships that go with them (2024, pp. 38-41).

To work with an archipelagic approach to memory means adopting an approach that is mobile and dynamic and entangled in continental spaces just as much as in those areas where water acts as a bridge between islands and continents with coastal borders. Raimondi and Kabir (2024) describe this as “archipelagic method”, connecting the evidently disconnected and tracing relationalities across geographies. In practice this means linking various multilocal sites such as the island state of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago with non-island spaces, that bear an “island effect” through shared experiences of (Jewish) exile or creolisation. From an archipelagic perspective like Glissant’s or Epeli Hau’ofa’s (1994), we see the planet as a sea dotted with islands and island chains that are interrelated and distinct. From this point of view, the sea is the unifying element of human experience and history. This puts it at odds with a continental perspective that prioritises land narratives, methodological nationalism, and colonial divisions (Benitez-Rojo, 1997).

In relation to the Caribbean, this reframing unsettles inherited linguistic partition into the Hispanic, Francophone, Anglo, or Dutch Caribbean (Cubero, 2017, p. 9), and, as Kabir notes, invites us to see creolisation as a balancing act “between empires, between metropole and colony, and between groups of divergently-(dis)empowered people (masters, the enslaved, freed slaves, whites, blacks, mulattos, and so on)” (Kabir, 2020, p. 137).

In this sense, the archipelagic memory applied here is a deterritorialised locality without closure and a relationality without unity, which arises from lived experience in the worlds of islands and seas, which interacts with individuals in ways different from other human-environment relationships. Hence, addressing archipelagic entangled memories is not to be carried out from a national perspective, but in a diasporic context that refers to a shared horizon of experience. A horizon fed by an island effect, that is, in relation to multiple island spaces that transcend colonial geographies and instead reveal the possibility of understanding island histories through the island itself and not just by reference to the continent, which “connotes a relation of power to which the island is subject to” (Cubero, 2017, p. 160).

II. Historical background: Saving displaced Jews overseas

German-speaking Jews began escaping to the Americas and the Caribbean from 1933 onwards, and they often found already-existing Jewish communities there. Early emigrants tended to be politically far-sighted (Feierstein, 2016, p. 7) or have family abroad, while many who were not directly affected by the anti-Jewish measures at first, hesitated and hoped that anti-Jewish developments were only temporary. They saw themselves as German citizens with a Jewish faith, and some of them were no longer even aware of their Jewishness, as René Kirchheimer, a Jewish descendant of the second generation, just under eighty years old, pointed out to me in March 2020, when he said, “my father didn’t see himself as a Jew until being Jewish became a problem.”

Between 1933 and 1941, nearly 280,000 German Jews left Nazi Germany (Wegner, 2013, pp. 33-35). Families who had once lived in Eastern European countries moved back to their former countries of origin. Many thousands, however, remained in Northern and Western Europe. By the late 1930s, overseas destinations had become the most important escape destinations. Besides the US, Palestine, and Shanghai, and Latin American countries, the Caribbean also became increasingly important as a place where Jews found refuge. By the late 1930s, triggered by both the *Anschluss* (annexation) of Austria, and the November pogroms of 1938, flight became urgent, yet restrictive immigration policies limited options. One crucial moment came at the International Refugee Conference in the French town of Évian in July 1938, convened by U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt. Delegates from thirty-two states met at the Hotel Royale in Évian to discuss reception possibilities for displaced Jews (Dillmann & Heim, pp. 31-35). Yet the conference was widely considered a failure because of its alibi-style statements: many delegates made expressions of sympathy for Jewish refugees coupled with lists of economic, political, or social obstacles that served mainly to justify inaction and avoid expanding quotas. The forced impoverishment of displaced Jews due to expropriation contributed considerably to their being unwanted in potential countries of refuge. Some of the delegations went beyond caution to openly express antisemitic resentment, as a statement from the Australian minister of trade, Thomas Walter White, made clear: “As we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one by encouraging any scheme of large-scale foreign migration” (Toltz, 2017, n.p.). The statement “None is too many,” made by a high-ranking Canadian immigration official, pointed to similar attitudes (Abella & Troper, 1982).

Although its government set up the conference, the United States itself made no concrete offer of admission (Kaplan, 2010). In stark contrast, the Dominican Republic, as the only state willing to take in 10,000 Jewish refugees. Later it even increased its offer to 100,000, prioritising emigrants from Germany and Austria with agricultural skills. While the proposal required self-financing and was met with initial caution, it marked the genesis of the Sosúa settlement project and positioned the Dominican Republic as a rare open port in an otherwise closing world (Dillmann & Heim, 2009; Kaplan, 2010).

Due to the conditions of admission, the situation left Jewish refugees searching for less conventional destinations and paths that linked scattered points rather than following continental corridors. Two of the lucky ones were the Viennese brothers Egon Schwarz and Ernst Schwarz, who left Europe via Italy in 1938. They were still wealthy enough to buy themselves tickets for a luxury ship to China. While their two sisters fled to South America, Egon Schwarz and Ernst Schwarz first found sanctuary in Shanghai, where they lived for nine years. In the Shanghai ghetto, Egon Schwarz met his future wife, Hilde Krakowiak, who had

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earlier worked as a dentist and emigrated to China from Berlin. Their daughter, Sylvia Schwarz, who was born in Puerto Plata and who now lives in the US, said in August 2021:

When the Japanese came in, they were confined to a ghetto and had a very bad time. My mother almost died twice ... In 1947, when they found out about Mao Tse-tung, they didn't want to stay there. They heard about the Dominican Republic, and they decided to go because they were offered a farm and a house. (See Figure 3.)

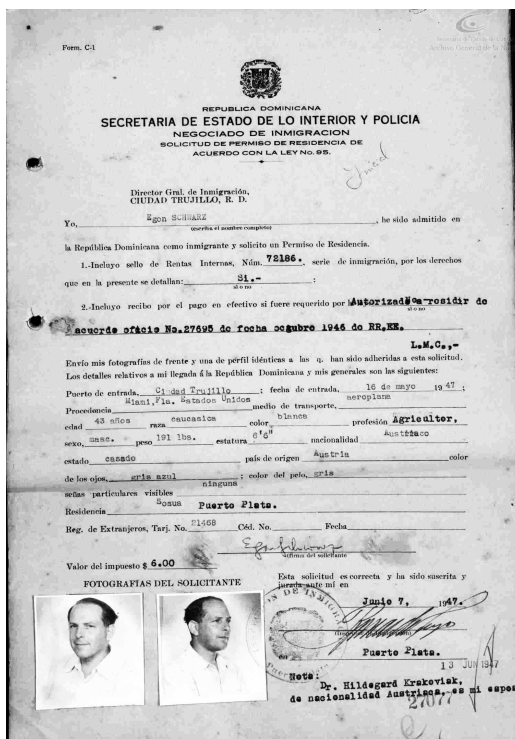


Figure 3 - Egon Schwarz's application for a Dominican residence permit (Archivo General de la Nación, 2020).

On November 25, 1941, Germany collectively revoked the citizenship of all German Jews living inside and outside the territory of Nazi Germany. The emigration process became very complicated, and only a few managed to escape from Europe. With their citizenship revoked, those affected had also lost all their assets to Nazi Germany, so they had little or no financial means at their disposal to help them to escape. Paths to exile therefore often lay somewhere between legal emigration and clandestine flight (Wegener, 2013, p. 35). Niño Sontag, the father of Sunny Sontag, faced such a challenging situation. Because Niño Sontag had Polish parents who came to Vienna, where he was born, he was expelled from Austria. As Sunny Sontag described in an interview in Vienna in July 2021:

Poland said, 'you're not a Pole.' The Austrians said, 'you're not an Austrian.' Ergo, my father was stateless and had to leave.

Niño Sontag fled from Vienna to Brussels with his brother; they remained there for a while together and their grandmother and sister arrived later. In Sunny's words, "when the Germans invaded, my father and his brother fled to France, where they were both in a camp until the camp was abandoned and he arrived in Sosúa in the most adventurous way."

Such stories illustrate how Jewish refugees navigated an archipelagic geography of survival that is not characterised by a straight line from danger to safety, but a series of crossings and reorientations across sea-linked worlds. The trajectories from Austria to China, from Shanghai to Sosúa, and from Sosúa to Miami trace not isolated migrations but what Hau'Ofa (1994) terms a "sea of islands": a network where the sea enables continuity rather than separation. Archipelagic memory emerges here not as a metaphor, but as the lived reality of families whose stories are anchored in multiple shores. This is also underpinned in the ethnographic vignettes of finally finding refuge explored in the following sections.

Refuge in the Caribbean islands—a last resort

The Caribbean emerged as one such space of refuge. Its Jewish presence dated back to the 15th century, when Spanish-speaking Jews and conversos—converted Christians with Jewish ancestry—were expelled and exiled in the Americas and Caribbean islands (Mirvis, 2020, pp. 2–3). These long-established Sephardic networks, particularly in Curaçao and Cuba, created nodal points of relation, much like the interlinked islands of an archipelago. European Jews who arrived during World War II were thus entering not isolated territories but interconnected worlds where histories and mobilities overlapped. They were able to draw on existing Jewish communities, either in settlement projects and refugee camps or directly in the community. For many, however, the Caribbean islands were temporary solutions before emigrating further to the US, Israel or larger Latin American metropolises, such as Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo, where the job opportunities were better, and so in these locations, a place of transit more often became a permanent home (Feierstein, 2016b).

As Nazi power consolidated, Cuba's relatively accessible visa policy made it a key point in the Caribbean's web of refuge (Behar, 1995, pp. 154–156). By the late 1930s, its Jewish population reached about 16,500, most of whom settled in Havana and other urban centers (Kaplan, 2001, p. 21). The Kirchheimer family also tried its luck with a visa application. On his escape from Germany to France via Luxembourg, Arthur Kirchheimer and his Protestant wife, Ilona Detjen, tried to organise a visa for Argentina but failed. They did, however, obtain visas for Cuba, which they were unfortunately never able to use because the documents were stolen, as their son René Kirchheimer reported in Sosúa in March 2020:

They sent the passports to a consulate, but they never got them back. The passports were stolen. And they lost the money. They paid 800 marks for the visa. That was a lot of money at that time.

With Cuba closed to them, the Kirchheimers redirected to the Dominican Republic. Yet, this detour is emblematic of archipelagic mobility: shifting from one island node to another as opportunities and barriers changed. Even when plans failed, the attempted routes reveal how the Caribbean's interconnected islands formed a shared geography of possibility. Further, the connection to Cuba remained with them. René Kirchheimer later married a Dominican whose grandfather once came from Cuba.

In contrast to other Caribbean islands, the US island territory of Puerto Rico did not attract many Jews until the 20th century.⁵ During and after the Second World War, Jewish refugees arrived, followed in the 1950s and 1960s by Cuban Jews, who fled from the economic difficulties and the challenges they faced in practicing their religion after Castro came to power (Duany, 1989, p. 37). The island's geographical, cultural, and linguistic proximity to Cuba made it a natural destination in the regional archipelago (Luxner, 2004). Puerto Rico, however, served not only Cuban Jews in exile but also Jews threatened elsewhere in the Caribbean. The Austrian Jew Kurt Wellisch, who feared for his life because of his political commitment against the Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic, hid there for several months, as will be further clarified later. Such moves show how security could be sought not only across oceans but across nearby islands, another example of intra-archipelagic refuge.

The Dominican Republic played a prominent role in taking in Jews. By the late 19th century, a significant number of Sephardic Jews, mostly from the neighbouring island of Curaçao, and who had fled the Inquisition in Spain or Portugal, arrived. Drawn by economic opportunities in Spanish-speaking Hispaniola after Dominican independence and escaping the Curaçao's post-emancipation recession after the end of slavery in 1862, many relocated to nearby Dominican Republic (Goldish 2009). In the mid-1930s, Ashkenazi Jews began arriving in the Dominican Republic. In 1938, the Dominican Republic had 1.5 million inhabitants, including seventy-five Jews. A few hundred German Jews had already immigrated, but most of them quickly left the island state again due to a lack of prospects. Immigrating Jews were highly welcomed, however, and they did not have to fear antisemitism. Sosúa's remote location, far away from the then capital of Ciudad Trujillo and close to the Haitian border, shielded the new settlement from political hostility, a circumstance described as "blessed neglect" (Kisch quoted in Kaplan, 2010, p. 172). In 1939 the agricultural settlement project formally began and transformed the northern coastline from a place once known for a mass massacre into a site of refuge.

III. The Jewish settlement project in Sosúa

A racist welcomes racially persecuted people

Although the Dominican government was the only delegate at the refugee conference to offer to take in Jewish refugees, this was initially received with restraint due to restrictive immigration regulations and widespread suspicion about Rafael Trujillo's motives (Dillmann & Heim, 2009, pp. 39–40). Many interpreted the humanitarian gesture as an attempt to repair his tarnished reputation. In particular, after the 1937 Parsley Massacre (Zoboi, 2018)⁶ in which thousands of ethnic Haitians and *rayanos* (García-Peña, 2016, pp. 93–96) were murdered by the Dominican military in the border region with the neighbouring state.⁷ Following Lorgia García-Peña (2016, pp. 93–96), the term *rayano* refers to those living in or close the Dominican-Haitian border region, whose lives and identities are shaped by both nations but are not fully claimed by either; in this sense they embody a hybrid border

⁵ In 1952 Puerto Rico became a U.S. commonwealth with limited autonomy over certain areas, which is why there is a continued colonial relation with the U.S. (Duany, 2011, pp. 6–7).

⁶ It is worth noting in this context that Trujillo, with a Dominican father and a mother of Dominican Haitian descent, had Haitian roots that he wanted to destroy (Dillmann & Heim, 2009, pp. 52–54).

⁷ While many foreign studies only mention the crime against the allegedly unlawful Haitian immigrants living on the Dominican side of the border, the genocide of the interethnic border population of "Afro-Hispaniola rayano[s]" has been silenced (García-Peña, 2016, p. 14; 95).

subjectivity that has emerged in a contested space. According to the human geographer David Howard (2001), the massacre served to save the Dominican nation from “Africanisation,” while also maintaining a conception of the Haitian laborers as the “enemy within” in order to legitimise the dictatorship.

Besides these political motives, demographic and economic motives may also play a role in Trujillo’s offer. The north of the island state in which the settlement project was to be implemented was only sparsely populated, and it lay fallow. Especially in the border region with Haiti, the aim was to achieve a “racial improvement” of society by settling European *white* settlers, as also summarised by Bernalice Katz, a third-generation Jewish Dominican descendant in Sosúa in March 2020:

He chose people by the color. One of the things he chose us was for that... to make a better race.

Such phenotypical selection criteria reveal the settlement project’s ethnicising function (Vega, 1985; Metz, 1990; Wells, 2009).

For more than a century, Haitian farmers had settled on abandoned Dominican agricultural land in the borderlands (Krohn-Hansen, 2009, p. 14), leading to an “ethnically mixed and highly transnational border population” (García-Peña, 2016, p. 96). Trujillo’s “Dominicanization Program” (Krohn-Hansen, 2009, p. 14) sought to displace these communities, with the 1937 massacre and expulsions of Haitian migrant workers throughout the country as a consequence. The Trujillo regime closed the border and launched a massive propaganda campaign to demonise Haiti. But this “ethnic cleansing” (García-Peña, 2016, p. 94) and the Dominicanization policy that followed did not lead to diminished support for the regime on the Dominican side. On the contrary, many in the Dominican Republic supported or accepted Trujillo’s brutal imposition of an assumed monoethnic nation (Krohn-Hansen, 2009, p. 14).

This Dominicanization process was a lifeline for the Jewish refugees, even if this process generated ambivalent feelings in their descendants. For example, Bernalice Katz, daughter of second-generation descendant Benny Katz, said in Sosúa in March 2020, “so, it’s very ironic because in Germany they were killing us because of the race and here, they wanted us because of the race.” The Dominican government’s efforts to accept displaced Jewish persons were therefore primarily based on economic and political interests, and they exposed the future settlers to reverse discrimination. As Guillermo Moncada, the grandson of Kurt Wellisch, one of the Jewish Austrian pioneers in Sosúa, pointed out by in March 2020 in Santo Domingo, this happened amid attempts to “whiten” society,” when Trujillo:

wanted to do it like racial cleansing. He wanted to eliminate the Haitian people. So, Dominican people could be ... let’s say it how it is, whiter. That’s why he brought in all those different refugees.

From the perspective of archipelagic memory, these testimonies show how refugee histories became entangled with ongoing island politics of racial hierarchy, producing a layered memory in which mobility across oceans is inseparable from the racialised spatial order of the host island. Trujillo assured the refugees, however, full freedom of religion and legal and economic equality, leading to the creation of the Dominican Republic Settlement Association (DORSA) in 1939 under US leadership to finance the settlement project in Sosúa (Dillmann & Heim, 2009; Wells, 2009).

The first World War II settlers arrive in the Dominican Republic

One of the pioneers of the settlement project was the Kirchheimer family. Arthur (Arturo) Kirchheimer, born in 1906 in Hamm in Germany, lost one brother in the Buchenwald concentration camp, while his parents and most of his family emigrated to Argentina and England. In 1933, dismissed from his job due to anti-Jewish laws, he faced mounting restrictions under the Nazi regime, as Arthur's son René Kirchheimer recalled in March 2020 in Sosúa:

My father told me once, he was in a pub, drinking coffee with friends and there they have a radio, and they listened to the fight between Max Schmeling and Joe Louis. And Joe Louis won, of course. That was a disgrace for the white Germans. But he and his friends were happy. Of course, some Nazis got upset. They made a big noise and started arguing with the friends and my father. And that's when he decided to leave.

In 1938 Arturo Kirchheimer left Hamburg for Luxembourg and married Ilona Detjen married just before the country was fully occupied by Nazi Germany. By chance, they encountered a Jewish American aid organisation that was recruiting Jewish people for a settlement project in the Dominican Republic. After months of waiting, they left Europe via Portugal on a cargo ship and arrived at the port of Puerto Plata via Ellis Island in July 1941. A year later, in July 1942, their son René Kirchheimer was born and still lives in Sosúa (Figure 4).



Figure 4 - The Kirchheimer family in Sosúa in 1943 (private archives of René Kirchheimer, 2020).

All settlers who arrived in Sosúa in early 1940 were taken to a homestead, where they initially worked as farmers in a kibbutz-like collective project. Several homesteads had to farm

together as a cooperative. Over the years, the settlers built a hospital, a theatre, a school, and several cafés, including a Viennese coffee house (Kaplan, 2008) with Productos Sosúa sold in the city's *colmado*, a small neighbourhood grocery store, becoming their most successful enterprise.



Figure 5 - Colmado Sosúa in the 1940s (private archives of René Kirchheimer, 2020).

Most practiced liberal Judaism and often married into long-established Catholic families, so religious observance did not dominate community life, as the descendant Joe Benjamin also reflected in March 2020 in Sosúa:

Sosúa was not very religious. Here's the reason. My father, for instance, he said when somebody asked me what I was, I was always a German. Hitler told me I was a Jew. But you don't identify yourself by your religion. You identify yourself usually by your nationality. Most people in Sosúa were Germans or Austrians or Czechs, but Jewish was their religion. Sosúa was not a very religious community. We had services and all that, but the main thing of Sosúa was not its Judaism. It was living like working people.

Differences in the practice of religion, however, also led to tensions within the Jewish community (Kaplan, 2010, p. 173), which resulted in several conservative settlers leaving the island state later on (Dillmann & Heim, 2009, p. 120).

Due to financial and political difficulties, only around 1,000 displaced Jews from Germany and Austria had settled in the Dominican Republic by the end of the war, many of whom had barely escaped death and Nazi persecution (Wells, 2009). After the end of the war, most of the settlers' descendants left the island state for the US or Israel, and a few for Germany or Austria. Because of the loss of key skilled workers, Trujillo repeated his offer to take in Jewish refugees. In 1947 new settlers reached Sosúa. Jewish refugees who emigrated to Shanghai in 1938, and who were looking for a new perspective, resettled in the Dominican Republic and were known as the Shanghai Group (Dillmann & Heim, 2009; Kaplan, 2010).

The stories of settlement, stretching from Europe to the Americas and the Caribbean as well as linking Sosúa to places far as Shanghai, reveal how Jewish Dominican lives have always embedded in overlapping island and continental geographies: from the transatlantic routes that brought refugees to the Caribbean to the inter-island connections sustained through kinship and memory. Yet within this network of relations, the island of Hispaniola, known in Taíno as *Kiskeya*, itself occupies a unique position. Shared by the Dominican Republic and Haiti, it is both a geographical unit and a politically and culturally divided space. From an archipelagic memory perspective, Kiskeya-Hispaniola⁸ can be read as an ‘intra-archipelago’ in miniature where proximity and entanglement coexist with sharp boundaries and selective remembering. In the narratives of Jewish settlers and their descendants, cross-island connections, such as being close to the Haitian border, anti-Haitianism, and anti-Blackness, remain mainly muted or absent. The following section turns to this shared island space to examine how memory silences interact in shaping Jewish Dominican understandings of Dominicanness within the wider Caribbean.

IV. Kiskeya-Hispaniola as intra-archipelagic space: Dominicanness, memory and silences

Kiskeya-Hispaniola is a single island divided into two sovereign states: the Dominican Republic and Haiti. In the context of archipelagic memory, this geographic fact makes it a condensed “micro-archipelago”, where two political and cultural orders exist in continuous proximity, linked by deep histories of migration and conflict. As with the wider Caribbean, the currents connecting these two parts of the island are not only material in terms of mobility of people and goods, but also mnemonic like shared stories and inherited silences.

For the Jewish settlers of Sosúa, the intra-island relationship was an unspoken backdrop to their everyday lives. Situated on the Dominican Republic’s northern coast, Sosúa lay closer to Haiti than to the political center in Santo Domingo. And yet, Jewish descendants spoke easily about ties to Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the United States, whereby few family narratives make explicit reference to Haitian people and histories and were often shaped by inherited national stereotypes – like the general narrative of being Dominican. The negotiation over Dominican identity is already evident in the island’s name: Hispaniola, which means ‘Little Spain’ and goes back to the Spanish colonisers (El Historiador, 2021). Previously, the island was called Kiskeya, which goes back to the language of the Indigenous Tainos. Today, the name Kiskeya can still be found in the Dominican national anthem and in Haiti, numerous schools, streets, and landmarks carry the name Kiskeya (Saint-Jean, 2018). Over the years, however, there have been repeated name changes to the island. In the 1930s, on the Dominican government’s insistence, the entire island was renamed Hispaniola to stress its European heritage (Corbett, 1999). These name attributions and historical experiences also inscribe themselves in the everyday life of the people who live on the island. They lead to an exclusion of the African past and a celebration of European heritage.

⁸ The term Kiskeya-Hispaniola combines the island’s Indigenous Taíno name *Kiskeya* (“mother of all lands”) with the Spanish colonial ‘Hispaniola’. This pairing signals a decolonial intention: to recall the shared pre-colonial heritage of both sides of the island while acknowledging the colonial imposition of Spanish-European naming, most notably reinforced under Rafael Trujillo to affirm a Hispanic legacy. This layered naming history is discussed in more detail in the following chapter. See also Brüske & Nimführ (2025).

Following Albert Saint-Jean (2018), many Dominicans are still unaware of the importance of Kiskeya on the Haitian side of the border. As a result, a large number of people in the Dominican Republic believe they have nothing in common with Haitians. This was also demonstrated in a conversation with a Jewish Dominican descendant in summer 2021, where Haitian-Dominican relations were framed through the prism of inherited Dominican national narratives:

Even if it's the same island and the island is so small, it is a different culture completely. A different mentality. They [Haitians] are very different from the Dominicans and this is a problem, because ... I don't see Haitians assimilating the Dominican culture that we [i.e. the Jewish community] do.

According to the Dominican historian and former US ambassador Bernardo Vega, anti-Haitianism was rooted in the island's history, as he explained in Santo Domingo in March 2020:

We were occupied by Haiti for twenty-two years and we got our independence, but not by fighting the Spanish troops like the rest of Latin America. We fought the Haitians. We have this anti-Haitianism very much as part of our mode. We are prejudiced racially, but not against Jews.

The absence of Haitian histories in Jewish Dominican family memory does not mean there were no points of contact. Archival records and oral accounts suggest moments of interaction, like Haitian laborers working on Sosúa's dairy farms, as a Jewish Dominican descendant, now living in the United States, recalls in summer 2021:

Haitians worked here in the fields, sometimes in construction. But we didn't mix much... We knew about their position in society, but my father said that wasn't our history to tell. We had our own story of survival.

This division of memory, Jewish exile history on the one hand, Haitian-Dominican history on the other, reflects what Antonio Benitez-Rojo (1997) calls "the repeating island", whereby patterns of separation and convergence structure the flow of narratives. Further, this selective remembering illustrates what Gorman-DaRif (2024) describes as the "archipelagic palimpsest", where certain historical layers are overwritten while others are preserved. This is not a coincidence but rather reflects the structuring influence of Dominican nationalist discourse, in which Dominicanness is framed against a Haitian Other. This form of othering is also expressed in the quote above, if it is assumed that Dominicans of Haitian origin would not assimilate sufficiently, while people of other origin could do better. According to the Jewish settler descendant René Kirchheimer, however, the differences emphasised would not be felt at the interpersonal level by those affected, but only in terms of the impact of political measures. As he stated in February 2022 in Miami:

In person-to-person relationships, Haitians are not hated by Dominicans... As a fellow human being, they're accepted but politically they're seen to be a menace because there are so many illegal citizens in the country and that cannot be accounted for with an identity... It's nationalism, it's extreme nationalism. You cannot call it racism because a lot of Dominicans are also dark, Black, mixed. So, they're not racist toward the Haitians.

According to René Kirchheimer, there is no difference between Dominican Blackness and Haitian Blackness. However, even if the majority of the Dominican population consists of mulatos and Blacks, they were and still are eliminated as such from the national imaginary.⁹

Both Haitian-descendant Dominicans and Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe experienced exclusion, dehumanisation and state-sanctioned violence rooted in racial ideology, meaning that both histories share the structural logics of ethnic cleansing and the denial of belonging. Yet, as oral histories from Sosúa reveal, this shared legacy of persecution is silenced by some of the interviewed Jewish Dominicans, who seemed to have absorbed dominant national narratives that frame Haitians as the racial and cultural Other. From an archipelagic memory perspective, this is not merely an absence but a missing current in the mnemonic landscape that connect two victims of violence. Considering both these connections and their absence allows us to see Kiskeya-Hispaniola not only as a bordered island, but as an intra-archipelagic space where mobility, memory and silence constantly reshape the contours of belonging.

V. The island between a place of refuge and a traumatised space

The peaceful island within the island

For many Jewish refugees and their descendants, Sosúa has been remembered as a safe haven, and as “another world,” “an island within an island,” and a place “without discrimination.” This perception coexisted with the reality that these families had survived multiple systems of violence like Nazism, Trujillismo and the Dominican Republic’s entrenched anti-Haitianism. Ida Stern de Marti, the granddaughter of a German-Austrian settler couple, recalled In March 2020 Sosúa’s intimacy and “European flavor”, that set it apart from other Dominican towns:

In Santo Domingo, it’s like everywhere else, but when you come to Sosúa, you could see that Sosúa, at that time when I was young, was a town very different from any other town. It was a town with a very European flavour. In every house you went here, there were Germans. For others, it was the “Sosúa” experience.

For Dominican visitors coming from other parts of the island state, Sosúa was a special experience because Trujillo’s nationalist ideology was not as dominant or evident there as in other places, as Joe Benjamin, a settler descendant of the Shanghai Group remembered in March 2020:

Here, we came into a place where basically it was a peaceful island. Those who had problems with Trujillo were people who had different political opinions... At the time, coming from Germany, it wasn’t for us to get involved in the resistance.

Similar to the tidalectic currents described by Gorman-Da-Rif (2024, p. 22) in reference to Brathwaite, Sosúa and the rest of Kiskeya-Hispaniola were in a constant exchange, yet the

⁹ In a 2009 community survey in Puerto Rico, nearly a third of all Dominicans—currently the largest group of foreign-born persons in Puerto Rico—described themselves as *white*. In contrast, Puerto Ricans tend to describe Dominicans “as darker-skinned than themselves, underlining... treating them as black” (Duany, 2011, p. 205).

waters between them carried different historical cargo leading to the fact, that proximity did not always ensure shared memory.

The end of the “peaceful island within the island” came with the assassination of two well-known opponents of the regime, who lived and worked in Sosúa. Pedro Clisante and Dr. Alejo Martínez both belonged to the liberal opposition party. In August 1961, Dr. Alejo Martínez was murdered in front of his home, where he ran a general practice, and Pedro Clisante was lured to Sosúa and shot by a soldier opposite the former *colmado*. The violence reminded residents that the political tide could turn at any moment, even in a harbor they had thought safe. Two streets in Sosúa were named after them, in memory of these two victims of the regime’s terrorist attack.

Resisting the Trujillo Regime and its aftermath

Opposition under Trujillo was dangerous and almost impossible. But despite difficult conditions, resistance movements emerged. One of the most prominent examples was the Mirabal sisters—also known as Las Mariposas (‘the Butterflies’)—who were involved in attempted overthrows beginning in 1959 as supporters of the group Agrupación política 14 de junio. The group was a leftist movement that fought against Trujillo’s dictatorship and plotted his assassination. It was led by the Dominican activists and lawyers Manolo Tavárez and Minerva Mirabal. In November 1960 the three Mirabal sisters were ambushed and murdered by Trujillo’s helpers near the town of La Cumbre. To cover up the murder, a car accident was faked, but the crime was discovered. This crime caused great indignation among the Dominican population, and dissatisfaction with the regime grew. On December 21, 1963, Manuel Tavárez was also murdered in the Dominican mountains of San José de las Matas after taking up arms in open warfare against the Triumvirate.

Since all opposition members were persecuted and tortured, some Jewish families sent their children abroad when they demonstrated a propensity to resisting the regime that had once saved their family. Arturo Kirchheimer was also worried about his son’s political attitude, as René Kirchheimer remembered in March 2022 in Sosúa:

On the surface, my parents sent me to the US for the educational prospects there. But my father explained to me many years later, “Do you know why I really sent you [to the US]? Because you showed revolutionary signs.” This was still in the Trujillo era, in 1956, and the youth was very anti-Trujillo... he was afraid that I would become politically active.

Others were forced into exile when their oppositions made them targets. The descendant Juli Wellisch de Moncada told me in March 2020 that her father, Kurt Wellisch, had to leave the family for Puerto Rico for a couple of months because of his political engagement, as opponents were also persecuted after Trujillo’s assassination:

In 1961 after Trujillo was killed, my father was almost killed because he was against the regime. He had to go to Puerto Rico to save his life... He was a part of a party that was against the government, and after Trujillo’s death, apparently Trujillo’s son gave the order to kill those people. In Sosúa they killed Pedro Clisante... and they killed Alejo Martínez... The third one on the list was my father.

The families who wanted to stay in the Dominican Republic, because it was their home, had to tacitly accept Trujillo’s dictatorship and the aftermath if they did not want to fear renewed

persecution. For many, this was a very ambivalent situation to be in, but being saved was the most important thing, as stressed by Joe Benjamin in March 2020, who arrived in Sosúa in 1947 as a six-year-old boy together with his parents after leaving their first place of refuge in Shanghai:

We always felt it was not for us to judge because we always tell the story that if you're drowning in the ocean and somebody throws you a life ring, you hold on to the life ring. You don't start questioning why he did it. He wanted to save your life. But obviously, I knew that—well, I didn't criticise him at the time because at that time you didn't criticise him. We talked among ourselves but never in public.

Trujillo's repressive policy, which did not accept any other opinion, made even the smallest resistance impossible. Joe Benjamin attended a public high school in Puerto Plata. Each year, the students had to write an essay for Mother's Day and the best essays were picked by the teacher to be read out loud in class. One day, Joe Benjamin's essay was picked to be read, and he remembered the teacher saying the following before reading it:

*She said, "Everything is all right with your essay, but you have to write something in honor of Trujillo's mother."
I said, "I'm not going to do that because she's not my mother."
"So then, you're not going to read your essay," she replied.
That's how it was. A little resistance like that was not accepted.*

The local school in Sosúa, which was run for twenty years by the Jewish director Luis Hess, who had already come to Sosúa in the early 1930s, also had to obey the regime. Portraits of Trujillo hung in the school. They were mandatory in every building and house, and once a year there was a celebration in honor of the dictator, at which the Jewish community thanked their savior. The Austrian German descendant Sylvia Schwarz recalled in a conversation in August 2021 that as children they were not happy about marching through the streets on these days:

I don't think that the people were in favor for him... they mostly kept their mouths shut. Whatever they saw, I guess nobody was happy with Trujillo, and we children, were not happy because we had to go to the demonstrations and scream, "Viva Trujillo."

These accounts reveal how Sosúa's Jewish community inhabited a double positionality by being safe from European antisemitism yet embedded in an island whose shared space with Haiti was shaped by racialised exclusion. The "island within the island" metaphor works both geographically and mnemonically: it names a refuge that is protected from certain hostilities and ensures that Sosúa remains a pleasant memory for many descendants – both for those who still live in Sosúa or have moved there again, and for those who live in the diaspora and only occasionally visit Sosúa, or even only know it from stories told by their parents or grandparents. At the same time, it marks a silence about other persecuted groups.

Archipelagic memory work

Today, Sosúa's Jewish past remains visible in the Jewish Museum, in the synagogue, in a square or street named after a Jewish person, in the Jewish cemetery, and in the multiple commemorative monuments. However, memory work is not only carried out in Sosúa but

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also transnationally. The “island within the island” is thus also unfolding beyond the Caribbean, including in Austria, once a site of persecution. According to Raimondi and Kabir (2024, p. 20), “archipelagic memory can therefore be a reparative and connective move.” In 2005 a memorial was opened at a Viennese High School (Figure 6). It was dedicated to those former Jewish students who had been expelled from this school during the Nazi regime. One of those former students was Kurt Wellisch, who fled to the Caribbean with his family. His daughter Juli Wellisch de Moncada attended the opening of the memorial site and reflected on the event in Santo Domingo in March 2020:

That school wanted to ask for forgiveness to the families of the Jews that were expelled during World War II... On the second floor of the school, they set up a hologram in remembrance. It was for the 150th anniversary of the school. It was a whole week of celebrations. I went there with my mother. My father passed away relatively young... so he didn't get to this.

Furthermore, anniversaries in memory of the settlement project have been carried out: in July 2018, eighty years after the refugee conference in French spa town of Évian, a commemoration took place at the same location, at which René Kirchheimer gave a speech recalling the settlement project, in the halls of the Hotel Royale.



Figure 6 - Memorial at Bundesrealgymnasium Waltergasse, Vienna (author's photo, 2025).

The transnational anniversaries are also held in places ranging from mainland Europe to the Caribbean. Twice a year, on the Day of the Liberation of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp or Yom HaShoah on May 10, the Jewish resistance's memorial day, and on the Holocaust Commemoration Day on January 27, the descendants of the settlers' community meet for

memorial services at the Star of David Monument in Sosúa's Parque Mirador (Figure 7), as Bernalice Katz recalled in Sosúa in March 2020:

At each of the six points of the star we put a torch, and each time all the ambassadors from Germany, from Israel, the United States, and all the important people representing the countries that are involved in that, come.



Figure 7 - Star of David monument in Sosúa, Dominican Republic (author's photo, 2020).

Finally, a global, archipelagic entanglement is visible in the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. In 1981, the day of the murder of the Mirabal sisters, November 25, was proclaimed a day of remembrance for victims of violence against women at a meeting of Latin American and Caribbean feminists, and in 1999 it was declared a worldwide memorial day by the United Nations. Here, the legacies of repression and resistance converge, sometimes they reinforce the silence that also characterised the archipelagic memory, sometimes they resist.

Conclusion: The Caribbean islands as a space of confluence

This article has aimed to place entangled imaginaries, discourses, and practices in conversation with one another, and show how together they form an archipelagic narrative of the Caribbean that also goes beyond the islands and shifts into the continental space. In this study, archipelagic memory refers to two intertwined dimensions: the tangible flows of people and ideas traverse islands and coastal spaces and the intangible, mnemonic currents of narrative connections and shared cultural repertoires, that move across these geographies and link disparate pasts to present-day identities. Through this lens, the histories of Jewish Dominican refugees reveal overlapping geographies of refuge, exclusion and selective memory work that connect Sosúa not only to the wider Caribbean, but also to transoceanic networks.

The empirical data has shown that individual memories from various islands and continents are interconnected. Narratives that may previously have been important only for certain islanders, now also become important for the island's non-Jewish population, and diasporic communities beyond the Caribbean, turning these locations into nodal points in a larger mnemonic archipelago. These entangled memories also reflect the fact that all the Jewish families I have met during the research phases also have non-Jewish family members and often “repeat the journey of the ancestors” (Agosín, 2002, pp. xi-xii), moving between multiple islands and continents. This leads to a life in many diasporas that is shaped by constant movement and transformation, yet always with traces and fragments of earlier histories (Gorman-Da-Rif, 2024, p. 25). These families therefore navigate multiple histories of violence—namely, those of the Shoah, colonisation, slavery, Trujillismo, and anti-Haitianism, or anti-Blackness, while some are also participating in the silences that shape intra-island relations on Kiskeya-Hispaniola. As Kabir and Raimondi (2024, p. 3) describe it, the “archipelagic” operates here as an epistemic approach that engages with fragmentation and isolation, fostering relations of contiguity without seeking to erase the ruptures between them. In other words, these connections emerge between histories and memories even when they remain partial, discontinuous, or in tension.

In the case of Jewish Dominican narratives, these relations can take the form of multidirectional assemblages that acknowledge certain shared histories, such as mobilities across the transoceanic archipelago, while omitting others, such as the intertwined histories of victimisation, that clearly differ from one another and yet have points of contact. In this context, the island is experienced simultaneously as a place of refuge and as a “traumatized island space” (Joseph 2021, p. 194) that produces an archipelagic Caribbeanness that is hybridised through African, European, Indigenous, and Caribbean Jewish experience (Esteban Deive, 2007, p. 127).

Unravelling these confluences requires attention to both the flows and the absences in memory: As Gorman-Da-Rif (2024, p. 25) notes, this involves “remaking from fragments, of reimagining, while acknowledging what has been broken.” In line with Michael Rothberg's (2021) multidirectional memory, archipelagic memory's potential lies in its capacity to act as a reparative and connective practice (Raimondi & Kabir, 2024, p. 19), explicitly one that builds differentiated solidarities by acknowledging different injustices and positionalities without erasing difference. Rethinking the Caribbean through archipelagic memory allows us to reconnect this region with its untold, forgotten, or silenced stories to recognise the multidimensional connections that make islands both points of reference and nodes in global systems. In these entanglements, mobility and mnemonic currents together shape how Caribbean pasts are remembered, reworked, and lived in the present.

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