

THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF
JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

This *History* offers an unparalleled examination of all aspects of Jewish American literature. Jewish writing has played a central role in the formation of the national literature of the United States, from the Hebraic sources of the Puritan imagination to narratives of immigration and acculturation. This body of writing has also enriched global Jewish literature in its engagement with Jewish history and Jewish multilingual culture. Written by a host of leading scholars, *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* offers an array of approaches that contribute to current debates about ethnic writing, minority discourse, transnational literature, gender studies, and multilingualism. This *History* takes a fresh look at celebrated authors, introduces new voices, locates Jewish American literature on the map of American ethnicity as well as the spaces of exile and diaspora, and stretches the boundaries of American literature beyond the Americas and the West.

HANA WIRTH-NESHER is the Samuel L. and Perry Haber Chair on the Study of the Jewish Experience in the United States and Professor of English and American Studies at Tel Aviv University. She is the author of *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* and *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel*. She is also the editor of *What Is Jewish Literature?*, *New Essays on Call It Sleep*, and, with Michael Kramer, *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*.

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★

Edited By
HANA WIRTH-NESHER



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32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

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Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107048201

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First published 2016

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

The Cambridge history of Jewish American literature / edited by
Hana Wirth-Nesher, Tel-Aviv University.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-04820-1 (hardback)

1. American literature – Jewish authors – History and criticism. 2. Jews – United States – Intellectual life – History. 3. Judaism and literature – United States – History. 4. Judaism in literature. 5. Jews in popular culture – United States. I. Wirth-Nesher, Hana, 1948– editor. II. Title: Jewish American literature.

PS153.J4C364 2016

810.9'8924–dc23 2015009589

ISBN 978-1-107-04820-1 Hardback

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Acknowledgments

To all of the contributors to this volume, I cannot thank you enough for making the time to write these stellar essays and for graciously providing answers to my many questions during the long process of preparing the typescript. My deep gratitude to Stephanie Ginensky for devoted and meticulous assistance with both research and editing. Thanks also to Max Daniel for efficient editing and dedication to this project during a memorable summer internship funded by the “Israel Experience.”

I am grateful to Tel Aviv University’s Department of English and American Studies for a semester sabbatical, and to the Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University, in particular Professors David Engel and Hasia Diner, for hosting me as a Visiting Scholar during that sabbatical, when I completed the editing and wrote my own essays. Thanks also to Luke McMullan for cheerful assistance during my New York sabbatical. The Goldreich Family Institute for Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture at TAU provided technical and office support, especially Michal Bondy, who gave thoughtful help when needed.

My sincere gratitude to Ray Ryan for initiating this project and entrusting me with it, for being both patient and exacting, and for recognizing the importance and timeliness of this volume. Thanks to Caitlin Gallagher at Cambridge for attention to details in the production.

Friends and colleagues provided careful readings of my drafts and good advice for which I am deeply grateful: Una Chaudhuri, Ellen Coin, Morris Dickstein, Marilyn Reizbaum, David Roskies, and Rachel Rubinstein. Special thanks to Werner Sollors for exemplary collegiality when it was most needed. The warm hospitality of friends made research visits to New York City a joy. Thank you, Ellen, Barry, Barbara, Rick, Ronne, and Andy.

Finally, and always, thanks to Arie and our loving family – Ilana, Ben, Yonatan, Amanda, Shira, and Amit – for being so supportive throughout

Acknowledgments

this time-consuming process, and for providing me with the happiest of interruptions, the arrivals of Adam, Rose, and Benjamin.

During the final weeks of preparing this volume, Sacvan Bercovitch passed away. For many of the contributors to this *Cambridge History*, he was an inspiring scholar, a teacher, a colleague, a friend. This volume attests to how much Saki taught us about American literature.

Introduction

HANA WIRTH-NESHER

America extended unprecedented freedom to a people who had learned to survive with restrictions for centuries. The Jews who landed on America's shores had little preparation for life that promised more than they had ever imagined. "Have children ever been so safe?" contemplates a character in a Philip Roth story as he surveys middle-class suburbia in postwar America; "the world was at last a place for families, even Jewish families."¹ The United States offered equality under the law, freedom of movement, economic opportunity, and a supple language open to innovation. However, it did not happen all at once. The history of Jews in America did not originate in a miraculous escape from the limits imposed by prejudice. Beginning with the refusal, by Peter Stuyvesant, director-general of New Netherland, to grant Jews the privileges accorded to other newcomers, including the all-important right to homeownership, and continuing to discrimination in university admission, access to professions, and club membership in what was to become the United States, exclusionary practices that had plagued Jews in the Old World persisted in their American experience.² Even so, Jews had never before received a message like the one sent by President George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, in which he characterized the United States government as one that "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." Echoing the prophet Micah, Washington describes America as a place where Jews "would merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants; while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig free and there shall be none to make him afraid."³ And indeed, Jews had never succeeded in integrating into the mainstream of their societies, personally and collectively, to the extent that they had in the United States. When Emma Lazarus proclaimed, in her triumphal poem "1492," that this "two-faced year" marked both Spain's casting forth "the children of the prophets of the Lord" and "a virgin world where doors of sunset part,"⁴ it was not the geography of the Americas that she was praising, but rather the ideology of the United States. After all, the first Jews to reach

North America's shores in 1654 had not departed from Europe; they were fleeing from the Americas where they had sought shelter from the Inquisition only to find that it had followed them to Brazil. When she celebrated a "virgin world" that parted its doors for newcomers, she meant the United States of America.

Just as America is the exception in Jewish history for the freedoms that it proffered, Lazarus's poem is an exception in Jewish American literature for its unqualified praise and celebration of the new nation.⁵ Jewish American writers, particularly in prose, have portrayed America from the point of view of both insiders and outsiders, heady with its promise yet often ill at ease with the costs exacted by Americanization.⁶ This bedrock ambivalence is part of what makes Jewish American writing a dynamic and mutable discourse, in which the terms "Jewish" and "American" interact and signify in ways that are sometimes discrepant, sometimes complementary, and always dialectical. If literary narratives often tend to be accounts of individual aspirations tested by social resistance, the narratives of Jewish American writers include accounts of dual resistance, as their protagonists often faced challenges from both their own community as well as others. The great waves of immigrants who expected "a goldine medine," a golden land, quickly found their romantic visions tempered by their encounters with unfettered capitalism, racism, and religious prejudice, undeniable personal obstacles in the real lives that provided the raw material for so much of their art. Moreover, they also encountered resistance from their own ethnoreligious community, fearful as it was of the freedoms that threatened to diminish Jewish religious practice and ethnic allegiance, and fearful too of the gentile majority gaze. This self-consciousness as Jews persisted well beyond the generation of immigrants, so that one of the assumptions about this corpus, that it was primarily a literature focused on the immigrant experience, has been disproven by the flourishing of Jewish American writing to the present day.⁷ As Jews faced fewer barriers to their integration into American society, and as they played an increasingly greater role in the shaping of American culture, the crucial duality that had always characterized Jewish experience in America – greater freedom at the cost of diminished communal identity – continued to create unease and reflection, powerful catalysts for art.

The abundance, variety, and quality of Jewish American writing have, in turn, inspired commentary, criticism, and scholarship that attest to its continuing vitality and its value and fascination for readers, students, and scholars. In recent years, journals are devoting special issues to the subject, anthologies and collections are facilitating the teaching of this rich body of writings, and

gifted authors are adding their perspectives to what was already a treasure trove of writings. *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* emerges out of this atmosphere of creativity and intellectual ferment, offering new directions, new accounts, and new readings of this multifaceted canon. Traditional scholarship on Jewish American literature has tended to measure how much of the quality called “Jewishness” has been retained and how much “Americanness” it has absorbed, often treating these concepts as self-evident.⁸ But the story of the Jewish American experience, and of its role in the formation of American culture, is far more nuanced than this dualistic narrative of preservation and assimilation suggests. The guiding principle for this volume is that the categories of “American literature” and “Jewish literature” are mutually constitutive, both variously refracting the Judaic civilization and the American ideology from which they arise. As such, *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* aims to contribute to the discussion in both American and Jewish literary study that emphasizes mutual interaction, intersection, and dialogue. Although the abundance, scope, and power of this literature, encompassing such well-known authors as Emma Lazarus, Saul Bellow, Henry Roth, Grace Paley, Philip Roth, and Cynthia Ozick, are uncontested, locating the study of this field on the map of American academia poses questions about the categories of identity currently in place and their implications for American literary history.

The publication of *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* at this time reflects developments in American culture and in literary studies that would appear to be mutually contradictory. On the one hand, as I have already pointed out, Jewish American literature is thriving, and reaching mainstream audiences. On the other hand, the teaching of this literature is often marginalized in the field of American literature, and simultaneously channeled into Jewish studies. While this body of literature undeniably deserves a place in Jewish culture studies, a subject to which I shall return, it also deserves to be recognized as an inherent component of the dynamic field of American literature. Two landmark events since the turn of the millennium illustrate these contradictory developments. The first was a three-day conference at Princeton University in 2001 entitled “Celebrating Jewish American Writers,” to mark the opening of the Leonard Milberg ’53 Collection of Jewish American Writers, an invaluable archive of first editions and unpublished manuscripts. The organizers of the conference, most of whom were from the Princeton English Department, convened a stellar group of authors, among them E. L. Doctorow, Tony Kushner, Will Eisner, Jules Feiffer, Grace Paley, Art Spiegelman, Robert Pinsky, C. K. Williams, Wendy Wasserstein, and Susan

Sontag. According to Morris Dickstein, “It [was] the first and probably the largest such gathering of Jewish-American writers ever.”⁹ It was a turning point for Jewish American writing, because Princeton lent its prestige to a burgeoning field by attributing value to its rare editions and manuscripts, and by sponsoring a high profile symposium. After the conference, the *Princeton Library Chronicle* devoted two volumes to Jewish American writing and scholarship, and a new fund was established to promote the teaching of Jewish American culture in the English and American Studies curriculum.¹⁰ While this event could be seen as valedictory, a celebration of the postwar golden age of Jewish American literature, there were many younger writers participating as well.

Despite this achievement for a field that had been gathering momentum for decades, several years later, in 2009, scholars and teachers of Jewish American literature organized a panel at the Modern Language Association entitled “Does the English Department Have a Jewish Problem?” prompted by “the imbalance between the lack of emphasis on Jewishness by English departments and the influential role Jews have historically played in the production, consumption, and transformation of American literature.”¹¹ Motivated by the great interest generated by this event, *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)* subsequently devoted a special issue to “The Future of Jewish American Literary Studies.” Drawing on the stimulating questions posed by the panel, the editors asked, “Will Jewish American literature remain homeless, relegated to disciplinary exile, or might it find a home in the twenty-first century English department?”¹² This provocative question, ironically alluding to the centrality of exile in Jewish history, reflects recent shifts in defining ethnicity in America that tend to exclude Jewish American literature from the English Department curriculum. How did this happen?

For nearly half a century, American literary study has been recognizing and affirming the multiplicity of voices that go into the making of the national literature. The labels that define these collective voices may sound alike – as in African American, Native American, Asian American, Jewish American, Latina/o – but each has its own distinct history and features, and each contributes to the idea of American literature in its own particular way. What they have in common is that the term qualifying “American” originates outside the United States or precedes its nationhood, yet has also been shaped by the idea of America, as both nation and hemisphere. What they also share is their reference to an ethnic or racial minority. Jewish American writing has played a significant role in the development of the concepts of cultural pluralism and ethnic culture, both as resistance to the ideal of the melting pot in the early

decades of the twentieth century, and later as one participant among others in the search to recover roots that reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s. A brief look at the evolution of these concepts in America may shed light on current debates about the place of Jewish American literature in university programs and curricula.

Horace Kallen's essay "Democracy versus the Melting Pot" advocated preservation of ethnic culture as a strategy to fortify the American nation, and challenged the prevailing melting pot ideology.¹³ The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Kallen proposed a concept of ethnicity and cultural diversity derived from biology. If biological diversity signified progress in the natural world, he argued, then cultural diversity signified progress in the social world. For Kallen, who used his own group affiliation as a Jew to demonstrate the benefits of a hyphenated identity, the non-American label in any hyphenated identity was stable and continuous, unaffected by interaction with other groups or by economic or political factors. The term "Jewish" in "Jewish American" was self-evident, expressed in his often quoted declaration that men "cannot change their grandfathers."¹⁴ Kallen believed that "the selfhood which is inalienable" in Americans, and which requires "inalienable liberty" to realize, "is always "ancestrally determined."¹⁵ He proposed that the United States become a federal republic model where each national group would retain its dialect and its intellectual forms.

Kallen's model of ethnicity prevailed during the first phase of ethnic literary study when the paradigmatic ethnic figure was the American immigrant, and Jewish American literature could therefore be examined alongside other immigrant literatures, such as Italian American, Polish American, or German American. The idea of ethnicity, however, has undergone changes, not only since Kallen first recommended preserving ethnic culture as a strategy for bolstering democracy, but also since Glazer and Moynihan's findings half a century later, in *Beyond the Melting Pot*, that ethnicity trumped class in American social and political behavior.¹⁶ Werner Sollors's landmark study *Beyond Ethnicity* questioned the usefulness of this idea of authentic, enduring, and static identity through descent by calling attention to the role of consent, the contractual self-made component of American identity, whose engagement with the hereditary, ancestral descent component constitutes "the central drama in American culture."¹⁷ Sollors focused on the construction of ethnicity to ensure difference and monitor boundaries in the process of consenting to become American, rather than on the center as an inherited essence. Ethnicities forged in America, he argued, needed to be understood comparatively as the dynamic of free agents negotiating

descent and consent in relation to other minority groups doing the same. According to Sollors, “ethnic literature provides us with the central codes of Americanness.”¹⁸

In contrast to Sollors’s all-encompassing approach, which subsumed race into ethnicity, more recent discussions of literature and ethnicity have foregrounded race, with consequences for Jewish American literary study. In a comparative analysis of Jewish American literature in relation to Chicano and African American writing, Dean Franco sums up the two models of ethnicity currently employed in American studies: “First of the two dominant types is the immigrant American as the paradigmatic ethnic prior to World War II, and the second is the ethnic American of color, actively resistant to assimilation.”¹⁹ According to Dean Franco, “The former group produced a substantial body of literature matched by critical attention up to and following the rise of multicultural consciousness. The latter group effectively contested the prominent representation of the former and successfully established a new critical ethos in ethnic literary study.”²⁰ This new critical ethos is exemplified by David Palumbo-Liu’s book *The Ethnic Canon*, in which essays on African American, Asian American, Native American, and Latino/a writings describe a “critical multiculturalism” that does not include Jewish American literature.²¹ Palumbo-Liu’s account of literary study from an ethnic perspective allows only one intervention by Jewish Americans, which he draws from David Hollinger’s account of how a secular intelligentsia of the children of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the 1940s and 1950s joined ranks with academic descendants of WASP families to forge a cosmopolitan culture that served each group to revolt against what they considered to be the provincial inheritance of their respective cultures.²² It was a moment when the alienation of the Jewish intellectual dovetailed with the existential alienation brought on by modernity, urbanism, and the horrors of the Second World War. For Palumbo-Liu, this broadening of culture toward cosmopolitanism has been rewritten in the activities of a “critical multiculturalism,” which “explores the fissures, tensions, and sometimes the contradictory demands of multiple cultures, rather than (only) celebrating the plurality of cultures by passing through them appreciatively.” In other words, the descendants of white European immigrants who have made it into the mainstream no longer qualify as ethnic Americans, and therefore their literature is not included in a canon whose primary criterion is the production of fissures and tensions, rather than the appreciation of diversity. This redefinition of ethnicity and minority culture in large part accounts for the recent marginalizing of Jewish American literature in English and American Studies curricula, as recognition

of the extraordinary achievements of these authors and works does not automatically translate into courses.

In light of these developments in literary study, *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* makes a case both for the vibrancy of this field and for its potential to reopen questions about the study of minority and ethnic literatures in the United States. With its diverse approaches and wide array of topics, the volume challenges the assumption that this body of writing belongs to an older paradigm of ethnic literature that merely celebrates diversity and poses no resistance to assimilation. On the contrary, Jewish American literature and the scholarship on it defy any clear dichotomy between assimilation and resistance, and have always addressed the “fissures and tensions” between multiple cultures. The distinctive features of Jewish American culture that invite a reexamination of models of minority writing in America are religion, peoplehood (ethnic and cultural), race, and language.

First of all, Jewish American literature cannot be satisfactorily subsumed within the designation of ethnicity alone, because Jewishness is also a religion, a powerful force in American culture that has received less attention than race, ethnicity, gender, and class.²³ Moreover, it is a religion that has played, and continues to play, a central role in America’s vision of itself. In Puritan rhetoric, the Jews appear in their ancestral and biblical incarnation as the Children of Israel and as Hebrews. The rhetorical underpinnings of America, as articulated by Sacvan Bercovitch in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, is a story of supersession that builds on Christian hermeneutics where the Hebrew Scriptures are superseded by the New Testament, rendering the former an allegorical prefiguring of the latter.²⁴ America’s Puritan forefathers saw themselves as the new Chosen People led out of their enslavement in Europe to the new Promised Land, where salvation was communal and political as well as personal. In this theological vision, Jews existed only as ancient Hebrews prerequisite to the unfolding of scriptural history. Jewish sources and Judaism were necessary precursors to the Christian mission of settling the new Promised Land, America. As Jonathan Freedman puts it, “Jews are both essential and eradicable; their covenant is the model for that of Puritan believers and hence crucial for the unfolding of human history, yet at the same time replaceable by Christians molded in their image.”²⁵ Jews, therefore, were the only immigrants to America who could not readily assimilate this Puritan rhetoric of a new Promised Land and a new Chosen People without giving up the most central tenets of their faith. For Christian Americans, Jews were the Other in the narrative of their sacred cause.²⁶

The notion of Hebrews as the long-dead ancestors to the New Israel is dramatized in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's mid-nineteenth century poem "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport"²⁷ (1858), where Jewish citizens of the United States are converted posthumously into Hebrews: "How strange it seems! These Hebrews in their graves," he writes, concluding that "what once has been shall be no more! ... And the dead nations never rise again." For Christian Americans, Jews in the form of extinct Israelites and Hebrews were compatible with America's divine mission. Living Jews, however, fleeing poverty and persecution for America's shores, were an impediment. Despite the dawn of the modern nation state, and in particular the political secularism that led to America's separation of church and state, poets such as Longfellow continued to identify Jews as ancestral Hebrews whose burial ground is the site from which America emanates as more than a geographical place. The elision of Hebrews and Jews is particularly significant in this period, when, in contrast, Jews in Europe were being racialized and would soon seek refuge in the United States in massive numbers.²⁸ The theological role of Jews in the rhetoric of the American nation left its imprint on the United States of America, even as that nation severed itself from religion in law but not in spirit. No other immigrant group would have to contend with such a privileged yet vexed place in the very concept of the American nation due to their religion. When the WASP Quincy Davenport, in Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* accuses David Quixano of presuming to claim America as his own, "Your America, forsooth, you Jew immigrant," Quixano admits, "Yes – Jew immigrant! ... But a Jew who knows that your Pilgrim Fathers came straight out of his Old Testament."²⁹

Within a decade of Longfellow's poem, Emma Lazarus would contest his conclusion with a poem of her own that reaffirms Judaism as a living religion: "And still the sacred shrine is holy yet," she insists in the last stanza of "In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport," "Take off your shoes as by the burning bush, / Before the mystery of death and God."³⁰ A quarter of a century after Longfellow's eulogy for the noble Hebrews, Lazarus invoked Hebraism as the custodian of American freedom in her poem "The New Colossus" (1883), subsequently affixed to the pedestal of America's most well-known icon, the Statue of Liberty. Inspired by the plight of Eastern European Jews fleeing to America to escape the violence of pogroms, the poem makes a clear distinction between the Old Colossus, "a brazen giant of Greek fame"³¹ that represents Hellenic pagan culture, and the New Colossus, "Mother of Exiles," the Hebraic antithesis to Greece, which will safeguard the ingathering of exiles into the New Promised Land.³² For Lazarus, whose volunteer

work for the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society took her to Wards Island to witness what she would describe as “the huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” the Jews were a transnational people who deserved the safety and freedom that America could provide, and they were the torchbearers of the Hebraic culture underlying America’s sacred freedom.³³ Her universal vision of America as a haven for “the wretched refuse” of European injustice was initially conceived as a solution for Jewish victimization, expressed most dramatically in the poem “1492.” Furthermore, she expressed her sense of kinship with Jews not only in her efforts on behalf of immigrants, but also by entitling a collection of her poems *Songs of a Semite*. Although the concepts of Aryan and Semite originated in comparative philology, they eventually became mythic racial categories with devastating effects.³⁴ For Lazarus, who translated poems by both the Hebrew medieval poet Yehuda HaLevi and the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine about the Western Jew’s longings for an ancient homeland in the East, to be a Semite meant romantic identification with an Oriental home and language. Her poetry serves as a site of the intersection of Christian Puritan rhetoric that she had assimilated and her self-designated identity as a Semite, ironically blending a nostalgic embrace of Eastern origins with an emergent racialism that foreshadows the fate of the Jew in the West in the twentieth century – victims of genocide for being racially cast as Semites.

Jewish American literature dramatizes the ways in which Jews in America have regarded themselves as members of both a religion and a people, a faith and an ethnicity, often differentiated by the terms “Judaism” and “Jewishness,” respectively. On one hand, then, Judaism in America has indeed been partly shaped by Christian America, as manifested in the elevation of Chanukah in response to massive public observance of Christmas. On the other hand, the very idea of ethnicity in America as a model of descent that ensures cultural pluralism, which in turn ensures democracy, originated, as I have already mentioned, in the work of Horace Kallen, a Jewish American philosopher and social thinker who based his idea of essential ethnic identity on the experience of his own Jewish community.

One more significant factor that distinguishes Jewish American identity from hyphenated identities that are derived from immigration history alone is language. As a transnational people, Jews did not consider their primary identity to be that of their specific country of origin. Most of them did not see themselves as Russians, Poles, or any other nation rooted in a specific locale, but rather as a people who shared religion, kinship, language, history, and/or a repertoire of texts. For the vast majority of Jews who emigrated from

Europe, close to two million during what was known as the Great Migration between 1880 and 1924, their vernacular was Yiddish and their liturgical language was Hebrew.³⁵ By 1899, the Bureau of Immigration recognized this by applying the term “Hebrew” to Jewish newcomers. For many Sephardic Jews, the majority of the 4 percent of the U.S. Jewish community who were not of Germanic or Eastern European origin, their everyday language was Ladino, otherwise known as Judeo-Espagnol, with Hebrew reserved for religious rites.³⁶ From a linguistic perspective, this meant that when Jews, like other immigrants, adopted English, and when their descendants abandoned their familial tongue, they retained Hebrew as a common language that bound them to other Jews globally. The U.S. government acknowledged this unusual detachment of native language from country of origin in 1910, when they introduced the category of “mother tongue” for immigrants, recording “Yiddish and Hebrew” for Jews rather than the language of the site of their embarkation for the New World.

Insofar as Jews were not Christian, they could not easily subscribe to the Puritan rhetoric of America as the new Promised Land, yet insofar as they did not regard themselves as leaving their countries of origin when they emigrated, they could readily embrace America from the perspective of a diasporic people who traced their origins to ancient Israel. Their ancestral homeland, then, as well as their common language, whose alphabet also extended to their unique languages, Yiddish and Ladino, were of the East. In short, most Jewish Americans subscribed to both Western and Eastern narratives of their past. The great majority thought of themselves as Europeans, with a sharp internal division between Eastern European and German Jews, whose attitude toward religion was profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment and the emergence of Reform Judaism. By the same token, regardless of whether they were Eastern or Western geographically, they also took with them the components of their Jewish culture that were Eastern, and their racial designation as Semitic. Moreover, many non-Ashkenazi Jews, those who hailed from Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking areas of Western Europe, or Ladino-speaking communities of the Ottoman Empire (Sephardi), or the Middle East and Western Asia (Mizrahi), or Greek-speaking Jews of the Byzantine Empire (Romaniotes), have been perceived as non-European by both gentiles and Jews in America, as they do not fit neatly into the paradigm of the Jew as Western. In recent years, the descendants of these immigrants (and newer generations of Jewish immigrants from the Middle East, Latin America, Asia, and Southern Europe) have formed social and cultural alliances with both Hispanic and Arab communities in the United States.

The concept of “Jewish American,” therefore, needs to be understood against a backdrop of beliefs about Jews that have set them apart in terms of race, religion, and cultural orientation (non-Western), attributions that Jews themselves have often maintained.³⁷ Their unstable racial designation has been a product of both European discourse in which they were Semites and thereby a threat to Western civilization and America’s reductive racial divide, which turned them into “white folks.” Focusing on the latter development exclusively erases the history of violence against Jews that was fueled by racism, as well as the effects of that history on Jewish Americans’ self-perceptions and consciousness. Furthermore, it also erases the lived realities of many American Jewish artists and writers who might be characterized in more complex, racially hybrid terms.

The label “Jewish American,” which privileges the latter term by making the former its qualifier, would seem to locate the subject of this *Cambridge History* as a subcategory of the national literature of the United States, but these works need not be read as exclusively American literature. The writings discussed in these essays also belong to the field of Jewish literature, a transnational array of texts and authors, a diasporic literature that has never been contained within national borders.³⁸ Jewish American writing intersects with this multilingual modern Jewish literature, as does German Jewish, Russian Jewish, Iraqi Jewish, or Israeli Jewish literature, a relation heightened by the fact that academic study of this literature often takes place within the field of Jewish Studies. Moreover, contemporary Jewish American writers in particular seem even further granulated, thinking of themselves as “German Jewish American,” “Syrian Jewish American,” “Tunisian Russian Jewish American,” or other variations that reflect the complex paths of migration of so many American Jews and the modern valorization of multiple cultural origins. Definitions of Jewish literature are as notoriously slippery and contested as are debates about who qualifies as a Jew, running the gamut from narrow criteria such as biography and language, to broader claims about the presence of a Jewish imagination, ethics, or attitude toward writing.³⁹ Shmuel Yosef Agnon, Hebrew writer and Israeli Nobel laureate, famously reassured Saul Bellow that his novels were safe for posterity because they had been translated into Hebrew, and thus occupied a secure place within Jewish literature. Hebrew has often served as a touchstone of Jewish literary continuity, either as the language of the works themselves as it expresses a collective spirit of the “volk” in Herder’s term or as a minimal reference point for a shared culture.⁴⁰ Biographical accounts of Jewish literature have also been qualified beyond birthright to a modicum of self-awareness on the part of the author about his

or her Jewish identity.⁴¹ Gershon Shaked, for example, claimed that “Jewish literature in non-Jewish languages is, most fundamentally, that written by individuals who define themselves as having a dual identity.”⁴² For Ruth Wisse, the modern Jewish canon consists of works that portray the “inner lives of Jews.”⁴³ Contested and elusive as the definition of Jewish literature may be, it can nevertheless function as a fruitful critical framework for the study of Jewish American literature.

Drawing on Jewish historical experience in a literary work is Robert Alter’s principal criterion for categorizing a work as Jewish. Alter argues, for instance, that while Kafka wrote about the broadest questions of human nature and spiritual experience, “his self-awareness as a Jew and his consciousness of Jewish history impelled his imagination in a particular direction.”⁴⁴ If drawing on Jewish historical experience, and evoking Jewish intertexts, defines a work of literature as Jewish, this then entails identifying what constitutes a Jewish intertext. Yet another way of approaching the subject foregrounds readership. Dov Sadan’s apparent inclusivity, for example, in attributing the label of Jewish literature to writings in Hebrew, other Jewish languages, and non-Jewish languages is actually severely limited by his proviso that this designation applies only to literature targeted to a Jewish reading public.⁴⁵ As Dan Miron points out, this would eliminate the best writers, since they all aimed for recognition within their linguistic and national literatures while also addressing Jewish audiences. Stylistic considerations have also served to define a Jewish corpus, as in Benjamin Harshav’s argument that Jewish writing tends to be argumentative in a Talmudic sense, a literature based on a particular semiotics of communication.⁴⁶ In a somewhat similar vein, Jacques Derrida’s defense of writing against its subjugation to the spoken word has provoked discussion of the relation between Judaism, particularly the Kabbalah’s investment in writing, and Derrida’s thought as it seeks to valorize the written word.⁴⁷ This text dependency is one of the tenets that Geoffrey Hartman accentuates in his reflections on what constitutes a Jewish imagination, and hence Jewish writing.⁴⁸

Finally, in his recent pathbreaking book Dan Miron rejects the idea of one continuous Jewish literary history, replacing it with the concept of contiguity, “a contact that avoids all permanences, is in flux . . . within a space that is vast and open, . . . yet circumscribed by a borderline of Jewishness” not as an essence or religious or national entity but rather as “the perception of reality through the screen of the experience of being ‘A Jew in the world,’ ” a phrase he borrows from Buber.⁴⁹ Miron’s conclusion about Jewish literature applies equally well to Jewish American writing: “a freely floating, imprecisely defined, and widely inclusive Jewish literary complex

does exist; and it exists because many (albeit by no means all) Jewish writers and readers feel and behave as it if it did.”⁵⁰ According to Miron, a Jewish writer is one whose “work evinces an interest in or is in whatever way . . . conditioned by a sense of . . . being Jewish, or is being read by readers who experience it as if it showed interest and were conditioned by the writer’s being Jewish.”⁵¹

What is to be gained by applying the label of “Jewish American literature” to a dynamic corpus of writing that is ultimately indefinable? Why group a body of writing under the heading of “Jewish American”? Like any other category based on identity, whether it be race, gender, or nation, it is a powerful heuristic that can enable us to read more attentively, attuning ourselves to the questions that arise from the terms themselves, so long as the labels remain provisional rather than fixed and essential. Since reading is always mediated by expectations arising from categories such as genre, rhetoric, period, theme, or audience, collective identity offers one perspective among others. Although “Jewish American” is not a privileged or exclusive approach, it is a fertile one if measured by the readings that it generates and the questions that it raises.⁵² It is the aim of *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* to enrich the study of American and Jewish literatures by offering diverse methods and works. Further, this volume aims to expand the scope of ethnic and minority American literary study such that the role of Jewish American writing in the making of American culture can be recognized and the literature can be explored and savored.

The volume is divided into five sections representing five approaches to the material: discovery, genre and period, place, establishing fields, innovation. As each of these approaches can be found in all of the sections, the category division is a matter of emphasis. The first section, New World Encounters, addresses encounters and discoveries in the New World: the idea of America (Levinson), the English language (Wirth-Nesher), indigenous people (Rubinstein).

The second section, Genres: Adopting, Adapting, Reinventing, is organized around the genres of fiction, poetry, and drama. As prose fiction makes up the bulk of Jewish American writing, this genre is divided into three periods: immigration and modernity: 1900–1945 (Sollors); making it into the mainstream: 1945–1970 (Shreier); new voices, new challenges: 1970–2000 (Wood). The section on poetry is also divided chronologically: 1870–1950 (Wolosky); 1950–2000 (Shreiber), as well as linguistically, with an essay on Yiddish American poetry (Novershtern). Drama is represented by the Yiddish stage (Sandrow) and the English one (Nahshon) and extends to film (Freedman).

The third section, Place and Peoplehood: Redefining “Here” and “There,” addresses the transnational aspect of Jewish American literature linguistically, geographically, and metaphysically, in relation to concepts of home, exile, diaspora, and dispersion. The subsection Beyond America explores the role of languages other than English in the repertoire of Jewish American writing: Hebrew (Weingrad) and Ladino (Balbuena), and the representation of multiple diasporas, focusing on the Middle East and North Africa (Kandiyoti). Two essays reflect on Jewish America’s most compelling counterlives: the Holocaust (Budick) and Israel (Sokoloff). The section American Sites expands that locale linguistically and geographically. The remarkable presence of New York in the Jewish American literary imagination is treated in two essays, one on fiction in English (Baumgarten) and the other on fiction in Yiddish (Krutikov). The hemispheric dimension of Jewish American literature finds expression in the landscapes of the Americas, including the Caribbean Canada, Alaska and Latin America (Casteel and Margolis).

Creating Fields, the fourth section, is devoted to the process of defining the fields of American, Jewish, and Jewish American literature by public intellectuals (Raber); through anthologies, canons, and literary histories (Zierler); and through the poetics and politics of translation (Norich). The last section, New Perspectives, focuses on contemporary approaches or materials that call for remappings and reconsiderations of the field: the framing and the ethics of the topic blacks and Jews (Newton), gendered poetics (Hellerstein), queer theory (Solomon), graphic novels (Roth), popular culture (Whitfield), and humor (Caplan). Josh Lambert’s final essay spotlights twenty-first century writing as it reflects the changing roles of Jewish American authorship.

The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature hopes to expand the boundaries of the subject in a number of ways that reflect contemporary developments in literary scholarship: by situating this literature in the Americas and hemispheric studies (with chapters on Canadian and Caribbean writing); by going beyond writing in the English language (Yiddish, Hebrew, Ladino); by including literature that emanates from Jewish non-European cultures (North Africa and the Middle East); by widening the scope of genres to include film, humor, and the graphic novel; and by going beyond the concept of nation to address a literature that has been and continues to be cosmopolitan and global. There are no single author chapters, for designating any one author as more representative than others runs the risk of projecting a writer’s sensibility and reception onto an entire field; Saul Bellow’s conservative humanism, to cite one example, no matter how brilliant his writing and how worthy his Nobel Prize, cannot stand in for Jewish American literature in its entirety.

Finally, the *Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* does not aim to be comprehensive, preferring to treat one author or work from several different perspectives rather than to provide an encyclopedic index with only one entry per item. Emma Lazarus, to cite one example, is discussed in six essays: in relation to the idea of America, New York, translation, women's writing, Israel, and religious poetry. Major figures who have earned a secure place in this body of literature appear in these essays recurrently, among them Mary Antin, Saul Bellow, Abraham Cahan, Bernard Malamud, David Mamet, Mordecai Noah, Cynthia Ozick, Grace Paley, Henry Roth and Philip Roth, Delmore Schwartz, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Nathanael West, and Anzia Yezierska, to name a few. However, dozens of novelists, poets, dramatists, intellectuals, graphic artists, filmmakers, and humorists who have received little critical attention are also woven into these narratives of Jewish American creativity. Each of these works of American and Jewish culture can be read productively through other lenses, no less particular. Reading this literature through ideas about what constitutes Jewish American experience exemplifies Cynthia Ozick's captivating image of how the particular speaks when universality is silent: Anyone who blows into the wide end of a shofar, Ozick says, "will not be heard at all." But "if we blow into the narrow end of the *shofar*," she writes, "we will be heard far."⁵³

Notes

Many thanks to Una Chaudhuri, Morris Dickstein, and Rachel Rubinstein for thoughtful readings of earlier drafts.

- 1 Philip Roth, "Eli, the Fanatic," in *Goodbye, Columbus* (New York: Random House, 1959), 279.
- 2 Stuyvesant's policies were overturned by the Dutch West India Company in Amsterdam in their response to a petition by Jewish merchants. Stuyvesant was ordered to permit Jews to "travel," "trade," "live," and "remain" in New Netherland and after several more petitions they were granted the right to trade and to own real estate. Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 2–3.
- 3 Washington appropriated the first statement from the address prepared by Moses Seixas, warden of the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, on the occasion of President George Washington's visit to Newport on August 17, 1790. Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States: A Documentary History. 1790–1840* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 8–11.
- 4 Emma Lazarus, "1492" in Emma Lazarus: *Selected Poems* ed. John Hollander (Library of America, 2005 [published in 1883]), 87.
- 5 Along with Mary Antin's flag waving autobiography, *The Promised Land* (1912).
- 6 For a discussion of the insider/outsider status of Jews in contemporary America see David Biale, Susannah Heschel, Michael Galshinsky, eds., *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

- 7 In his rich analysis of this literature in the introduction to *American Jewish Stories*, Irving Howe famously predicted that “insofar as this body of writing draws heavily on the immigrant experience, it must suffer a depletion of resources” with time. The abundance of Jewish American writing produced by writers removed from the subject of immigration has proved him wrong, although the extraordinary second wave of fiction produced by immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and their children, in recent years does testify to the unique power of that experience. Irving Howe, ed., *Jewish American Stories* (New York: New American Library, 1977), 16.
- 8 Julian Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 2.
- 9 *Princeton Weekly Bulletin* 91:6 (October 15, 2001).
- 10 *Princeton University Library Chronicle* LXIII:1 & 2 (Autumn 2001–Winter 2002). The Lapidus Family Fund for American Jewish Studies jointly administered by Judaic Studies and American Studies.
- 11 Lori Harrison-Kahan and Josh Lambert, “Introduction,” *The Future of Jewish American Literary Studies* (Special Issue), *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 37:3 (Summer 2012), 6.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Horace Kallen, “Democracy versus the Melting Pot: A Study in American Nationality,” *Nation* (1915). Reprinted in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, eds. Chametzky et al. (New York: Norton, 2001), 206–217.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 216. For a discussion of the legacy of Kallen’s ideas in contemporary American studies see Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). Although Kallen’s view prevailed, it was not the only theory of ethnicity that resisted the melting pot in favor of a trans-national approach. Randolph Bourne’s concept of cosmopolitanism relied less on essentialism than Kallen’s. See “Trans-National America,” *Atlantic Monthly* 118 (July 1916), 86–97.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963).
- 17 Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 19 Dean Franco, *Ethnic American Literature: Comparing Chicano, Jewish, and African American Writing* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 13.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 David Palumbo-Liu, *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1995).
- 22 *Ibid.*, 3, 5. Palumbo-Liu is drawing on David Hollinger, *In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 88.
- 23 According to Jonathan Freedman, “Jewish difference is not just racial or ethnic difference; it is *ethno-religious* difference.” Freedman, “A Jewish Problem?” in “The Future of Jewish American Literary Studies,” *MELUS*, 27. My claim refers specifically to the Jewish experience in the United States, where it became, according to Will Herberg,

- the third major religion constituting the American nation (Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*. New York: Doubleday, 1960). Hence, many works of Jewish American literature will relate to religious aspects of Jewish experience. Moreover, the view that religion and ethnicity are opposing categories stems from Christianity's separation of body and spirit. Jewish American culture, in particular its literature, both internalizes and resists this view. The role of religion in Jewish civilization historically and outside the United States is a vast and complex topic.
- 24 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975). See the illuminating preface to the new edition (2011).
 - 25 Freedman, 27.
 - 26 See Arnold Eisen's study of the particular theological challenge faced by Jews in America in relation to concepts of the Chosen People. *The Chosen People: A Study in Jewish Religious Ideology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).
 - 27 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport," http://www.hwlongfellow.org/poems_poem.php?pid=52.
 - 28 In 1899, the Bureau of Immigration began to apply the term "Hebrew" to Jewish newcomers.
 - 29 Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 91.
 - 30 Lazarus, 9.
 - 31 Ibid., 58.
 - 32 For a detailed analysis of how Lazarus substituted Hebraism for Hellenism in this poem, see Daniel Marom, "Who Is the 'Mother of Exiles'? Jewish Aspects of Emma Lazarus's 'The New Colossus.'" *Prooftexts* 20 (2000): 231–261.
 - 33 Michael Kramer points out that "Lazarus' poetry marks a clear turning point in Jewish American literature, as it gazes at the new East European immigrants – the 'wretched refuse' of 'Europe's teeming shores'... through the eyes of the Sephardic-German experience." Michael Kramer, "The Origins of Jewish American Literary History," in Michael Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 28. His essay examines the conceptual bind of early Jewish American writers and thinkers (first two centuries) "looking backward to Jewish origins and forward to American vistas" (16). *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* complements the *Cambridge Companion* by expanding and diversifying the topics and approaches in the latter.
 - 34 For a discussion of the genealogy and the effects of the concept of Semites, see Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).
 - 35 This is true primarily for the great migration of Jews from Eastern Europe. German Jews, who immigrated earlier, were an exception, as they were highly Germanized and continued their collective cultural and religious life in America in German.
 - 36 For a history of Sephardic Jewry in the United States, see Aviva Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). Ben-Ur defines Sephardim as "Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Jews of Western Europe and Ladino-speaking Jews of the Ottoman Empire" (6).
 - 37 As Jonathan Freedman has pointed out, the Oriental ethnic otherness attributed to the Jew in America "placed Jews in a direct line of descent to the biblical Jews of the

- Near East . . . in which the Jew gets loaded with the full weight of the contradictory ascriptions that were generated by . . . the discourse of Orientalism.”
- 38 Among the studies of Jewish literature that discuss its diasporic and exilic dimension, see Sidra Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000); Julian Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Ranen Omer-Sherman, *Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American Literature* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2002).
 - 39 For a collection of essays on this topic, see Hana Wirth-Nesher, *What Is Jewish Literature?* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994).
 - 40 Chaim Rabin, “What Constitutes a Jewish Language?” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 30:1981, 19–28.
 - 41 Biographical accounts refers to literary analysis based on whether the author was Jewish by birth. Michael Kramer has argued that this “racial” basis for defining Jewish literature underlies all scholarship on the subject since the Enlightenment. See his article and the responses to it: “Race, Literary History, and the ‘Jewish’ Question,” *Prooftexts* 21:3 (Fall 2001), 287–349.
 - 42 Gershon Shaked, *The Shadows Within: Essays on Modern Jewish Writers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 57–58.
 - 43 Ruth Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4.
 - 44 Robert Alter, *After the Tradition: Essays on Modern Jewish Writing* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969), 34.
 - 45 Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 266.
 - 46 Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1990).
 - 47 Shira Wolosky, “Derrida, Jabes, Levinas: Sign Theory as Ethical Discourse,” *Prooftexts* 2 (1982), 283–302.
 - 48 Geoffrey Hartman, “On the Jewish Imagination,” *Prooftexts* 5 (1985), 201–220.
 - 49 Miron, 307.
 - 50 *Ibid.*, 404.
 - 51 *Ibid.*, 405.
 - 52 Dean Franco offers a succinct justification for the category Jewish American literature: “that heading allows for a contingent way of reading that focuses on commonly assumed historical narratives, geographical allegiances, and affective cultural markers.” See *Race, Rights, and Recognition: Jewish American Literature since 1969* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 12.
 - 53 Cynthia Ozick, *Art and Ardor: Essays* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1983), 177.

PART I

★

NEW WORLD ENCOUNTERS

Encountering the Idea of America

JULIAN LEVINSON

A remarkable consistency underlies the writings of nineteenth-century American Jews: In multiple genres from poems to sermons to newspaper editorials, they present their adopted nation as a glorious land brimming with promise. To have gained American citizenship, they announce, was to have recovered the basic conditions for human dignity after two millennia of degradation in the Old World. Hence nineteenth-century Jewish American writings abound in images of regeneration, rebirth, and new beginnings. To some extent this optimism reflects the outlook of modern Jewry during the age of emancipation, a time when countless Jews in the United States as well as in Central and Western Europe (especially France) set their hopes on the emerging liberal nation state.¹ But if nineteenth-century American Jews can be seen as a type – perhaps *the* type – of modern Jewry, there are also ways in which the Jewish encounter with America must be treated as a special case. Because of the distinctive ways in which political and religious discourses are configured in the national mythos, including a heavy emphasis on the language of biblical prophecy, America has appeared to many Jews not merely as a haven of political freedom, but as a nation allied with their own deepest spiritual aspirations *as Jews*. American Jewish optimism has thus included the sense that here, at last, some abiding, underlying Jewish essence would emerge and flourish.

In what follows, I track the dynamic interaction between Jews and America – or, more precisely, with the *idea* of America as they understood it during the nation's first century of existence. My analysis focuses on three foundational figures: Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785–1851), Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900), and Emma Lazarus (1849–1887).² Each had a multifaceted career combining textual production and public advocacy: Noah was a playwright, journalist, and politician and easily the most famous American Jew prior to 1850; Wise was a rabbi, novelist, journalist, and the foremost

leader of American Judaism by midcentury; Lazarus was the best-known English-language Jewish poet of her age, and she too crossed into the political realm, advocating on behalf of victimized East European Jews. In their energetic promotion of America as the center of Jewish modernity, they provide a group portrait of nineteenth-century American Jewry at its most optimistic. Even before the mass migration of Jews from Eastern Europe of 1881–1924, they had already set the terms for the view of America as a new beginning for Jewish life.³ While the mainspring for their analysis of Jewish modernity is the idea of America itself, their primary linguistic medium, English, created an ideational setting on its own, making their writings a staging ground for the revision of Jewish culture and identity in America (Wise wrote important works in German as well, but his vision of American Judaism crystallized in English). For Noah and Lazarus, another key context is New York City, the most religiously and ethnically diverse city in the new republic, which encouraged the creation of a self-confident, assertive Jewishness. The question, as we turn back to these key originators of American Jewish discourse, is how they absorbed prevailing political and religious discourses while carving out a space for Jewish particularism.

A Utopia of Individuals

To understand America's transformative power on the Jewish self-image, we must consider that especially in its early years the United States constructed itself more as an *ethos* (a guiding set of principles) than as an *ethnos* (a specific group of people).⁴ However much its actual history may be linked to specific actors working out their own aims, the nation projected itself not merely as a swath of geography, but as a glittering, triumphant *Idea*. Such ideological grandiosity is a prerogative of all revolutionary societies. But America's idealistic reading of itself was and has remained particularly vivid. One reason has been the malleability of the Idea of America. In its most concise form, the national purpose has been defined as the liberation of the individual from arbitrary, external restraints, the realization of the principle of *laissez faire*. As such, diverse groups of people have seen "America" as a sphere for the fulfillment of their own purposes, an invitation to imagine themselves as they would be without any external impositions.

No single document has laid out this promise with greater authority as far as Jews were concerned than George Washington's letter to the "Hebrew Congregations of New Port" (1790). While traveling through Rhode Island,

Washington had received a warm response from the Newport congregation. In exchange he offered an unequivocal welcome:

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy. . . . All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. . . . May the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants, while every one shall sit in safety under his own fig-tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.⁵

Washington offers the American public sphere as a neutral space for self-realization, an Edenic clearing. Washington's central metaphor, the fig tree, is taken from eschatological passages in Micah and Zachariah; here it suggests the triumph of *laissez faire* liberalism. Unlike Napoleon Bonaparte, whose fear of disloyalty led to his famous interrogation of the Assembly of Jewish Notables at roughly the same time (1806), Washington understands citizenship as conferring "immunities" without proof of loyalty. Washington seems, furthermore, to be making the safety of Jews a litmus test for American ideals: The "enlarged and liberal policy" of his government is proven by the safety and freedom of Jews. The shape or *content* of Jewish identity is construed as a wholly private matter, a message that would have resonated with the terms set by Rhode Island's religious culture more generally, given its origins in Roger Williams's ideology of religious dissent and radical autonomy.

As they embarked on their American adventure, Jews inevitably rescripted their identities and sense of collective purpose in terms consistent with the broader national project. As intellectual historians from Ralph Barton Perry to Daniel Walker Howe have observed, this project can be seen as the crystallization of two distinct intellectual currents: seventeenth-century English political thought, exemplified by John Locke and his Enlightenment successors, and the radical Protestant Reformation, embodied by the Puritan settlers and other dissenting groups.⁶ Despite (or maybe *because of*) their often contradictory agendas, these two traditions have joined to lend a special fascination to the "Idea of America." A key aspect of this intellectual inheritance has been the American emphasis on the sufficiency of the individual: Protestants called upon people to read and interpret Holy Writ for themselves; the enlighteners affirmed the individual's ability to discover truth through one's own reason and experience. This focus on the individual has shaped the characteristically American culture of self-help and self-improvement. The idea is that the "natural" self stands in need of correction, but that the powers of

correction already lie buried within the self. What endangers this process of self-correction, according to these traditions, are faulty institutions and stultifying inherited traditions. Hence, a second result of its intellectual heritage has been the American affinity for what Isaiah Berlin calls “the concept of negative liberty” – an understanding that liberty consists chiefly in the freedom *from* external barriers and harassment by others.⁷ On this score, Reformation attacks on the demonic papacy anticipate in tone and purpose James Madison’s attacks on the “blind veneration for antiquity, for custom, or for names.”⁸ In both cases the individual must be rescued from some prior, entrenched set of norms; the prerequisite for salvation – whether defined in secular or religious terms – is the negative gesture of clearing away obstructions.

Furthermore, the Enlightenment and the radical Protestant Reformation have combined to lend a millenarian sense to America’s national mission. Prudence, hard work, and compromise would be necessary – a pragmatic realism was built into these traditions – but redemption of some kind has been seen as an imminent reality in the New World. The Declaration of Independence may be a largely secular document, casting God as a deistic abstraction, but the mythical role in the collective mind of the break from England has been reinforced by the memory of Puritan New England.⁹ And the revolutionary generation’s overall spirit of hope was anticipated by the dissenting impulse of the Great Awakening (1730–1743). Even as the impulses behind the Reformation were secularized in the generation of the founders and thereafter, the structure of Christian eschatology, an abiding millenarianism, continued to inform the national self-image. The result has been a sense of national mission aimed at a fundamental transformation of the individual. In the famous words of Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, in America “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men whose labors and posterity will one day make great changes in the world.”¹⁰ Formulated in this way, America’s mission involves at once the liberation of its citizens and their fundamental *transformation* into some new kind of person.

The antagonism toward the past radiating from the American idea, not to mention its Christian overtones, would appear to clash at every turn with the claims of traditional Judaism, particularly in its premodern rabbinic form. Antiquity, custom, names – the very concepts that elicit Madison’s ire serve as positive sources of value in traditional Jewish identity. As Yosef Yerushalmi, Arnold Eisen, and others have argued, even more attenuated versions of modern Jewish identity have emphasized cultural memory, the imperative of situating the self within, not in opposition to, the continuities of history.¹¹ In view of these fundamental tensions between the idea of America and traditional

Jewish models of selfhood, it is evident that the American cultural milieu that Jews were entering into was not quite so neutral after all. To accept the invitation to reside beneath their own “fig-trees” was also to absorb distinct assumptions about history, selfhood, and community, which American Jews would inevitably adopt, particularly when expressing themselves in English, to define their identities. Under the sign of the American ethos, all collective projects inherited from the past would come to appear as less binding than individual pursuits, the demands of the past would be generally seen as a threat to personal autonomy, and the future would come to be anticipated as a time of dramatic transformation in one’s personal life. How would Jewishness be rewritten under these new ideological conditions? And how would Jewishness itself provide a perspective from which to reimagine America itself?

Fig Trees in Upstate New York?

One of the most audacious attempts to link Jewish history with America was made by Mordecai Noah. A brief biographical sketch reveals a figure of titanic energy, at once politician, playwright, journalist, and utopian dreamer. Noah was one-quarter Sephardic, three-quarters Ashkenazi, but he emphasized his Spanish descent because it lent him elevated status among Jews and others in America. His family background gave him authority to speak as both a Jew and an American: His father served in the Pennsylvania militia during the Revolutionary War, and his mother hailed from a family that included the “Reverend” David Mendes Machado, who served New York’s sole congregation, Shearith Israel, from 1736 to 1747.¹² As a playwright, Noah wrote half a dozen plays including a well-received popular romance about the War of 1812 called *She Would Be a Soldier, or The Plains of Chippewa* (1819).¹³ These plays contributed to the development of an indigenous American-themed literature; an 1836 survey of American literature in the *New York Mirror* listed Noah as one of the nation’s outstanding writers. During his political career Noah was sheriff of New York, a member of Tammany Hall, and ultimately U.S. consul to Tunis under President Madison. His work as a journalist – he edited the New York newspapers *National Advocate* and the *Enquirer* – further embedded him in the political and cultural world of antebellum America. When Noah set about imagining a Jewish future in the New World, he was expressing at once his personal loyalties as a Jew and the deep logic of American political culture.

Noah’s claim to Jewish fame hangs on the plan he hatched during the late 1810s to establish a colony for his coreligionists in Upstate New York. Having

learned of the availability of Grand Island, located in the Niagara River near the soon-to-be completed Erie Canal, Noah sought out financial backers and purchased the land in 1825.¹⁴ He hoped to attract Jews from around the world to this “asylum,” where they would establish a thriving economy and “regenerate” themselves under the influence of American democracy. Noah named his sanctuary “Ararat,” after the mountain where the Bible’s Noah discovered dry ground after the flood. By evoking his biblical namesake, this name reflects Mordecai’s self-fashioning as modern savior of the Jews. It resonates, furthermore, with what is arguably *the* central image in the rhetoric of American exceptionalism: John Winthrop’s casting of his Puritan community as a “city upon a hill” (from Matthew 5:14). Both Winthrop and Mordecai Noah evoke biblical mountaintops to portray arrival in America as a metaphorical ascent. These allusions underscore the auspiciousness of these settlement plans, lending them the aura of divine sanction and eschatological promise.

Noah’s vision of a Jewish asylum in America did not appear out of the blue. The buoyant, self-confident years following the War of 1812 witnessed a number of proposals to establish Jewish colonies in the New World. Two were conceived by enterprising Jewish developers; at least two more were planned by missionaries hoping to convert the Jews.¹⁵ By contrast Noah’s plan was fueled by a philanthropic concern for Jews suffering throughout the world – and by the conviction that an asylum in America would provide the setting in which a strengthened, modernized sense of Jewish collective purpose would emerge. Noah’s plan also advanced further than other schemes – as far, in fact, as a grandiose dedication ceremony, which Noah staged as an ecumenical media event. Transportation to Grand Island could not be procured on the day set for the ceremony, so it was staged in the neighboring city of Buffalo. A procession advanced from the Masonic Lodge to the largest available building, the Episcopal Church of Buffalo. Here a band played Handel’s *Judas Maccabees*, a morning service was conducted by the reverend of the church, and a series of biblical passages were recited, including eschatological statements from Jeremiah 31 and Zephaniah 3:8 (e.g., “Therefore wait for me, declares the Lord, for the day I will stand up to testify”). This cobbling together of allusions and cultural forms underscores Noah’s penchant for seeking out common ground linking Jews and Christians. It also suggests that religious differences might be eased over when biblical eschatology – God’s ultimate plan for humankind – was emphasized over questions of doctrine. But unlike the Christian listeners in the audience, who would have been prompted by these readings to imagine their souls in the afterlife, Noah had in mind the regeneration of the Jewish people *as a nation* in the here and now.

Noah then delivered a stirring proclamation, which must be considered a foundational text in the history of American Jewish optimism. Attired in a gown borrowed from a local actor (who had used it in a recent production of *Richard III*) and pronouncing himself a judge of Israel, Noah presented his vision of Ararat as the antidote to Jewish affliction. He begins with the reminder that Jews are and shall remain the chosen people, the first to proclaim God's unity and omnipotence. Judaism embraces, he claims, "all that is pure and upright, all that is just and generous."¹⁶ He insists that Providence has destined Jews to remain a distinct people; despite being scattered throughout the world, they have retained an underlying "homogeneousness of character."¹⁷ He then traces the wanderings of the "Hebrew nation" from their biblical beginnings through the centuries of suffering in Europe and on to what he foresees as their imminent arrival en masse in America. Here, Noah modulates into a recognizable American key, constructing today's Jews as latter-day pilgrims, in quest of religious freedom. The American nation, buttressed by the Constitution, will enable the "full and unmolested enjoyment of their religious rights, and of every other civil immunity, together with peace and plenty."¹⁸ Echoing Washington's letter to the Hebrews of Newport, Noah calls America a "land of milk and honey, where Israel may repose in peace, under his 'vine and fig tree'."¹⁹ Referring to his own speech as a "declaration of independence," Noah implies that Jews are poised to recapitulate in their own experience the drama of the revolutionary generation.

In this speech, Noah inaugurates what might be called the discourse of American Jewish triumphalism:

This effort [to secure a refuge for the Jews] makes men and citizens of them, gives them a name, an interest and a voice among the nations of the earth – thus, in fact, fulfilling the promises made to the descendents of the Patriarchs – that the Lord God may say to an admiring and astonished world, "Behold my people Israel."²⁰

Noah's gendered language (Jews will become "men and citizens") signals a defiance of a history of Jewish subjugation while also recalling Crèvecoeur's description of Americans as a "new race of men." And yet Noah modifies this narrative of transformation, making this newness appear less as a fundamental alteration than the long-awaited realization of Judaism's original purpose. While he portrays Jews as beneficiaries of the American system (i.e., Jews will be made into "men and citizens"), he also describes them as bearers of an ancient tradition that produced America in the first place. Noah views America as the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, the very promise that

was preserved by Jews through their long stateless history. Elsewhere, Noah suggests American constitutionalism itself has its origins in the Sinaitic revelation: "The code of laws which the Almighty through Moses presented to the children of Israel forms *even at this day* the basis of every civil and religious institution" (emphasis added).²¹ In this view America enables the Jews to realize the deepest purpose of their own national heritage, since America answers the promise originally given to Abraham, their patriarch. The effect of this claim, which will recur in later instances of American Jewish public rhetoric, is to suggest that Jewish distinctiveness need not be erased in America: the Crevecoeur-esque language of self-transformation is recast as a narrative of self-fulfillment.

Even as he thus elects America as a destination for the world's Jews, Noah cannot ignore the traditional view of the Land of Israel as the telos of Jewish history. Indeed by choosing "Ararat" rather than, say, Canaan or Zion, as the name of his asylum, Noah suggests that America may be a turning point, a refuge from the storm, but not the journey's ultimate end. "Is it proper for me to state," he announces, "that this asylum is temporary and provisional. The Jews never should and never will relinquish the just hope of regaining their ancient heritage."²² Nevertheless, Noah insists that America has a unique role to play as the preparatory stage for ultimate restoration. He speculates that if the Jews of the world were suddenly to find themselves in the Holy Land, they would inevitably enter into conflict with one another: "the diversity of opinions and views would create *factions* as difficult to allay as those fatal ones which existed at the time of the first and second Temples" (emphasis added).²³ Once exposed to the "science of government" in the United States, Jews will acquire the necessary skills to run their own commonwealth. Once again Noah bases his model of Jewish redemption on American political history. The *Federalist Papers* devote sustained attention to "the dangers of factions," and here Noah proposes that Jews have suffered from this very scourge, which requires them to learn from America's enlightened constitutional government. Thus, however much Noah sustains traditional notions of Jewish nationhood, he adds a new twist to the metanarrative of Jewish history: A sojourn in the United States, including a rigorous apprenticeship to the science of government will be a necessary prelude to their final restoration. America is thus a crucible for a reconstituted Jewish nation.

In retrospect, Noah's Ararat scheme looks hopelessly quixotic. The island was never settled by a single Jew, and Noah soon became involved in other matters. But the sheer grandiosity of the plan stands as a reminder of the power of the idea of America over Jews from the nation's earliest years. Moreover, even

after the demise of Ararat, Noah remained steadfast in his faith in America as a transformative agent in Jewish history. By the 1840s, with the Ottoman Empire in steep decline and the Christian West caught up in its “rediscovery of the Holy Land,” Noah seized the opportunity to propose that the United States should purchase the original Land of Israel and establish it as a Jewish colony. He laid out his vision in his *Discourse on the Restoration of the Jews* (1845), originally given as an address before the Broadway Tabernacle, one of the most influential Presbyterian churches in Manhattan (presided over by the famous evangelist Charles Grandison Finney). Here, in a grand ecumenical gesture, he builds an eschatological narrative in which Jews and Christians alike will find their salvation. The mediating term, the literal and figurative meeting ground for these distinct religious communities, is the American nation, which Noah frames as a joint effort to manifest God’s purposes on earth. Even though his Ararat scheme failed, Noah remained convinced that America would play a transformative role in Jewish history; a dispersed, subjugated people would become under American auspices a coherent, enlightened, and self-determined nation.

Returning to the Jewish Fold – in America

On numerous issues facing American Jews in the nineteenth century, Mordecai Noah and Isaac Mayer Wise took opposing sides. Born in Bohemia in the aftermath of the enlightened monarchy of Joseph II, Wise became an early advocate of Reform. Inspired by the innovations taking place in Hamburg, Dessau, and Frankfurt, Wise advocated for a Judaism consistent with the spirit of the age.²⁴ Such a Judaism would be rational, associated with a deistic God, and rooted in the doctrine of the mission of Israel to spread ethical monotheism. Hired as a rabbi in the town of Radnitz (in present-day Czech Republic), Wise sought to introduce Reform’s agenda, including sermonizing in German and amending the liturgy. He soon chafed against entrenched local Jewish leadership, a sign to the young Wise that a progressive Judaism could only blossom in new surroundings. He emigrated to the United States in 1846, eventually settling in Cincinnati, where he served as a rabbi for forty-six years and spearheaded initiatives to establish Reform Judaism on sure footing in the United States. In his program for American Jews, Wise considered himself a moderate reformer. What he sought above all, he claimed, was to transform American Jews from a dispersed group into an organized, respectable community.

However much Wise saw himself as the great unifier of American Judaism, his views proved far too progressive for somebody like Noah. While Noah’s

own personal observance was irregular, he publicly espoused a traditionalist, “Orthodox” position on matters of religious practice and doctrine. Wise and Noah also differed sharply over the meaning of Jewish nationhood. From his Ararat plan to his *Discourse on the Restoration of the Jews*, Noah described the Jews as a national body. While he embraced America as a true home for himself and those already established there, he never relinquished the traditional view of Zion as the site of the final in-gathering of the exiles. For Wise, by contrast, any talk of Jewish nationhood in the present tense smacked of atavism. In the months leading up to the First Zionist Congress in 1897, Wise decried the “political national sentiment of olden times.” The Zionist movement threatened to erode Judaism’s “universal and sanctified ground and its historical signification.”²⁵ Wise insisted that American Jews already possessed all of the civic protections they could possibly desire: The messianic age was already dawning in the United States.

Given their differences, it is striking that Wise and Noah sound nearly identical when discussing the overall significance of America in Jewish history: Both saw America as a political experiment shrouded in divine purpose – and the threshold linking Jews with modernity. Whereas Noah sees America as a new phase in Jewish national existence, Wise emphasizes America’s role in purifying Judaism as a religion. In both cases, immigration to America is linked with Jewish self-realization. Consider how Wise tied his personal history to America in a sermon delivered on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday. Recalling his years of struggle with the rabbinate in Bohemia, Wise says, “The irresistible longing for other conditions; another state of things generally became to me finally the message to Abraham – ‘Get thee out of thy country, and far from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house unto the land which I shall show thee.’” Then, in an antiquarian bookstore in Prague, he experienced a shock of recognition while reading “a set of [American] journals from the year 1780–1790” (the letters of Richard Henry Lee, the leading revolutionary figure from Virginia and staunch defender of states’ rights). These became his divine call: “That literature made of me a naturalized American in the interior of Bohemia.”²⁶ In Wise’s conversion narrative “America” functions as the summoning call, answering his conflicts with both anti-Semites and local Jewish leaders in Bohemia.

Wise’s redemptive personal narrative served as the basis of his first published work of fiction, a novella entitled “The Convert” (1854).²⁷ Though not generally discussed as a fiction writer, Wise produced a substantial body of fiction that served to underscore and publicize his agenda. Attention to this oeuvre reveals not only that American Jewish fiction has a longer history than

is typically acknowledged, but that its origins lie in the effort to revitalize Jewish life. Written under the pseudonym “the Jewish American novelist,” Wise’s fiction was published in the *Israelite*, the newspaper he founded in 1854 to serve as a “fearless organ” for the “progress, enlightenment, and spiritual striving” of modern Jews.²⁸ Most of Wise’s novels served this didactic purpose by dramatizing heroic episodes from the distant Jewish past (e.g., *The First of the Maccabees* [1855] and *The Combat of the People; or, Hillel and Herod* [1858]). “The Convert,” serialized over the first five issues of the *Israelite*, was atypical in this regard, focusing on the identity crisis of one specific modern Jew. Though bound by the conventions of nineteenth-century melodrama, Wise’s novella sketches out a narrative structure, based on rebellion and return, that will replay itself in various guises in subsequent Jewish American works (e.g., Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* [1925], Ludwig Lewisohn’s *The Island Within* [1928], and Samson Raphaelson’s “The Day of Atonement,” the basis for the movie *The Jazz Singer* [1927]).

Wise’s story begins in Bohemia, where a traditionally observant family is mourning the conversion to Christianity of their prized son, the promising medical student Moses Baum. We learn that this Moses has converted to Christianity in order to rise in the medical profession. Moreover, he was left unmoved by the rituals of his home, where he was forced to pay lip service to a tradition that had become irrelevant. (An aura of corruption lingers around his Orthodox family, who seem most concerned with marrying their other son to a wealthy girl.) Now living in Prague, Moses becomes the center of a web of intrigue. His close friend Isaac is a progressive-minded theology student whose views are identical to Wise’s and who hopes to marry Moses’s sister. The condition placed by Moses’s father on the marriage is that the friend draw Moses back to Judaism. A complicated set of plot turns leads eventually to a triumphant conclusion. Saved by his friend from a blackmailing Jesuit priest, Moses happens to attend a Kol Nidre service in the majestic new Reform Temple in Prague. The service precipitates a deeply troubling dream in which he is forced by the priest to kill his father (the abandonment of Judaism is figured here through the motif of parricide). Waking in a cold sweat, Moses declares that he will return to a Judaism modeled on his friend’s Reform vision. Together with another former convert and the newly married couple, this modern-day Moses leads the way to the new promised land: “We go to America and become Jews again. There a man is entitled to his own views and none is bound to be a hypocrite in order to obtain an honorable position in society.”²⁹ In the final words of the story we learn that he has become the “founder of a Hebrew congregation in the far west.”

Wise offers his protagonist three options in this narrative: Subordinate oneself to a stagnant Orthodoxy; convert to Christianity in a calculated effort to succeed; or embrace an authentic form of Judaism that reflects the spirit of the age. The right choice is only possible, of course, in a land unburdened by the corruptions of Old World society, both Jewish and Christian. Aimed no doubt at flattering his Cincinnati congregants, Wise's praise of the "far west" resonates with the great frontier myth of America, suggesting that Judaism can be modernized in a land free of the weight of history.

Just like Noah, Wise reads America as the fulfillment of promises originally given to the biblical Israelites. This "dispensationalist" view is nowhere more explicit than in a Fourth of July editorial that Wise published in 1858 in the *Israelite*. Here Wise proposes that the American Declaration of Independence must be seen as the second stage in a spiritual history that begins with the Israelites' liberation from Egypt: "Moses forms one pole and the American revolution the other, of an axis around which revolves the political history of thirty-three centuries."³⁰ The Fourth of July is thus linked with Passover; both are commemorations of divine interventions on behalf of liberty and justice and against arbitrary despotism. Consider Wise at the height of his enthusiasm:

The fourth of July is the day of second redemption of mankind, the spirit of God as revealed through Moses and the prophets as far as this earth is concerned, was incarnated in a modern and suitable form and destined to conquer the nations, to break the chains of servitude ... that every eye may behold the sacred sun of truth and be delighted with its glorious rays, that every mind perceive the great laws of God, the path of truth and salvation.³¹

Wise's view of history sounds very much like Christian supercessionism, the doctrine that the church has replaced Israel in the divine scheme of salvation. The "second redemption of mankind" represents a universalizing of the principle of liberty first enacted at Sinai. Now it is not only Israel but "every eye" that beholds the divine truth. In a direct echo of Christian rhetoric, he even construes American democracy as the "incarnation" of the Mosaic revelation. But this substitution of America for the body of Christ accomplishes more than a mere cosmetic rearrangement of Pauline eschatology. First, Wise displaces an embodied savior by a historical event: the American Revolution. This is a secularizing move, rooting agency in a collectivity struggling against external oppression. Second, Wise maintains that the "first redemption," Israel's original covenant, retains its original validity, having been verified by

enlightened politics. The “second redemption” of the Fourth of July proves that the first one was already sufficient.

But if the “second redemption” has already occurred in America, why should Jews remain Jews? This question, so vexing to Reform Jewish communities of the future, did not preoccupy Wise as much as it might have. Instead, he imagined a future in which Jews and Christians alike would embrace a universal religion, a rational set of principles wholly compatible with liberal democracy and rooted in “the sublime Jehovah conception.” Such a view was what he understood Judaism to be at its core; its realization would represent the fulfillment, not the cancellation, of Judaism. Thus the chief order of the day was to clear away the dross of rabbinism and allow the underlying truth of Judaism to blossom forth. Wise’s master narrative, to put it another way, entailed the uncovering of the true Judaism, a pure ethical monotheism. Wise believed that this would be the very outlook of Crevecoeur’s “new race of men.” America would witness the fulfillment of Judaism, since the enlightened liberalism that defined the idea of America reflected the essential truth of Judaism.

Emma Lazarus as Jewish American National Poet

The nineteenth century was a great period for the blossoming of the office of “national poet.” As diverse nationalist movements from Bulgaria to Belgium gathered momentum throughout the century, they typically enshrined a single poet as the representative voice of the people. These poets frequently belonged to European Romanticism in general, but their themes addressed their nation’s burgeoning sense of itself as a unique phenomenon, with its own sensibility, native landscapes, heroic figures from the past, and aspirations for the future. While Walt Whitman played this role most clearly for nineteenth-century Americans generally, from the standpoint of American Jewish culture, the best candidate for national poet was Emma Lazarus. Previous poets like Penina Moise and Rebecca Hyneman had specialized in liturgical poems and works based on biblical motifs. But Lazarus must be credited with producing the most wide-ranging, visionary, historically informed, and “patriotic” Jewish poetic oeuvre in nineteenth-century America. She crafted a poetic voice that spoke from and for the Jewish people as a burgeoning nation, posed for a renaissance. Like Noah and Wise she envisions the American phase of Jewish history as a key turning point, an opportunity to reform Judaism in the image of an enlightened modern nation. Her poetic

project reinforced an overall upsurge in Jewish self-awareness in the 1870s and 1880s that Jonathan Sarna has called “the Jewish Great Awakening.”³² In Lazarus’s work, I would argue, Wise’s vision of America as haven for modern Jewish spirituality unites with Noah’s vision of America as the crucible for modern Jewish nationhood.

Lazarus’s cultural outlook was shaped by her Sephardic family background, her direct participation in the culture of American Transcendentalism (a key presence in her early life was Ralph Waldo Emerson), and her nearly pious regard for the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the modern “science” of Jewish learning, imported from Germany.³³ Born into a prosperous family with deep roots in America, Lazarus moved in the world of New York’s Sephardic elite. Her grandfather was president of Shearith Israel from 1846 to 1849, coediting the country’s first English-Hebrew prayer book. Unlike Jews from German-speaking lands, she had no connection with Reform Judaism and its denationalizing campaign, which she came to see as an offense to the reality of Jewish experience. She embraced the view of Hebrew culture in medieval Spain as a golden age and as her direct cultural lineage (part of her poetic apprenticeship involved translations of Judah ha-Levi, Ibn Gabirol, and others). Like writers linked with other movements of national consciousness building, she saw her work as a recapitulation of an earlier moment of cultural glory. Her hopes for an imminent Jewish renaissance were bolstered by her enthusiasm for the Emersonian project of forging an indigenous American culture. Inspired by Emerson’s call to create a poetry answerable to the American present, Lazarus reinterpreted this as a mandate to provide a foundation for a renewed sense of Jewish nationhood.

At the same time, Lazarus’s education in Jewish history occurred under the auspices of the Prussian-born Gustav Gottheil, who immigrated to America in 1873 to serve as Temple Emanuel’s rabbi. Gottheil inspired her to study Hebrew and Jewish history and exposed her to the approaches of German historiography. Central to this approach was the notion that Judaism contained a single idea, which in Hegelian fashion develops under different forms throughout history before being finally brought to maturity. Thus for Lazarus the Jewish people were not some static entity that had achieved greatness in the past; they were instead defined by an underlying spirit (i.e., *Geist*) that would reach an expressive fullness in the modern world. This notion of a Jewish nation formed through a history of struggle would provide the great theme of her poetry.

Beginning in the early 1880s, when the outbreak of anti-Jewish violence across Russia brought the “Jewish question” palpably to life for American Jews,

Lazarus devoted herself to celebrating Jewish heroism and galvanizing a sense of collective purpose among American Jews. She also became deeply involved in philanthropic work on behalf of the persecuted Jews of Russia, joining with a group of wealthy New York Jews to form the Society for the Improvement and Colonization of East European Jewry. In a reprise of Mordecai Noah's earlier efforts, they hoped to resolve the crisis now facing Russian Jewry by purchasing land in Palestine for the purpose of resettlement. Lazarus's poems from this period included hagiographic works about Bar Kochba and Rashi, a long narrative poem based on a fifteenth-century epistle from a loyal Jew to a converted Jew, a verse tragedy about medieval Jewish martyrdom, translations of Spanish Hebrew poets, and broad reflections on the Jewish soul. These poems typically envision Jewish history in the Old World as a relentless struggle amid brutal oppression, a tragic existence that belies the grandeur of Israel, who has served as bearers of God's truth. In "The Choice" (1884), for example, the poet associates the fate of Israel with a "narrow track" along an "abysmal verge" where "all men shall hate and hound thee and thy seed."³⁴ At the same time it is to Israel that God has placed "my lamp for light." The identical image appears in "Gifts" (1883), where "the Hebrew" is described as leading a life opposed to the idols of the pagan world – "cursed, hated, spurned" and yet "immortal through the lamp within his hand."³⁵ Numerous poems use stridently martial language to describe an imminent rebirth of Israel. In "The Banner of the Jew" (1882), she calls out to Israel to "Recall to-day / The glorious Maccabean rage."³⁶ Insisting that Israel's "ancient strength remains unbent," she yearns to see it manifest itself again as of yore: "Oh for Jerusalem's trumpet now, / To blow a blast of shattering power."³⁷ The antagonist in these poems remains unspecified; more important is their basic narrative structure moving from oppression to triumphant release.

Lazarus also wrote numerous prose works during this period, including a series of fifteen articles published between 1882 and 1883 under the title *An Epistle to the Hebrews*. Drawn from a New Testament work traditionally attributed to Paul, this title underscores Lazarus's sense of her own project as that of galvanizing a new consciousness, a new dispensation, for American Jews. Like both Noah and Wise, Lazarus sees America not merely as refuge but as a nation whose deep purpose corresponds to the spirit of Israel. It is revealing that when she wrote "The New Colossus" (1883) for a fund-raiser to build a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, she used the very same image of the lamp in her most famous lines to represent the promise held out by America to newly arrived immigrants: "Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my light beside the golden door."³⁸ America, which is metonymically presented

through the Statue of Liberty, appears in a similar guise to Israel's: Both stand opposed to the benighted Old World; both embody the divine will to bring righteousness.

Lazarus's most sustained effort to weave the destiny of the Jews into American history occurs in the last work to be published during her lifetime, a cycle of seven poems entitled *By the Waters of Babylon: Little Poems in Prose* (1887). The first poem, "The Exodus," begins with the expulsion from Spain, narrated as a collective trauma that in effect creates the Jewish nation as a unified body: "Noble and abject, learned and simple, illustrious and obscure, plod side by side, all brother now, merged in one routed army of misfortune."³⁹ This scene rehearses the departure from Egypt of a "mixed multitude" that over the course of their desert wanderings will become the consolidated people of Israel. Just as Lazarus's "despairing exiles" are leaving Spain, the "world-unveiling Genoese" is departing on his voyage to discover America, heralding Israel's future liberation. Here the figure of Columbus, another metonym for America, has displaced the figure of Moses as the agent of national redemption.

Finally, the poem envisions the rejuvenation of the Jewish people in the American heartland, figured as an Arcadian paradise: "The herdsmen of Canaan and the seed of Jerusalem's royal shepherd renew their youth amid the pastoral plains of Texas and the golden valleys of the Sierra."⁴⁰ This rebirth appears as a collaborative project: America provides a setting for the revival of Jewish strength, which is also represented as a welling up from the depths of Jewish history. The poem's final section represents this as a sublime breakthrough:

Long, long has the Orient-Jew spun around his helplessness the cunningly
enmeshed web of Talmud and Kabbala. . . .

But when the emancipating springtide breathes wholesome, quickening
airs . . . lo, the Soul of Israel bursts her cobweb sheath, and flies forth in the
winged beauty of immortality.⁴¹

Lazarus's language recalls Wise's Reform agenda, adding a host of metaphors distinguishing the Judaism of the past from the glorious American present: The Talmud and the Kabbala are textual accretions that must be cast away so that the pure "Soul of Israel" can be liberated; the cunning, aged, and orientalized Jew has transformed within the space of the poem into a youthful angelic figure. Even as Lazarus's proto-Zionist work and her repeated claims to speak for "the Jewish nation" identify different political and social priorities than Wise's, both construct triumphant visions of

America as the site of Jewish fulfillment, a process that is seen as a spiritual purification.

Conclusion

We might characterize the discourse whose origin we have traced here as “American Jewish dispensationalism”: America is cast as a dramatic new phase in the long *duree* of Jewish history, when something imagined as the underlying truth of Judaism will emerge. While the terminology that defines this discourse is shot through with providential language of contemporaneous evangelical Christianity, in Jewish hands this language is more typically directed toward more secular ends: It emphasizes self-realization within American social and political life rather than in a spiritualized future. For both Noah and Lazarus, an engagement with the idea of America ultimately leads to a renewed sense of the importance of Jewish nationhood, which translates into proto-Zionist activities. The view of America as somehow allied with particularistic Jewish ends is dependent on a reading of America as *ethos* rather than *ethnos*. It is possible for Lazarus to imagine that “the Soul of Israel” will find its natural place in America because America is seen as an outgrowth of biblical religion: According to this conceit, Jews have been proto-Americans throughout history and America is but an outgrowth of Judaism.

By the end of the nineteenth century, waves of Jewish and other immigrants combined with an economic downturn led to a backlash against newcomers of all kinds (and, often, Jews in particular), so that it would become increasingly difficult to maintain this view of an American-Jewish symbiosis. The antiimmigration movement known as nativism, which combined populist and elite elements, began to assert that America was and had been for generations a land belonging to one people: white Protestant Anglo-Saxons.⁴² This view was typically bolstered by implicit or explicit biological theories. Crevecoeur had spoken of Americans as a “new race of men,” but this language was now tinged with a greater sense of biological determinism than he could have meant it in his pre-Darwinian century. In this new context it would become more difficult to sustain the Jewish dispensationalist view of America, the idea that a new era had dawned for Jews that would also restore them to their origins as a people. Or, more precisely, when this kind of view was set forth, as it was quite powerfully in Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912), for example, it has a new implicitly polemical thrust. Noah, Wise, and Lazarus can all blithely assert that the Jewish vision and the American vision are complementary (if

not identical). They can also affirm that America will therefore play a decisive role in the unfolding of Jewish life, particularly in its modernization. But from the 1890s onward, those who make these kinds of claims are implicitly arguing against those who reject them. By focusing on the period before the nativist backlash and before the rise of theories of biological determinism, we can see the formation of a distinctly American Jewish rhetoric that will endure, even as it comes to represent a position that must be strenuously defended. In the glorious visions of Mordecai Noah, Isaac Meyer Wise, and Emma Lazarus, as in those moments in subsequent American Jewish culture when their rhetoric resurfaces, we see an America that represents an ideal, a promise of Jewish self-determination and fulfillment.

Notes

- 1 For a useful recent discussion of attitudes toward emancipation, see Israel Bartal, "Messianism and Nationalism: Liberal Optimism vs. Orthodox Anxiety," *Jewish History* 20:1 (2006): 5–17.
- 2 For a collection of essays on the question of American Jewish exceptionalism see, *Why Is America Different?: American Jewry on Its 350th Anniversary*, ed. Steven Katz (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 2010). See also, Tony Michels, "'Is America 'Different?': A Critique of American Jewish Exceptionalism," *American Jewish History* 96:3 (September 2010): 201–224.
- 3 For an insightful reading of Jewish engagements with the Idea of America, particularly during the period of the East European immigration, see chapter 5, Eli Lederhendler, *Jewish Responses to Modernity: New Voices in America and Eastern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).
- 4 See *The Idea of America: A Reassessment of the American Experiment*, ed. E. M. Adams (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1977). For a tendentious promotion of the American ethos, see David Gelernter, *Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).
- 5 Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Jew in the American World: A Sourcebook* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 77.
- 6 Ralph Barton Perry, *Puritanism and Democracy* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1944); Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 7 Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," [1958] in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).
- 8 *The Federalist*, No. XIV (James Madison), ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911), 81.
- 9 For a discussion of the ways Puritan millennialism reappeared in nineteenth-century American thought, see Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).
- 10 Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, ed. W. P. Trent and an introduction by Ludwig Lewisohn (New York: Fox, Duffield, 1904), 55.

- 11 See Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982); and Arnold Eisen, *Rethinking Jewish Modernity: Ritual, Commandment, Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- 12 For the most thorough biographical information on Noah, see Jonathan Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (Teaneck, NJ: Holmes & Meier, 1981). An indispensable source for the study of Noah's own writings is *The Selected Writings of Mordecai Noah*, ed. Michael Schuldiner and Daniel J. Kleinfeld (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999). For recent studies of Noah in the contexts of Jewish literature and American culture, see Michael Weingrad, *American Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011) and Rachel Rubinstein, *Members of the Tribe: Native America in the Jewish Imagination* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010).
- 13 See Schuldiner and Kleinfeld.
- 14 See Sarna. For a discussion of Noah's project in the backdrop of Jewish history in Buffalo, see Selig Adler, *From Ararat to Suburbia: The History of the Jewish Community of Buffalo* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1960).
- 15 See Sarna.
- 16 Schuldiner and Kleinfeld, 112.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., 107.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., 118.
- 21 Ibid., 113.
- 22 Ibid., 112.
- 23 Ibid., 113.
- 24 See Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995); and Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism*, 2nd rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
- 25 Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Jew in the American World: A Source Book* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 382.
- 26 Max B. May, *Isaac Mayer Wise: The Founder of American Judaism: A Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916), 41.
- 27 Isaac Mayer Wise, "The Convert," *Israelite* 1:1 (1854). (Serialized over five issues.)
- 28 Isaac Mayer Wise, *Reminiscences* (Cincinnati: Leo Wise and Company, 1901), 267. See also Michael P. Kramer, "Beginnings and Ends: The Origins of Jewish American Literary History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer, 25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 29 Isaac Mayer Wise, "The Convert," *Israelite* 1:5 (1854): 3.
- 30 Isaac Mayer Wise, "The Fourth of July, 1858," in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Jules Chametsky, et al. (New York: Norton, 2001), 84.
- 31 Ibid., 86.
- 32 Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).
- 33 For biographical information on Lazarus, see Esther Schor, *Emma Lazarus* (New York: Schocken Books, 2006); Bette Roth Young, *Emma Lazarus in Her World: Life and Letters* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995); and Diane Lichtenstein, *Writing Their Nations: The Traditions of Nineteenth-Century American Jewish Women Writers*

- (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). See also Julian Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).
- 34 Emma Lazarus, *Selected Poems and Other Writings*, ed. Gregory Eiselein (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2002), 265.
- 35 Ibid., 241.
- 36 Ibid., 182.
- 37 Ibid., 183.
- 38 Ibid., 233.
- 39 Ibid., 242.
- 40 Ibid., 245.
- 41 Ibid., 247.
- 42 John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism (1860–1925)* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955).

Encountering English

HANA WIRTH-NESHER

In Philip Roth's story "Eli, the Fanatic," a native born lawyer in suburban America faces off with a newly arrived refugee from the Holocaust whose presence in the shady groves of middle class suburbia threatens the newly acquired postwar respectability of American Jews. This nameless survivor shadows their lives by his traditional garb and his muteness brought on by trauma, and ignorance of English. Designated by his community to find a legal way to evacuate these religious Jews from American Jews' newfound pastoral, Eli is haunted by this cipher of Jewish suffering. Frustrated by his attempts to communicate with his alter ego, the Jew who remained in Europe, Eli pleads with him, "Please, please, speak *English*."¹ What does that imperative to speak English signify in the writings of Jewish American authors? In this story by Roth, an American Jew seeks to bridge the chasm between himself and survivors of the Holocaust by insisting on English, his only language, as the medium of their exchange. Another refugee puts it to Eli bluntly: "You have the word suffer in English?" Throughout the history of Jews in America, the imperative to speak English would be mainly from Gentiles and not other Jews, but this exception demonstrates that when English appears in Jewish American writing it is not exclusively tied to the immigration story or to the pragmatic need to acquire English for success in the New World.

How did Jews encounter English in America, and how did they represent that encounter in their literature? That depends of course on the language in which they wrote, and how long they or their forebears had been in the New World. Although the encounter with English often takes place in works by immigrants or works about the immigrant experience, this is not always the case. For many writers several generations removed from immigration, for whom English is their native tongue and in some cases may be their only means of expression, English remains tied to memories of other languages that are entangled with Jewish identity. In a later work by Philip Roth,

Operation Shylock, we find three representations of English that recur in Jewish American writing.

First there is the alphabet. Abducted by unknown assailants during a visit to Israel, Philip Roth the author, the main character of this novel, awaits his interrogator in a locked room where his failed attempt to decipher Hebrew writing on a blackboard brings back childhood memories of his initiation into literacy.

I had been transfixed by the alphabet as it appeared in white on a black frieze some six inches high that extended horizontally above the blackboard. 'Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee,' each letter exhibited there twice, in cursive script, parent and child, object and shadow, sound and echo. . . . And when it registered on me that the couples in this configuration . . . each had a name of its own, mental delirium of the sweetest sort set in. . . . It only remained for me to be instructed in the secret of how these letters could be inveigled to become words for the ecstasy to be complete. . . . The alphabet is all there is to protect me; it's what I was given instead of a gun.²

Admittedly this passage marks his moment of self-recognition as a writer whose medium will be English words formed out of these phonetic signs. Yet the passage is also poised between Jewish and American references. On the one hand, it signals iconic scenes of literacy as freedom in American literature most often articulated in African American writing. On the other hand, it is a defensive Jewish American appropriation of diasporic textual culture in opposition to what is perceived to be Israeli muscular culture, the alphabet versus the gun. In the passage that follows this romantic view of initiation into English literacy, Roth draws on a recurring motif in Jewish American literature: English in relation to the ancestral alphabet of both Hebrew and Yiddish. When the initial shock of being thrust into a classroom by masked assailants subsides, Philip Roth scours the room for clues about his dire situation and finds letters on a blackboard – in Hebrew. "Four decades after those three years of afternoon classes at the Hebrew school, I could no longer even identify the letters of the alphabet. . . . For one hour a day, three days a week, fresh from six and a half hours of public school, we sat there and learned to write backwards, to write as though the sun rose in the West, and the leaves fell in the spring, as though Canada lay to the south, Mexico to the north, and we put our shoes on before our socks"³ Joyful invocation of the Roman alphabet that constitutes English contrasts with his failed attempt to read Hebrew ciphers. Roth has cleverly reversed a familiar trope in Judaism: The Hebrew letters that are sacred, mystical, and awe-inspiring have been replaced by the English alphabet in a comical substitution. In short, Hebrew precedes and shadows English;

it makes English, despite its majesty, a sign system among others, a language among languages. What would be obvious for immigrant writers, namely, that English is not an exclusive way of being in the world, remains true for their descendants, because the gradual erasure of the language of country of origin does not leave Jewish Americans as English monolinguals. Even when they no longer remember Yiddish or other languages of their country of origin, and even if they are not literate in Hebrew, the presence of this language, of those letters, in prayer and rites of passage affects their attitudes toward English. A religious ancestral language that has an afterlife for generations beyond that of the language of immigration is one of the markers of Jewish American literature and culture that distinguishes it from most other ethnic literatures. Moreover, the revitalization of Hebrew as the language of the modern nation of Israel further complicates the linguistic dimension of Jewish Americans, evident in Roth's scene where "Philip Roth" the character remembers Hebrew from religious school in America while actually situated in Israel.

This shadow alphabet preceding Latin and English in both Christian and Jewish culture relates to Jewish Americans' encounter with English *as writing*. Roth's novel, however, provides a powerful illustration of the encounter with English *as speech* as well. When Philip Roth discovers that his captor is a representative of the Mossad who is recruiting him for a rescue operation that will not only be dangerous but also demand the ultimate sacrifice from a writer, self-censorship, he agrees to do it because the recruiter is an elderly Israeli who speaks Yiddish-inflected English. In contrast to Hebrew as an alien primal script perceived to be written backward, or as the language of the state of Israel, foreign to the Jewish American, Yiddish is perceived as a familial link to Eastern European grandparents, and as an authentic voice that can be trusted.⁴ Representation of accented speech pervades Jewish American writing, with Yiddish, the dominant language of origin for this community, leaving its traces on English.⁵ Finally, in addition to script and voice, a third aspect of the Jewish American writers' encounter with English, the role of canonical English literature, is also dramatized in *Operation Shylock*, the code name from Shakespeare that Philip Roth assigns to the Mossad mission tailored for him. Jewish American authors often convey their awareness of Hebrew and Yiddish as lofty and familial precursors of English, respectively, yet at the same time they are acutely aware of English literature, to which they want to gain entry and that they know has not always been hospitable terrain for either Jewish characters or their authors. Recruiting a Jewish author acclaimed for his English prose to carry out a European operation dubbed Shylock reiterates his revenge in *The Merchant of Venice* and cleverly infiltrates the society

that stereotyped the Jew as just such an infiltrator. In the words of his Mossad recruiter, “*this* is Europe’s Jew.” Moreover, Shylock’s demonization is evident when he utters his first words on stage, often performed in a thickly accented English, perfected, according to the recruiter for Operation Shylock, by the actor Charles Macklin in the eighteenth century. “We are told that Mr. Macklin would mouth the two th’s and the two s’s in ‘Three thousand ducats’ with such oiliness that he instantaneously aroused with just those three words, all of the audience’s hatred of Shylock’s race. ‘Th-th-th three th-th-th-thousand ducats-s-s.’”⁶

Roth brings acerbic wit to his depiction of these three encounters with English that have marked Jewish American writers’ self-consciousness about language, identity, and art: embracing English in a linguistic field that it shares with Hebrew and other languages in Hebrew script, representing speech marked as Jewish,⁷ and locating the Jewish writer in relation to English literature. For Jewish authors in America who did not write in English, their encounter with English words has tended to emphasize the untranslatability of certain American concepts into their language and culture. The following pages will offer diverse illustrations of these language encounters that often intersect.⁸

Yiddish immigrant writers’ encounters with English varied according to the stage of their careers and their temperament. Isaac Bashevis Singer declared in a much cited manifesto in 1943 that Yiddish writers in the United States would have to restrict their writings to Old World settings because the language did not have the vocabulary to represent life in America, a restriction that he himself did not adhere to later in his career.⁹ When it comes to celebration of English in Yiddish literature in America, nothing compares with Sholem Aleichem’s *Motl, The Cantor’s Son*, in which sheer love of wordplay is tempered by a foreboding about the loss of Yiddish. Created by the great humorist and the most popular Yiddish writer of his time during the last years of his life, *Motl* offers a comical series of episodes of a boy’s impressions of America in a voice that is naively exuberant about his newfound freedom and the language that typifies this wondrous world. Like Huckleberry Finn’s, *Motl*’s youthful eye takes in the idiosyncrasies and absurdities of his world, allowing the author to satirize that world through his naiveté. Yet unlike Huck, who has a vested interest in precisely those values that his author is satirizing, *Motl* is not weighed down by the Old World that he has left behind. His freedom from the constraints of traditional Jewish life, and hence his predisposition to revel in all things American, is already evident in the first volume when he is still in Europe, where he buoyantly declares, “It’s grand to be an orphan!”¹⁰ The

death of his father, whose role as a cantor signifies the demise of Jewish religious life in the face of modernity, releases Motl for his immersion in a new life in New York, where English becomes a daily adventure. As a child who has nothing to lose in this transition from Europe to America, Motl reflects on those English words that indicate the enormous changes sweeping over immigrants from Old World shtetls, among them “dining room,” “union,” “boss,” “strike,” “subway,” and “reverend,” the latter an upgrade for ritual slaughterers or circumcisers in the Old World. Imported English words in the Yiddish text are transliterated into the Hebrew alphabet, so that they appear as foreign elements on the page, marked by an explosion of quotation marks, as chaotic and jubilant as the streets that overwhelm Motl’s eyes and ears.

One of the first puzzling items that Motl encounters is “chewing gum.” After describing the wonders of the New York “elevated” and “subway,” and how Americans avoid flying around at top speed by doing something called “hanging on a strap,” Motl turns to the behavior of these riders. “People sit and keep chewing on something, like animals chewing their cud. Later I learned that the thing they are chewing is called ‘chewing gum.’ It’s a kind of candy made out of rubber. American people chew gum all their lives long, without stopping. They chew it but they don’t swallow it into their stomachs.”¹¹ Since not all newcomers know that gum is not intended to be swallowed, this can be a hazardous practice. When Pinye, one of his family’s friends, saw “chewing gum for the first time in his life, he grabbed a package and swallowed it whole. It made a revolution in his stomach and almost killed him.”¹² Pinye’s overly enthusiastic response to chewing gum represents his embrace of all things American, not least the American language, which he swallows unreflectively. Motl witnesses and reports numerous arguments about the pros and cons of American English between Pinye, the great advocate of Anglicizing Yiddish, and Motl’s brother, Elye, whose Jewish learning and scholarly inquiry make him question etymology and language practice. To enrich the linguistic play in his sketches, Sholem Aleichem introduces the character of Broche, Elye’s wife, who is a staunch conservative, ever ready to defend Yiddish against the onslaught of English.¹³ One such argument circles around the appropriateness of the word “breakfast,” which both Pinye and Elye hear as “brekfish.” According to Elye, who is always intent on understanding English words in terms of the culture that he already knows, it is perfectly logical to call a meal by what is conventionally eaten at that meal, so “brekfish” correctly signifies the eating “of fish, or herring” in the morning. Never willing to give in to Elye’s etymologies, Pinye replies that as long as it is also herring, why should not the word be “brekherring.” Elye’s logical rejoinder puts Pinye in his place. “You

dunce! And what is a herring if not a fish?” When they agree to resolve their argument by asking a passerby who has been in America for years, they not only discover that their quarrel was based on mispronunciation, but also that veteran immigrants have contempt for their ignorance, as they are shamed by being publicly denounced as “greenhorns.” Motl exhibits his own creative flourishes with English as well, sometimes elicited by Elye’s concocted etymologies. For example, his brother explains that the word “clock” derives from the Yiddish word *glok* (bell), because when you “punch a clock” at work, it sets off a bell. According to him, since a watch on the wall can also ring like a bell, it is called a clock, but a pocket watch does not ring, so it is called a watch. Motl is not convinced by the example. According to him, a pocket watch should be called a “watcherel,” the diminutive for watch, because a “zayger,” when it is in a pocket and not on a wall, is called a “zaygerel.” Both of their theories are based on imposing Yiddish on English, whether it be lexicon or grammar.

Sholem Aleichem created Motl at the end of his career as the most beloved of Yiddish writers for a generation that undertook arduous migrations away from their small towns to modern European cities, to America, and to Palestine, journeys away from their mother tongue. It is no surprise that Sholem Aleichem, witness to this upheaval and to the dissolution of Eastern European Yiddish life, would marvel at America through the eyes and ears of a child, the perspective of the future.¹⁴ Sholem Aleichem’s ambivalent attitude toward America is evident in his passion for the newest artistic medium of his time, the movies, and his favorite actor, Charlie Chaplin, whose cinematic style was what he envisioned for a screen adaptation of *Motl*. This meant that Sholem Aleichem’s celebration of English words in his Yiddish prose would have been translated into a nonverbal medium, into silent film as comic elegy for a language that was losing ground on American soil.¹⁵

In contrast to Sholem Aleichem, the majority of Yiddish writers arrived in America at earlier stages of their careers, yet most of them also chose to continue to write in Yiddish. In their works, artfully embedded English words often signal their disorientation in the face of concepts they have encountered for the first time. Immigrating to America in 1904 from Bessarabia, Isaac Raboy worked in a hat factory before leaving the highly congested areas of New York where most Jewish immigrants clustered in order to enroll in a Jewish Agricultural School in New Jersey. There he studied husbandry to prepare for his dream of moving out west. Two years later he left for North Dakota to work as a farmhand on a homestead. Although he had to return to New York to help out his family, a move that meant returning to factory work

as well, he never forgot his days on the prairie, eventually writing two books that drew on this experience: *Herr Goldenbarg* (Mr. Goldenbarg, 1914) and *Der Yidisher Cowboy* (*The Yiddish Cowboy*, 1942).¹⁶ “I wanted to relive the Wild West”¹⁷ was the reason he gave for writing *Herr Goldenbarg* shortly after his reluctant return to New York. In that novella, a Jewish immigrant named Herr Goldenbarg and his wife, Rachel, buy a homestead in North Dakota and hire a farmhand by the name of Isaac, who is intent on saving enough money to purchase ship’s passage to another promised land, Palestine. While working on the Goldenbargs’ farm, he falls in love with their niece, Dvora. To prevent her departure, the childless couple offer Isaac all of their lands if he will abandon his plan to emigrate. Dedicated to fulfilling his Zionist dream, Isaac leaves with Dvora, and the novella ends with Herr Goldenbarg’s paralyzing grief and with Rachel, like her biblical namesake, weeping for her lost child.

Raboy imports two English words into his novella for which there are no Yiddish equivalents. The first is “prairie,” which recurs as the setting for Herr Goldenbarg’s home. Treeless flat land with fertile soil, the prairie takes on mythic dimensions in America, much like the Russian steppes or the Argentine pampas, from Cooper’s novel by that name, to Fitzgerald’s nostalgic evocation of the Midwest prairie as the essence of America, Willa Cather’s romantic Nebraska prairie in *My Antonia*, and Laura Ingalls Wilder’s juvenile homage in *The Little House on the Prairie*. In his memoir, Raboy wrote that the colors of sunsets on the prairie were so spectacular that there were no words in Yiddish for those hues. The word “America” does not appear until the very end, named by Isaac and not Goldenbarg, who embraces the land rather than the nation. For Raboy, who joined the Communist Party in the 1920s, who was already antinationalist when he wrote *Herr Goldenbarg*, and who, in his words, felt at home on the naked prairie, the very word “prairie” transcends ethnic and national divisions, its breathtaking vistas commensurate with the vision of dissolving nation states and with the empowerment of the peasantry. But not quite. A second English term that Raboy imports into his Yiddish is the counterpoint to his prairie. It is the word “Jew.”

In contrast to Goldenbarg, who set out for the prairie in terms of American manifest destiny, Isaac regards the prairie as a means to an end that will fulfill his destiny as a Jew, to return to his national homeland. Isaac introduces Dvora to the history of anti-Semitism, to the pogroms inflicted on his own family, and to his father’s injunction “get thee out,” echoing God’s command to Abraham in Genesis. The word “Jew” leaps off the page when it appears, for its transcription into Yiddish requires three consonants to create the sound of “J” (daled-d, zayin-z, shin-sh); its orthographic foreignness in the Yiddish

text parallels Herr Goldenberg's foreignness among his fellow homesteaders. Raboy uses the English word "Jew" to show that this is gentile America's epithet for his character, and not the more neutral designation "Yid" in the language of the novella. "Jew" is uttered by his neighbor Mrs. Elkins as she comments on his difference from the others by serving him chicken rather than pork, in a scene that draws attention to his financial success and the jealousy of his neighbors. Moreover, his very name sets him apart, as everyone calls him "Herr" rather than "Mister" or "Goldenberg," a distinction that signals Germanic bourgeois culture in a western setting of down to earth cowboys. Furthermore, the name Goldenberg means "gold mountain," a topography entirely out of place on a prairie. With "gold" as a vestige of Jewish typology in Christian culture, and with the mountain as an alien apparition on a flat landscape, his name underscores his difference as "Jew." By importing "prairie" and "Jew" into his work, two antithetical words, Raboy split his identity between Goldenberg and Isaac. By the time he arrived on the prairie, he recalls in his memoir, he no longer believed in the separation of peoples; when he wrote *Herr Goldenberg*, he recounts, he had the Mendel Beiliss trial on his mind, the accusation of blood libel.¹⁸ North Dakota held out the promise of a golden land, but at the same time it was also a setting for ethnic markers and anti-Semitism; it was the site of the English concepts of "prairie" and "Jew."

For Lamed Shapiro, another immigrant Yiddish writer whose encounter with English dramatizes the magnitude of his encounter with America, the charged word that remains untranslated is "darky." Shapiro immigrated to the United States in 1906 at the age of twenty-seven, and by that time he had already written for the Warsaw Yiddish press and translated the works of major English and French authors, such as Dickens, Scott, and Hugo, into Yiddish. His story "Newyorkish"¹⁹ concerns a meeting one wintry night between a middle aged Jewish bachelor and a young Gentile waitress whom he invites to an ice cream parlor, followed by a movie preceded by vaudeville acts, an oyster bar, a walk in Midtown Manhattan, and finally, in response to her overture, and reluctantly – "I . . . it's not my style," he insists – to his tenement flat, where she spends the night.²⁰ Tossing in his sleep, he dreams that a baby bird has fallen out of its nest onto the warm ground. Reaching out tenderly to the trembling fragile bird, he feels the beating of the girl's heart close to his own, which awakens him. "That child of man on the bed. Turns out that: love that is bought – is still love. Go figure."²¹ After breakfast, he hands her a few dollar bills, from which she recoils, clasping her hands behind her back like a child. Only after his gentle insistence does she stuff the cash into her purse. He takes her hand one last time, touching her fingers with his lips mock-ceremoniously,

“the proud knight, it seemed, in his dressing gown, a shiny bald spot on top of his head, and the highborn lady, in New York, in the twentieth century.” Immediately before shutting the door behind her, she gives him one final look that sends a “wave of such intimacy” over his body that he shudders. Rushing toward the shut door and then stopping in his tracks, he utters the story’s last words: “My God! What’s all this? What was all this?”²²

A story about boundary crossing, “Newyorkish” is an Americanized rewrite of “Mayses” (“Stories”) by I. L. Peretz.²³ This too is a tale of an unnamed bachelor in a metropolis, Warsaw, and his encounter with a Gentile young woman in his rooms, a man who also asks himself why his heart pounds when he hears her tread on the landing. The difference in “Mayses” is that the poverty-stricken young seamstress goes to the poor man’s rooms only because he is a mesmerizing storyteller, and she is addicted to his tales. Intermittently she reminds him that he is a Jew, readily apparent, she remarks, from his appearance and his speech. The lines between them are clearly drawn. Once the story crosses the Atlantic, the boundary becomes permeable. Furthermore, the immigrant bachelor in “Newyorkish” desires this woman for her “brown” skin and, in his terms, her “Spanish” origin, despite her insistence that she is an “American,” born to Mexicans in California.

In Shapiro’s story, the encounter with English constitutes an encounter with America’s racial binary and the ambiguous location of the Jew on its racial map.²⁴ The vaudeville acts that precede the screening of the movie include a large burly man who sings minstrel tunes about “how the tobacco leaves are like gold and the cotton blossoms like snow” and “how the ‘darkies’ [the English word transliterated into Yiddish] do nothing but eat red, juicy watermelons, and dance by the light of the blue moon.”²⁵ This is followed by a cynical description of a blackface performance, “a Negro entered, whom all real Negroes would have envied – so black was his face, so red his lips, so white his teeth, so large and round his eyes.”²⁶ In this passage, Shapiro calls attention to the grotesque performance of racialized identity for the pleasure of the dominant culture, in keeping with his criticism of America’s brutal racism.²⁷ Shapiro foregrounds America’s polarized racial landscape and its destabilizing effect on the Jewish Eastern European immigrant’s own racial identity. In the context of recent writings about Jews’ identification with and appropriation of blackness in the United States, Shapiro’s Yiddish story is a particularly intriguing manifestation of this acculturation. His encounter with the English word “darky” is evidence of his interrogation of race in his writings. The bachelor imagines alternately the brown girl he calls Dolores, who conjures up Andalusia and a romanticized pre-Inquisition Sephardic Jewish culture, on one

hand, and a dark-skinned Gentile woman, on the other. His reverie about language the morning after his tryst with “Dolores” circles around the captivating quality of the word “Scarlet,” ending with “A delicious word, ‘scarlet’; fills the mouth like Malaga wine, or a bite from the heart of a fresh, juicy melon. Scarlet-red.”²⁸ For the Jew whose racial identity in this period was Semitic, neither black nor white, this Newyorkish dark-skinned woman with the Carmen-like flower behind her ear, is a combination of the exotic Other in the European Jewish imagination (Malaga wine in Spain) and the exotic Other in the American Jewish imagination (darkies, blackface, and watermelon), both objects of forbidden desire – one religious (Europe) and one racial (America). The crucial difference is that the Eastern European Jewish immigrant cannot reconcile America’s racial binary with his own designation in Western culture as a Semite racially, resulting in a triangulation of desire that subverts this polarity of black and white. Shapiro’s character knows, after all, that he is also a “darky” in Western civilization, yet he also knows that America is altering his racial profile.

Whereas Sholem Aleichem revels in the comical dimension of English, in the oddities of “chewing gum” and “brekherring,” despite its incremental erasure of Yiddish, Raboy opposes “prairie” and “Jew” to contrast the mythic freedom of the West with vestiges of European stereotyping, and Shapiro recognizes that “darky” is a challenge to the Jew’s racial identity in the New World, Abraham Cahan, who championed Americanization in his journalistic Yiddish writings, also chronicled the immigrants’ excruciating attempts to master a language that determined the success of its newest speakers. He did so in his English writings.

Cahan was a prolific figure in Yiddish letters who wielded great power as the editor of the most popular Yiddish newspaper, the *Forverts*. He immigrated to America from Russia when he was only twenty-two, and early in his career he wrote works in English that highlighted the language itself as an arduous challenge in the process of Americanization. In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, inspired by Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, a Talmud scholar turned cloak manufacturer in New York, whose colossal success as a capitalist leaves him aching for the world of learning that he left behind, encounters English pronunciation as a tortuous exercise doomed to failure. “That I was not born in America,” laments David Levinsky, “was something like a physical defect that asserted itself in many disagreeable ways – a physical defect, which, alas! No surgeon in the world was capable of removing.”²⁹ In *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, the accented spoken English speech of immigrants is cause for comical wordplay. “America for a country, and ‘*dod’ll do*’ [that’ll do] for a language!” quips

one of the characters, mocking both their failure to pronounce English and English itself, which, in their ears, merges the sound of a rooster's crow and Yankee Doodle.³⁰ Although this writing style earned him the designation of a realistic writer in the mode of regional and dialect literature within American literature, his multilingual wordplay goes beyond the aims of such realism.

The encounter with English plays a major role in Cahan's story "The Imported Bridegroom," which ends with the observation that "the room was full of smoke and broken English."³¹ An immigrant widower, Asriel Stroon returns to his village in Russia to buy, and import, a pious scholarly bridegroom for his only daughter, Flora. He wants a son-in-law who will gain him honor according to the values of the Old World. He discovers, however, that two obstacles stand in the way of fulfilling his mission, both associated with the English language. The first is Flora's ambition for a husband. "I won't marry anybody except a doctor," she would declare, with conscious avoidance of bad grammar, as it behooved a doctor's wife."³² To achieve her goal, she sets out to make herself a desirable wife for a middle class American born professional by reading Dickens's *Little Dorrit* beside the piano and the little library that signify her respectability. Despite these efforts, she ironically begins to sound like one of Dickens's working class characters: "you ain' goin' to say more Thilim [Psalms] tonight, are you, pa?"³³ The environment that Azriel Stroon's money has created for his Flora (Blume) has given her aspirations for respectability that Shaya, the Old World scholar whom her father imported for her, cannot satisfy. She is quick to point out to Shaya that he speaks in a funny Talmudic singsong.

All of this changes dramatically when Shaya enters the world of Gentile America and encounters English. In six months "he could tell the meaning of thousands of printed English words, although he neither knew how to use them himself nor recognized them in the speech of others."³⁴ What Azriel Stroon does not know is that his prodigy, the bridegroom he bought with the profits of his American business, has exchanged the synagogue for the Astor library, which he describes to Flora as a wondrous place, a true sanctuary of the spirit. When Azriel hears that his son-in-law has abandoned his faith, he follows him through the Bowery to Lafayette Place, where Shaya disappears behind the massive doors of an imposing structure. Dreading the worst, Azriel asks a passerby, "Dis a choych?" and is informed that it is a library.³⁵ Devastated by the knowledge that Shaya has redirected his intellect to Gentile books, he decides to leave America for the Holy Land. It is Flora whose heart sinks at the end of the story, when her husband takes her to the weekly reading group that has replaced his Sabbath prayers. Sipping Russian tea and reading

Comte in English, this motley group of radicals appears to her eyes as “the grotesque and uncouth characters in Dickens’s novels,” an ironic comment on her Dickensian aspirations and her own Dickensian English.³⁶ Flora, who aimed for affluence and elegance, knows that in a room full of smoke and broken English, her American dream of middle class respectability will never be achieved.

In contrast to Cahan’s portrayal of the ordeal of English, which is most comical when it is most painful,³⁷ Mary Antin romanticizes both the language and her mastery of it. For sheer celebration of English, no Jewish American author can surpass Mary Antin. In her acclaimed and widely read autobiography of her Americanization *The Promised Land* (1912), she praised the language that became her new religion. “I shall never have a better opportunity to make public declaration of my love for the English language. . . . It seems to me that in any other language happiness is not so sweet, logic is not so clear . . . I could almost say that my conviction of immortality is bound up with the English of its promise.”³⁸ Born in the Pale of Settlement in Russia and immigrating to Boston when she was twelve, Antin chronicles the torments of expunging Yiddish from her pronunciation of English at a time when Americans were vigilant about linguistic contamination by foreigners.³⁹ Despite the possibility of evading accent altogether in the written account of her life, Antin is so obsessed with passing as a native American linguistically that she goes into great detail about the efforts required to pronounce her sacred English correctly. Moreover, the voice that she cultivates in her autobiography echoes passages from Emerson and Whitman, from the English prose and poetry that shaped American literary identity in her time. Her sanctification of the English language reaches its peak at the home of her English teacher at afternoon tea. The pronunciation exercises she is subjected to in class in order to make her lips and tongue pronounce English correctly give way to a mock Eucharist where her mouth aims for perfect diction while it also ingests ham for the first time in a chapter entitled “Miracles.” As she reduces “the ham to indivisible atoms” in the presence of her high priestess of English, she submits to her new religion, Anglophone culture. Eventually she concedes that “I learned at least to think in English without an accent.”⁴⁰ Speech marked as Jewish was Antin’s nemesis.

Falling in love with English was not reserved for immigrant writers, as Philip Roth’s raptures about the English alphabet reveal. First generation Americans would also celebrate its marvels. The Nobel Prize winner Saul Bellow, whose parents immigrated from Russia, recalls the very moment when he was first captivated by English words. During his hospitalization

for peritonitis at the age of eight, he discovered the gospels, which he would sometimes read aloud to the Christian lady from the Bible society who paid visits to the patients. He recalled being moved by the beauty of the King James translation, by verses such as “suffer little children to come unto me” and “lilies of the field.”⁴¹ His love of the English language and his subsequent career as an English novelist began with this episode that he sensed he had to keep secret from his parents, yet his distinctive writing style would also draw heavily on the racy, pungent, salty Yiddish of his youth, along with the biblical and liturgical verses he memorized in Hebrew as a child.

The writer and literary critic Alfred Kazin, also the son of Russian immigrants, revisits the Brooklyn cityscape of his youth in *Walker in the City*, paying close attention to visual, auditory, olfactory, and linguistic memories: “Every time I go back to Brownsville it is as if I had never been away. From the moment I step off the train at Rockaway Avenue and smell the leak out of the men’s room, then the pickles from the stand just below the subway steps, an instant rage comes over me, mixed with dread and unexpected tenderness.”⁴² For the young Alfred whose development he traces in this conjuring of his past, Manhattan, as glimpsed on the horizon from his Brooklyn home, is the shimmering romantic equivalent of the beauty of English. This journey to English goes through several stages. First was the obsession with speech, for he was a stammerer, but only in social and educational situations, where the drive to succeed was so fierce as to be debilitating. “It troubled me that I could speak in the fullness of my own voice only when I was alone on the streets, walking about.” In his speech clinic, he “sat in a circle of lisps and cleft palates and foreign accents,”⁴³ and on his rooftop, he tried to cure himself by filling his mouth with pebbles as he had read Demosthenes had done. Surrounded by Yiddish and Hebrew, Alfred’s first revelation about language occurs when he reads the English translation on the left-hand page of his Hebrew prayerbook: “For the Lord is a Great God, and a great king above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; and the summit of the hills is his also.” At first, he is profoundly moved to discover “this deepness” that “lay under the gloomy obscurities of Shabbes in our little wooden synagogue.”⁴⁴ On Yom Kippur, he recognizes that the English translation of the confession of sins was a voice that “seemed to come out of my very bowels. There was something grand and austere in it that confirmed everything that I felt in my bones about being a Jew: the fierce awareness of life to the depths, every day and in every hour: the commitment: the hunger.” There was only one element missing: “there was no gladness in it.”⁴⁵

Kazin goes on to associate that gladness with beauty and art, which he finds in English words that are also a translation, this time from the Greek gospels, Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."⁴⁶ So powerful are these words that they instantly leave their trace in his own writing, "For now a single line of English words takes you up slowly, and slowly carries you across the page to where, each time you reach its end, you have to catch your breath and look away – the pleasure is unbearable, it is so full."⁴⁷ This ecstatic delight in English poetry leads him to Vaughan's "I saw Eternity the other night" and Blake's "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"⁴⁸ The last chapter of *Walker in the City* is both a chronicle of the works of literature that he began to devour by Keats, Shelley, Eliot, Joyce, Ibsen, Dickinson, Whitman, and Wilde (to name a few) and a strategy for reconciling his Jewish self with his devotion to a corpus of literature so deeply indebted to the Gospels – he reclaims Jesus as a Jew. "It was he, I thought, who would resolve for me at last the ambiguity and the long ache of being a Jew – Yeshua, our own long-lost Jesus, speaking straight to the mind and heart at once."⁴⁹ As with Shaya in "The Imported Bridegroom" and Mary Antin in *The Promised Land*, Alfred's walks lead him to the public library with its treasures of English books: "I read as if books would fill my every gap, legitimize my strange quest for the American past, remedy my every flaw."⁵⁰ As literary critic and public intellectual who would subsequently write another memoir entitled *New York Jew*, Kazin would stake his claim to American literature in landmark critical works such as *On Native Grounds*.

Initiation into English literature through Christian texts, as described by Bellow and Kazin, paved the way for Cynthia Ozick's reification of the language, "English is a Christian language. When I write in English, I live in Christendom."⁵¹ Like the American author who profoundly influenced her writing, Henry James, Ozick does not deign to represent accented speech; nor does she engage in interlingual wordplay. Yet she will revise the master's art by Judaizing its content, as she does in *Foreign Bodies*,⁵² a rewrite of *The Ambassadors* where the theme of American "innocence" and European "experience" is dramatized in postwar Paris by a young American held in thrall by an older woman, as in James's novel, but the young man is Jewish and the older woman of "experience" is a Holocaust survivor grieving for her child and husband. Kazin's "Yeshua" and Ozick's "foreign bodies" are two forms of Judaizing what each perceives as the essence of Englishness, the King James Gospels and the great master of the American novel. An author who takes this religious and cultural subversion to a high pitch of linguistic creativity is

Henry Roth in his novel *Call It Sleep*, where, in the final scene, Jesus also reverts to his Hebraic self in the consciousness of an immigrant child in New York. In this book, Roth celebrates English as a medium for modernist experimentation as it intersects with Yiddish and Hebrew. *Call It Sleep* stakes out a claim for a Jewish American novel as high modernism, where dialect, accent, and Jewish textuality combine to create a new form of art.⁵³

James Joyce was the modernist writer whom Henry Roth emulated when he wrote *Call It Sleep*. According to him, Joyce taught him how to make art out of urban squalor. The child of immigrants who arrived in New York when he was two, Roth spoke Yiddish at home, English in the streets, and he encountered English literature during his university studies. He too fell in love with the language, majoring in its literature and beginning to write stories while he was still a student. In this novel that depicts the hardships of Jewish immigrants on New York's Lower East Side, events are filtered through the eyes of a young boy whose gentle and loving mother never learns enough English to walk more than a few steps from her home, and whose paranoid and abusive father is convinced that both Gentiles and Jews are mocking him. As this is a Yiddish speaking family, the dialogue within the home, family, and community is narrated in normative English as a translation from an imaginary Yiddish original.⁵⁴ The English that he hears on the street is heavily accented Jewish speech that allows for exuberant wordplay. Since his mother cannot process English sounds, her distorted version of their home address makes it impossible for her son to find his way back home when he gets lost. She cannot hear the street name, and therefore he cannot say it. According to her, "Boddeh Stritt" is a strange address because it means "bath" in German (*Bade*; *bod* in Yiddish). This six-year-old child's desperate desire to return to his mother's lap gets an added linguistic twist when the Irish police try to figure out the English street name from the boy's speech. "Mmm! Boddeh! Body street, eh?"⁵⁵

Roth's innovative use of English in this book finds expression in eye dialect where the same word may have two, often opposing meanings due to the dissonance between what the eye sees and the ear hears in the act of reading. For example, when David sings the phrase "land where our foddors died" in "My Country Tis of Thee," the reader is aware that not only were these not his Pilgrim "fathers," but also that the birth of nations may entail war and cannon "fodder." Just as Pilgrim fathers are alien to these children, so too is Christmas. One of the boys delivers the news that "there ain't no Sendy Klawes," drawing attention to Santa Claus as a creature with "claws," a nonkosher, and therefore prohibited commodity. The boys also refer to the language they are speaking as "Englitch," the Yiddish word *glitch* referring to a slipup, an apt description

for the poetics of eye dialect, as well as the openness of American English to slippages from other languages that have left their mark on the national tongue. By now, “glitch” has become an English word, only one example of how Yiddish has left its imprint on American English.

Roth’s multilingual modernism extends to the reflections of his young protagonist who is acutely sensitive to the emotional and aesthetic power of words, similar to Stephen Dedalus’s boyhood awakening to the poetry of words in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In an early scene, David leaps out of his chair when bilingual alliteration leads him to a disturbing truth about what he witnessed on the street. Returning home after witnessing a funeral procession, David asks his mother about the fate of the dead, to which she replies that they are “cold” and “still”; that they are buried in graves in the dark earth for “eternal years.” Although narrated in English, in the fictional world she would have used the words *kalt* and *kayver* for cold and grave.⁵⁶ He then recalls that several days earlier he saw two “who were going to be married,” and tiny bits of paper were showered down on them. “Confetti, a boy said.” His ruminations are in English: “Confetti on the step. . . . Confetti. Carriages. . . . This afternoon! When the box came out! . . . Everything belonged to the same dark. Confetti and coffins.”⁵⁷ Prepared by the Yiddish words *kalt* and *kayver*, unarticulated in the text, and inspired by the same alliteration in English – carriages, confetti, and coffin – David arrives at his child’s understanding of eros and thanatos.

The most elaborate encounter with English that both Judaizes and humanizes Jesus concerns the word “kid,” which weaves together several thematic and linguistic strands of the novel. The term for a young goat, kid is also English slang for a child. In preparation for the Passover holiday, a group of boys are being drilled to sing the concluding song of the seder ritual, “Chadgodya,” translated into English as “one only kid.” A chain song that adds an item at each repetition, “Chadgodya” is about a kid whose fate is to be eaten by a cat, who is in turn beaten by a dog, followed by a hierarchy of power that peaks with God ultimately killing the Angel of Death. The slaughter of a kid or lamb at Passover reenacts the narrative associated with the holiday, namely, the blood of a kid on the doorpost as a sign for the Angel of Death to pass over the homes of the Hebrews in Egypt.⁵⁸ Since Jesus partakes of a Passover meal at the Last Supper, this ritual, according to Christianity, is superseded by the sacrifice of God’s kid, Jesus Christ, to redeem the world, with Easter superceding Passover. When David tries to escape from the violence of his abusive father by seeking God between the train tracks, his injury and coma redefine him as an innocent kid in a brutal metropolis about to be sacrificed

for the sins of others. In his hallucination before he is revived, David imagines the crucifix that he saw on his Catholic neighbor's wall, except that in his dream Christ's last words are "chodgodya." "Christ, it's a kid," says one of the passersby, before David's return to life makes him a secular American Christ figure, and before his hallucination re-Judaizes Jesus, or in Kazin's words, "our Yeshua." This wordplay that invokes the crucial divide between Judaism and Christianity depends entirely on the English double meaning of "kid" as it intersects with its Hebrew (Aramaic) meaning in the Passover liturgy. The coexistence of realism in the reported American speech of the passerby and the multilingual wordplay that appropriates "kid" for Judaic liturgy risk unintelligibility or untranslatability, but also create a new form of American literary modernism.

Encountering English as it is haunted, shadowed, and marked by other languages continues to be a widespread theme and stylistic feature of Jewish American writing in recent decades, even in the works of writers who are two or more generations removed from immigration. Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost: The Search for Six of Six Million* is a quest for knowledge where the obstacle is Jewish American insistence on English even when it is not relevant. In this memoir of a journey to his family's hometown in Poland, Mendelsohn mistakes a Yiddish word for an accented English one, a misperception "in my mind's eye" that prevents him from clearing up a mystery in his family past.

Motivated by love of his immigrant grandfather, Daniel sets out to ascertain the fate of his murdered relatives, of his grandfather's brother Shmiel, his wife, and four daughters. His only clue is the memory of his grandfather's oft-repeated speech that they were hidden in a "kessle."⁵⁹ Convinced that this was an English word, Daniel scours the countryside and questions the inhabitants of the town for the whereabouts of a castle. Only after years of futile search does he discover that his grandfather had been speaking Yiddish, and that Shmiel and his family were hidden in a *kestl*, a box, a nine foot hole in the ground, which was their living grave before the Nazis discovered this hiding place and they were shot to death. "A *kestl*, a *kestl*, not a *castle*."⁶⁰ Although the dividing line between speakers of different languages can be bridged by simply learning a language, in this case his inability to hear the Yiddish of the immigrant, and of the victims, becomes an analogue for the inability to imagine the pain and anguish of another, the unbridgeable divide between the body that suffers and the mind that hears the tale.⁶¹

The nature of the encounter with English in Jewish American writing depends on which language coexists alongside it, even if that other language is only a trace, an echo, an accent, a cipher. This essay has focused on

Hebrew and Yiddish, as they have tended to play a major role in the linguistic awareness of authors and characters. However, English engagement with other languages enriches Jewish American literature as well. In Achy Obejas's novel *Days of Awe*, Jewish Cuban refugees encounter English through Spanish, which endows their daughter, Ale, with a special heritage: She sees herself as a Hispanic with a noble ancestry that goes back to Spain and the special place reserved for Iberian Jewry within Jewish culture. Ale's parents keep a list of English words for which they cannot find a Spanish equivalent, with "heaven" at the top of their list. This omission also becomes a source of their collective pride as Sephardim. "I'd like to think that our inability to express heaven is simply a measure of our respect for a higher power," reflects Ale, "that, like certain Orthodox Jews who insist on never pronouncing or writing the word for god, we have a deeper understanding, a profound humility about our role in the cosmos."⁶² In contrast, in Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, Eva recalls the words in Polish that she could not simply translate into English: "'River' in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers. . . . 'River' in English is cold – a word without an aura."⁶³

Finally, Michael Chabon captures the peculiar situation of encountering English *before* encountering America, through the movies. In *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, a Jewish family in Prague at the onset of the Second World War, before the evacuation of their home and their deportation to the ghetto, spends its entire fortune in order to pay the necessary bribes for an exit visa for their elder son, Josef, pinning their hopes on his being able to rescue them once he arrives in America. When his papers are rejected at the border for lack of a stamp, he returns to Prague, too shamefaced and guilt-ridden to seek out his parents. In the home of his mentor, Bernard Kornblum, who has been training him to become a Houdini inspired escape artist, he tells his bitter tale in German with a few English idioms set off in italics. As he blows a puff of imaginary smoke, recalling his seat in the smoking car, he describes "'Hurtling through Germany on my way to *the good old USA*.' He finished in twanging American. To Kornblum's ear his accent sounded quite good. . . . 'With all of my papers in order, *you betcha*.'"⁶⁴ With his phantom cigarette and his slang – "you betcha," youthful Josef, now despondent and cynical, parodies the world-weary tones of film noir as it, in turn, parodies mythic American optimism and trust. Josef's English, on an ever-receding movie screen in the 1940s, will not save him and his family, a far cry from Mary Antin's English that served as a passage to freedom and to trustworthy neighbors. Always more than just a language, English has served as promise, challenge, obstacle, riddle, and inspiration for Jewish American writers.

Notes

- 1 Philip Roth, "Eli, the Fanatic" in *Goodbye, Columbus* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 265.
- 2 Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 323.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 310.
- 4 See Alan Rosen, *Sounds of Defiance: the Holocaust, Multilingualism, and the Problem of English* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).
- 5 The vast majority of Jews who immigrated to the United States were of Germanic or Eastern European Ashkenazi descent. For a discussion of the 4 percent of Jewish immigration by either the Spanish and Portuguese Jews of Western Europe or the Ladino speaking Jews of the Ottoman Empire, see Aviva Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History* (New York: New York University, 2009).
- 6 *Operation Shylock*, 275.
- 7 For a genealogy of "Jewspeak" in Yiddish literature, see David Roskies, "Call It Jewspeak: On the Evolution of Speech in Modern Yiddish Writing" in *Poetics Today* 35:3 (2014), 225–303.
- 8 This essay concerns only prose fiction. The encounter with English in poetry is another rich story that deserves attention.
- 9 Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America," *Svive* no. 2, March–April, 1943. Reprinted in English in *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 9 (1989), 5–12.
- 10 Sholom [sic] Aleichem, *Adventures of Mottel, the Cantor's Son, Book I* – In Kasrilovka, trans. Tamara Kahana (New York: The Sholom Aleichem Family Publications, 2001), 52. Bilingual edition.
- 11 *Adventures of Mottel, Book II* – In America, 104.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 13 For a rich detailed analysis of the multilingual aspect of this work, see Lawrence Rosenwald, "More Than an Echo, or, English in Yiddish in America," in *Multilingual America: Language and the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 82–122.
- 14 For insightful scholarship on *Motl* see Dan Miron, "Bouncing Back: Destruction and Recovery in Sholem Aleykhem's *Motl Peyse dem khazns*, *YIVO Journal*, 1978; Chone Shmeruk, *Studies in Sholem Aleichem* [in Hebrew], ed. Chava Turniansky (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2000) and Naomi Sokoloff, *Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
- 15 See Ber Kotlerman, "Sholem Aleichem and Charlie Chaplin: The Final Word," in *Disenchanted Tailor in "Illusion": Sholem Aleichem behind the Scenes of Early Jewish Cinema, 1913–16* (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers by Indiana University, 2014).
- 16 Isaac Raboy, "Herr Goldenbarg" in *Peonern in America* (Pioneers in America), ed. Shmuel Rollansky (Buenos Aires: Ateneo Literario, 1964 [1916]). Raboy, *Der Yidisher kauboy* (1924).
- 17 Isaac Raboy, *Mayn leben* (New York: Ikop Farlag, 1947), 235.
- 18 *Mayn Leben*, 293. Mendel Beilis was a Russian Jew accused of ritual murder in Kiev in 1913 in a trial that was reported worldwide as a dramatic example of what was known as anti-Semitic "blood libel."

- 19 Lamed Shapiro, "Newyorkish" in *Nuyorkish un andere zakhn* (New York: Farlag Aleyn, 1931). Reprinted by the Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library. Trans. Lawrence Rosenwald in *The Cross and Other Jewish Stories*, ed. Leah Garrett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 198–212.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Y. L. Perets, *Dertseylungen, mayselekh, bilder, Ale verk* (New York: CYCO, 1947), vol. III, 462–77.
- 24 The racial designation of Jews within Western culture is a complex subject that has been treated extensively in recent scholarship. Among the most important and interesting work on this subject are Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Emily Budick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Dean Franco, *Ethnic American Literature: Comparing Chicano, Jewish and African American Writing* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006); Jonathan Freedman, *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 2005); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Lori Harrison-Kahan, *The White Negress: Literature, Minstrelsy, and the Black-Jewish Imaginary* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press / American Literatures Initiative, 2011); Adam Zachary Newton, *Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Eric Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 In *Der shrayber geyt in kheder* (The Writer Goes to School) he compares lynchings to pogroms.
- 28 "Newyorkish," 13.
- 29 Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 291.
- 30 Abraham Cahan, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*. Reprinted in *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom* (New York: Dover, 1970), 21. For an extensive discussion of multilingualism in *Yekl*, see Hana Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 32–52.
- 31 Ibid., 161. For a reading of this story as an allegory of the Yiddish language intellectual at the birth of alternative modernisms, see, Sara Blair, "Whose Modernism Is It? Abraham Cahan, Fictions of Modernism, and the Contest of Modernity," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 51:2 (Summer 2005), 258–284.
- 32 Ibid., 94.
- 33 Ibid., 95.
- 34 Ibid., 135.
- 35 Ibid., 152.

- 36 Ibid., 161.
- 37 The pain and humor of mispronunciation are also depicted in Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (New York: Persea, 1925).
- 38 Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (New York: Penguin, 1997 [1912]), 164.
- 39 On the linguistic policies that fueled the anxieties of immigrants, see Gavin Jones, "Contaminated Tongues" in *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 14–37.
- 40 Ibid., 282.
- 41 James Atlas, *Bellow: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2000), 16.
- 42 Alfred Kazin, *Walker in the City* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951), 5.
- 43 Ibid., 40.
- 44 Ibid., 102.
- 45 Ibid., 103.
- 46 Ibid., 159.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid., 160–161.
- 49 Ibid., 162.
- 50 Ibid., 172.
- 51 Cynthia Ozick, "Preface," *Bloodshed and Other Novellas* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 9.
- 52 Ozick, *Foreign Bodies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2010).
- 53 For an elaboration of the connection between modernism and ethnicity in American literature, see Werner Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
- 54 For extended explorations of the linguistic dimension of the novel see Werner Sollors, "'A World Somewhere, Somewhere Else': Language, Nostalgic Mournfulness, and Urban Immigrant Family Romance in *Call It Sleep*" in *New Essays on Call It Sleep* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English*, 76–100.
- 55 Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991 [1934]), 101.
- 56 Ibid., 69.
- 57 Ibid., 70.
- 58 Book of Exodus XII:12–15.
- 59 Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (New York: Harper, 2006), 19.
- 60 Ibid., 482.
- 61 For an extensive analysis of the linguistic aspects of Mendelsohn's memoir, see Wirth-Nesher, "Yiddish as Voice and Letter in Post-Holocaust Literature," *Poetics Today* 35:3, 2014.
- 62 Achy Obejas, *Days of Awe* (New York: Ballantine, 2001), 11–12.
- 63 Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation* (London: Minerva, 1989), 106.
- 64 Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (New York: Picador, 2000), 17.

Encountering Native Origins

RACHEL RUBINSTEIN

Introduction: Encounters across Histories

In 1936, the playwright and poet Lynn Riggs presented his friend John Sanford with a gift. It was a book, bound in red and black, containing “Russet Mantle” and “Cherokee Night,” now often discussed as Riggs’s most “Indian” plays. In it, Riggs had inscribed the following lines:

John –
 “Some day the agony will end”
 for you Cherokees.
 – Lynn

Hollywood, September 4, 1936

Sanford, also a writer, would later recall this encounter in his autobiography, notably written in the second person. Sanford continues: “‘*Some day the agony will end,*’ you thought. You’d learn one day that the line was from the final scene of the second play, the one he’d written about his people. You looked up at him, saying, ‘It never does end, does it?’ And he said, ‘Who should know that better than us Jews?’”¹

Who, readers may very well ask, were Lynn Riggs and John Sanford? And why foreground this footnote in American literary history? Students of American cultural history might perhaps recognize Riggs as the author of *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1930), the play about Oklahoma that was transformed by Rodgers and Hammerstein into the Broadway musical *Oklahoma!* (1943). Riggs’s prodigious literary output, however, often addressed his Oklahoma upbringing and his Cherokee community, but in implicit and coded ways. With the republication of his work a decade ago along with reconsiderations of his work by the noted Cherokee scholar Jace Weaver, Riggs seems poised to reenter the Native literary canon. John Sanford, born Julian Shapiro, was a Hollywood screenwriter, novelist, friend of Nathanael West, communist,

and author of a masterful five-volume autobiography written in the 1980s titled *Scenes from the Life of an American Jew* (1985–1991). While his 1943 novel *The People from Heaven* was republished in 1995 as part of Alan Wald's Radical Novel Reconsidered series, where he is called one of the finest of America's overlooked writers, this has not prompted a widespread reevaluation of his work and he remains obscure.

I begin with this moment of encounter, dialogue, and mutual identification between two writers, not only excluded from dominant appraisals of twentieth-century American literary history but marginalized even within their respective ethnic literary canons, in order to introduce a history of literary encounters between Jewish immigrants and indigenous peoples in the Americas, which, while often treated as peripheral to the central tragedies of colonization and enslavement that so challenge and shape the national imaginary, should in fact be read as entrenched firmly and constitutively within them. Jewishness and Nateness, that is to say, served and still serve as powerful signifiers in the discursive formation of American identity, particularly in relation to one another.²

My essay is divided into several sections, as I move through discussions of cultural, historical, and literary encounters toward a consideration of disciplinary encounters. First, I introduce and discuss early modern materials in which Jewish imaginings of indigenous others are framed by Sephardic diasporic histories and identities and by the popularity of ten tribist theories. In turning to more familiar late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Jewish-authored texts, I operate more narrowly in an Ashkenazi and U.S. national framework, but in my conclusions return to the possibility of hemispheric and dialogical readings as I reflect upon the meaning of Jewish-indigenous literary exchange in a larger context of professional intellectual inquiry in two adjacent disciplines, Jewish American literary studies and Native American literary studies. I am thus particularly attuned to the tensions, rooted in histories of subordination and representation of Native people, working alongside the dynamics of recognition, gift giving, and reciprocity in Sanford's text.

Tribes Lost and Found

If the early efforts of Jews to write themselves into a U.S. national narrative most often drew on the Puritan language of a New Israel and deployed the new nation's promises of religious freedom and equal rights,³ yet another way to imagine the Jewish origins of America was to claim a special affiliation with the continent's indigenous peoples. However, while imagined encounters

between Jews and Indians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries might more often feature sympathetic identifications around shared experiences of exile, oppression, genocide, spirituality, nationalism, or “tribal” ties, as David Koffman observes, actual historical encounters between Jews – often as peddlers, traders, or Indian agents – and Native people were consonant with the general history of colonial conquest and westward expansion and were marked by violence, racism, and an uncritical adoption by Jews of the ideals and prerogatives of manifest destiny. What is more, further into the twentieth century, Jews in fact played key roles in producing and circulating popular (and of course deeply problematic) representations of Indians and indigenous culture, as merchants, collectors, curators, translators, anthropologists, activists, critics, artists, photographers, performers, and producers of mass and popular culture generally. While many did not engage self-consciously in these activities as Jews, it is also true that many who thus fancied and fashioned themselves privileged interpreters of indigenous culture to Euro-America did so on the very grounds of their Jewishness, however ambiguously defined. There is therefore considerable challenge inherent in any effort to give coherence to this long and complex history of imagined encounters, which are marked not only by their generic diversity but by the fluidity with which Jews both identified and disidentified (or were identified and disidentified) with indigenous others, and by the shifting terrain of American Jewishness itself.

Nevertheless, I still argue that Jewish projections, representations, and fantasies of Indianness, while no doubt formed by the history, dynamics, and discourses of the European colonial project, often assumed distinct expression within it, precisely because of Jews’ vexed place within Christian Europe. Jonathan Boyarin, in his study of Jews and Indians in the early modern Christian imagination, argues broadly that Christian Europe’s “history of managing Jewish difference helped shape the New World encounter” with Indians.⁴ Judith Laikin Elkin has demonstrated that textual slippages and confusions between Indian (*indio*) and Jew (*iudio*) in the sermons and records of New Spain were common; as New Christians, both were vulnerable to church persecution.⁵ As early as the sixteenth century many Christians, in the grip of millennial fervor, identified Indians with and as Jews, subscribing to the theory that the Indians of the New World were in actuality the descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel, dispersed and disappeared in the aftermath of the Assyrian conquest of ancient Israel in the eighth century BCE. For Puritans, therefore, both Jews and indigenous people were crucial to their conception of New World settlement as a continuation of biblical history, though only as peoples ripe for conversion and not with messianic aspirations of their own.⁶

The Jewish Indian theory would undergo a revival in the revolutionary period, reflecting the messianic fervor that accompanied the revolution, despite its philosophical roots in Enlightenment liberalism.⁷

I concentrate here primarily on Jews, who, in the process of imagining their own possessive relationship to the continent, would adopt and adapt this myth of the Jewish origins of the New World.⁸ Much of the ambivalence that I have suggested imbues narratives of Jewish-Native engagement can be traced to one of the earliest Jewish-authored tales of encounter between a Jewish traveler and indigenous Americans, the *Relacion* of Antonio de Montezinos, narrated to the Portuguese Dutch Rabbi Menasseh Ben Israel during Montezinos's brief stay in Amsterdam. Circulated by word of mouth and written correspondence all over Europe and the New World even before Ben Israel made it the opening chapter of his 1650 treatise, *Esperanca de Israel*,⁹ this fascinating early tale suggests the terms in which later generations of Jewish immigrants would interpret their relation to the New World's indigenous peoples, to the colonial project, and to Jewishness itself.

Montezinos, the descendant of Portuguese *conversos* (Jews, often by force, converted to Christianity), begins his narrative with his employment of a group of Indians to transport him and his goods through the Cordillero Mountains. When the group is struck with a terrible tempest, the Indians are convinced that they are being punished both with the storm and with Spanish oppression for mistreating God's "holy people." To both himself and to them, Montezinos is a Portuguese Christian merchant, who goes so far as to chide his Native guide Francisco when Francisco calls the Spanish "a cruel and inhumane people." After this adventure, Montezinos continues to Cartegena, where he is imprisoned by the Inquisition, perhaps for suspected Judaizing. It is here that his precarious identity begins to unravel. While praying for his life, he has a vision that "Hebrews are Indians."

Upon his release he seeks out his former guide Francisco, who he is convinced can answer his questions. One of the dramatic centerpieces of the narrative is Francisco's determined questioning of Montezinos, who eventually confesses his Jewishness. Francisco, satisfied, takes him on an arduous journey to a hidden tribe whom he calls Montezinos's brethren and who are the holy people other tribes have persecuted. Francisco's guided quest aims to purify spiritually and reinvent Montezinos: He is permitted to eat nothing but corn; he must throw away his European trappings, including his sword, and put on sandals made of linen and twine and follow Francisco with only a staff. The found tribes tell Montezinos through Francisco that they are descended from the lost tribe of Reuben, and that the time is imminent when they are at last

to issue forth into the world, but in the meantime they cannot allow visitors to discover them. Montezinos spends several days with Francisco and the hidden tribe, and finally with three fellow *caciques* whom Francisco also takes to meet Montezinos. His tale ends with multiple declarations of brotherhood and kinship: The members of the secreted tribe give Montezinos gifts and the *caciques* embrace Montezinos and assure him that “we are all your brethren”; Francisco bids farewell to Montezinos “as a brother.”¹⁰ This brotherhood forged in resistance to Spanish conquest, however, mirrors in its messianic yearnings the very language of conquest: Once Spain is defeated during the end of days, the hidden tribe assures Montezinos, now renamed Aharon Levi, “the Children of Israel . . . shall subdue the whole world to them.”¹¹

Montezinos’s is an unstable identity under siege; he is the descendant of many generations of *conversos* who, through his multiple encounters with Indians, painfully moves back to his Jewish origins, which are revealed to be Native as well. This drama of individual self-discovery is at the same time a recommitment to a Jewish collective identity, and the entirety is framed by a vision of Jewish-indigenous messianic deliverance and fantasies of Jewish power. Montezinos’s tale suggests the complex identities and practices of Jews, crypto-Jews, and *conversos* in the early Atlantic world and their nuanced roles as, in Jonathan Israel’s oft-quoted phrase, “simultaneously agents and victims of empire.”¹² At the same time, when Jonathan Schorsch refers to Jews, Indigenes, and Africans in the early modern transatlantic world as “three groups of Conversos,” he points to the subtending potential of the category of the *converso* across “dominated groups.”¹³ Thus, on the one hand, as Ronnie Perelis notes, “arguably, Montezinos’s identification with the Indians is little more than a classic instance of the appropriation of the subaltern into the intelligible categories of the imperial imaginary.”¹⁴ On the other, Montezinos “sheds the cloak of his ‘Spanishness’ and is able to hear a message of redemption for both the Indians and his own people. Seeing himself in their face and in their story, Montezinos realizes his brotherhood with the oppressed – ‘we are all brothers’ (*todos somos hermanos*) – and embraces his secret and persecuted Judaism.”¹⁵

Montezinos powerfully prefigures the (now frequently overdetermined) contemporary New World trope of the *marrano*, whose covert Jewishness often is conflated with indigenosity.¹⁶ Such Latin American novels, for example, as Isaac Goldembarg’s *La Vida A Plazos* (*The Fragmented Life of Don Jacobo Lerner* [1976]) and Mario Vargas Llosa’s *El Hablador* (*The Storyteller* [1987]) – reputedly inspired by Goldembarg) rewrite Montezinos’s tale of encounters in the jungle using persistent images of doubled or hybrid

Jewish/Indian selves, which simultaneously participate in and ironize the modern indigenist national ideal, offering poignant reflections on the limits of Jewish assimilation into Latin America. Montezinos's narrative thus informs Latin American literary representations of Jewish settlement and indigenous encounter. Because of its immediate popularity in English as a "Puritan" text, however, Montezinos's narrative influences later moments in U.S. Jewish literary history in which the pressures felt by Jews-cum-American citizens contend with their perhaps clandestine desires as Jews-cum-Indians.

Tribal Longings, Enlightenment Selves

Jewish fantasies of indigenization offered further ways to explore the collision between Jewish "tribalism" and modern, Enlightenment universalism; between commitment to the diaspora and to variously imagined homelands; between a remembered history of dispossession and oppression and the new possibility for full civic belonging. Throughout the nineteenth century, American Jews would variously imagine their likeness or unlikeness to indigenous people, both to explore their own sense of belonging in the new United States as well as to probe, and attempt to resolve, the contestations among individual, tribal, and national identities thrown into relief by the process of emancipation in Europe and by American literary nation building. Undergirding Jewish productions of imaginary Indianness in the last two centuries is the ambivalent legacy of Enlightenment universalism vis-à-vis the Jews, who, as Count Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre declared to the French National Assembly in 1789, "should be *denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals*."¹⁷ Jews imagining Indians would discern a similar Enlightenment, universalist logic directing the colonial policies on the other side of the Atlantic, where Indians would be extended the rights of American citizenship as individual Christians, but not recognized as members of sovereign nations.

Two early American Jewish writers, Mordecai Manuel Noah and Solomon Nunes de Carvalho, offer instructively divergent models for how mobile Native identity could be in the effort to fashion a distinctly American Jewishness, both individual and collective, within the fractious, diverse, and polyphonic culture of the early nineteenth-century United States. Noah's Jewish identity was highly public and performative; Carvalho's, in his one published text, unspoken and elusive. Yet both constructed their identities in dialectical relation to invoked Indianness, in the face of a dominant American

literary discourse that imagined both Jews and Indians as always-vanishing or already-vanished.¹⁸

For Noah, an early nineteenth-century Sephardic Jewish journalist, politician, and theatrical impresario, imagined Indians could be invoked in service of a complex nationalist project that challenged representations of Jews and Indians in the nineteenth-century literary imagination by arguing that Jewish, Native, and American nationalisms were compatible and mutually enforcing. Three-quarters of a century before the official birth of Zionism, Noah advocated the eventual return of Jews to Palestine, and the creation of a temporary and autonomous Jewish nation in America.¹⁹ Among the decrees for Ararat, the new Jewish American nation, was the assertion that “Indians, being in all probability the descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel, must be made sensible of their condition and reunited with their brethren.”²⁰ In 1819, Noah had written a popular play set during the 1812 war that featured a sympathetic Indian chief who of all the characters in the play most eloquently articulates the republican principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity.²¹ In his bid for Jewish nationhood in 1825, Noah would deploy similar language, inviting the elderly Seneca chief Red Jacket to participate in his opening ceremonies and calling his proclamation speech a “Declaration of Independence” for the “sovereign independent” Jewish nation, albeit “under the auspices and protection of the constitution and laws of the United States of America.”²² Well after the failure of Ararat, Noah was still arguing a kinship between Jews and Indians in his 1837 *Discourses on the Evidences of the American Indians Being the Descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel*.

Noah was not the only American writer to put the Declaration’s familiar language of liberty and freedom into the mouths of indigenous characters in order in fact to draw attention to and prioritize other kinds of exclusions, such as the rights of women. Catherine Maria Sedgewick would make similar use of such imagined affinities in her 1827 novel *Hope Leslie*, set in the colonial period, in which the Pequod Magawisca makes an impassioned and powerful case for her liberty before the colony’s Puritan leaders. Similarly, in *Hobomok* (1824), another novel set in the colonial period, Lydia Maria Child would organize her antipatriarchal, antiracist critique around the doomed union between the Wampanoag Hobomok and Englishwoman Mary Conant. However, neither of these novels questions the inevitable extinction of indigenous people; nor can they conceive of Native claims as separate sovereign nations, committed as they are to the liberal principle of individual rights for women and people of color within the national framework. Noah’s deliberate confusion of the individual rights granted (to some) by the Declaration of Independence

with the rights of national self-determination that he arrogates to Jews and secondarily to Indians-as-Jews, can be read more profitably as in dialogue with the indigenous activist and writer William Apess, who likewise uses ten tribist theories and an imagined kinship between Jews and Indians in building his own antiracist critique and bid for cultural autonomy.²³

Apess focused most of his advocacy in the 1830s on the Mashpee of New England, among whom he served as a Methodist minister, and their struggle for self-government. Apess's extensive ten tribist writings supported his advocacy work in several ways: The kinship he argues between Hebrews and Indians enables him to call the Mashpee Israelites, likening their oppression to that of the Hebrews under Pharaoh, and thus superseding Puritan claims as New Israelites. At the same time, he links Jesus, Jews, and Indians as a "colored people," thus building a potent critique of racism based on his radical rereading of Christianity.²⁴

Solomon Nunes de Carvalho's travel narrative, *Incidents of Travel and Adventure in the Far West*, an 1856 account of a journey undertaken in the winter of 1853, can likewise be read as a commentary upon this unstable nineteenth-century lexicon concerning Jews and race, chronicling as it does Carvalho's own movements in and out of whiteness via Indianness. Carvalho, an American-born Sephardic Jew with roots in the West Indies, was invited to join Colonel John Fremont's fifth expedition through the western United States as its photographer. The only account of the difficult and increasingly desperate expedition, intended to find a northern railroad route through the Rockies, Carvalho's narrative bears more resemblance to Montezinos's *Relacion* than to Noah's theatrical nationalism: first, in that Carvalho's is an unusual literary voice for a western adventurer in the heyday of imperialist expansion – curious, willing to suspend judgment, self-mocking, and self-effacing. And second, Carvalho's Jewishness, expressed as Indianness, only emerges at the critical point in his narrative when his identity is in danger of utter dissolution.

Carvalho describes a multiracial, multiethnic expedition party, where of twenty-two persons, ten are Delaware and two are Mexican. Two are Jews, though Carvalho does not acknowledge this, preferring to call himself a white man. Throughout the first half of his narrative Carvalho describes the party's many encounters with indigenous communities along the way, positioning himself as an ethnographer, translator, and mediator of conflict, all functions linked in many ways to his photography. But in the second half, as the party, struggling through the Rockies in the depths of winter, is forced to kill its horses for food, Carvalho reveals more of his disintegrating self, finally

admitting his Jewishness to his readers when he explains why he at first refuses the “forbidden foods” – blood and horsemeat – the party is forced to eat in the mountains in order to survive. By the time the party is rescued by Utah Indians and taken to a Mormon settlement:

I felt myself gradually breaking up. The nearer I approached the settlement, the less energy I had at my command; and I felt so totally incapable of continuing, that I told Col. Fremont, half an hour before we reached Parowan, that he would have to leave me there; when I was actually in the town, and surrounded by white men, women and children, paroxysms of tears followed each other, and I fell down on the snow perfectly overcome. I was conducted by a Mr. Heap to his dwelling, where I was treated hospitably. I was mistaken for an Indian by the people of Parowan.²⁵

The “white men, women and children,” with whom Carvalho both does and does not identify, “overcome” him because their presence reminds him of what he once was. As with Montezinos, his punishing journey has prompted a crisis and reorganization of selfhood, a recognition of the contingency of his “white” identity. Eventually, as Carvalho recuperates among the Mormons, he regains his ethnographic voice, treating with ironic detachment even his hosts’ insistence upon an ancient kinship between Jews and Mormons as they preach the “restoration of Israel to Jerusalem.”²⁶

Carvalho’s photography and portrait painting enable him to elicit the narratives of his interlocutors, serving as a broker between parties in conflict, thus recasting his own Jewish difference, in classic early modern Jewish fashion, as a cosmopolitan aptitude for cultural mediation. Carvalho’s Marranism can thus be read in his refusal to admit his Jewishness explicitly but rather to craft a singular – if precarious – identity positioned “in-between” the “white men” and the Delaware of the expedition party; between the expedition party and the Indians they encounter on their journey; between the Mormons and the Indians with whom they are at war; and between his readers and the “exotic” landscapes and peoples of the American West.

From *Marranos* to Marx

Reading Noah and Carvalho in these ways may thus inform us about the options – and, perhaps, the limits – available for Jewish self-fashioning with regard to tribe, race, and nation in the first half of the nineteenth century, a neglected period in Jewish American literary studies, to be sure. The negotiations suggested by Montezinos, Noah, Apress, and Carvalho between

indigenoussness and Jewishness, whiteness and racialized otherness, tribe and empire, liberal individualism and separatist corporate identities, acquire additional resonances in the period of massive immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, with the increasing prominence of nationalism and socialism as Jewish responses to the crises of post-Enlightenment Europe. Finally, these negotiations speak powerfully to our own postmodern moment, in which multiculturalism – in its nondomesticated, noncommercialized form – has the potential to pose radical, group-based challenges to the Enlightenment project of universalist integration.²⁷

The theatricalization of Jewish-indigenous identity suggested by Noah is taken up in the vaudeville tradition, beginning with the 1895 Yiddish playlet *Tsvishn indianer* (“Among Indians”), and continuing through burlesque songs such as “Yonkl the Cowboy Jew,” “I’m a Yiddish Cowboy” (1908 – about an intermarriage between a Jewish cowboy and an Indian maiden), and “Moshe from Nova Scotia” (about a “Jewish Eskimo”). The long, fascinating, and often troubling tradition of urban immigrant Jews performing an encounter with the mythical American West and its mythologized inhabitants continues with “Big Chief Dynamite” (1909) about a “tough Jew Indian boy,” and further with Fanny Brice’s Ziegfeld Follies song “I’m an Indian” (1920) and Eddie Cantor’s antic redface in *Whoopie!* (1928). It culminates with Mel Brooks’s late-twentieth-century turn as a Yiddish-speaking Indian chief in *Blazing Saddles* (1974), Gene Wilder’s Polish immigrant rabbi crossing the continent in *The Frisco Kid* (1979), and Rob Morrow’s New York Jewish doctor trapped in a tiny Alaskan village in the 1990s television series *Northern Exposure* (1990–1995).

Immigrant Jewish engagement with Native people was also fueled by more serious literary and political motivations. For instance, in the first half of the twentieth century, three American Hebrew poets published epics on Native American themes. Longfellow’s “The Song of Hiawatha” was translated into Yiddish and Hebrew in the early twentieth century. Translations and imitations of Native American chants into Yiddish appeared in *Shriftn*, published by a group of secular modernist Yiddish poets in New York. *Der Hammer*, the Yiddish communist monthly, devoted its July 1928 issue to Native America, featuring translations of poetry, renditions of traditional tales, and original fiction. The Yiddish press both in Eastern Europe and in the United States regularly featured articles on Native cultures. Some Yiddish writers such as Isaac Raboy and S. Dayksel developed a reputation for writing about Jews, the West, and indigenous people. In many cases, these articles were saturated with the radical left-wing politics characteristic of secular Yiddish literature. In English,

radical Jewish writers such as Tillie Olsen, Michael Gold, Nathanael West, and Howard Fast critiqued fascism, colonialism, and racism by referencing Native American history. It is important to note that these interventions were produced in a context where, as Walter Benn Michaels and Alan Trachtenberg have noted, in the face of anxiety-producing mass immigration Indians came to function in the Euro-American imagination as the romantic antithesis of the polluting immigrant Other, telescoped into the figure of the Jew.²⁸

Beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s, Jerome Rothenberg, Bernard Malamud, Henry Roth, and more recently Michael Chabon produced complex meditations on Jewish and indigenous national and diasporic identities, genocide, suffering, and power, inflected by both post-Holocaust memory and Zionism. They have been joined by contemporary Native writers, including Gerald Vizenor, Michael Dorris, Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie, David Treuer, and Tiffany Midge, who in their poetry and prose explore the comparative histories as well as the divergent present of Jews and indigenous people. In addition, several writers and artists who identify as both Native and Jewish are taking up themes of hybridity and transculturation in their work.²⁹

Here I return to Riggs and Sanford, whose friendship was mediated not only by what Riggs suggests is their “shared history,” but by the radical politics of the 1930s, arguably one of the legacies of the migration of Eastern European Jews and the socialist traditions they brought with them. Sanford describes a second meeting with Riggs, after Sanford has written his 1943 novel *The People from Heaven* (in which African American, indigenous, and Jewish histories and characters are firmly interlinked), when Riggs approaches him about the possibility of joining the Communist Party:

It was nine years since he'd given you his book of plays, but you knew the inscription by heart: *Some day the agony will end for you Cherokees*. On a shelf almost within reach, you could see a black spine and its gold stamping.

You waved at the book, saying, “When I read what you'd scrawled in that, I said the agony never ended, and you said, ‘Who should know that better than us Jews?’ I've never forgotten that.”

“Then maybe you're beginning to understand why I'm here.”

“Peculiar about us: a Jew likes the Indians; an Indian likes the Jews.”

“Not so peculiar. Think of our histories.”³⁰

Lynn Riggs's gift is more than his book. His gift is his identification of Jews with Cherokees when he calls Sanford's people “you Cherokees” and his own “us Jews,” as he links both in communal suffering and future redemption. The line “Someday the agony will end” is uttered in the last scene of his 1932

play *The Cherokee Night*, whose seven nonchronological scenes document the Cherokee community in crisis and transition, grappling with the ambivalent allure of assimilation as it moves into the twentieth century. Riggs's inscription to Sanford was not the only time he identified a Jewish friend as Cherokee; according to Jace Weaver, Riggs had inscribed another copy of his 1936 book to his friend the poet and philosopher Irwin Edman: "For Irwin – A Cherokee really – Lynn."³¹

Yet, despite its liberatory promises, the Left exerted its own universalist and integrationist demands. Sanford advises Riggs against joining the party, at first warning him that "some paleface committee of micks and hunkies would tell you what to think" but finally admitting that Lynn's queer identity would make him a liability: The party believed that homosexual members were a "risk," "open to pressure," and fearing exposure might "turn informer."³² Sanford's palimpsestic layering of Cherokee-Jewish-queer difference, suffering, secrecy, and sympathy works to open up a space of reciprocity and identification between the two writers, momentarily modeling the generative possibilities of true indigenous-Jewish exchange. In pushing Riggs back into the closet in the name of a broader liberatory politics, however, that possibility is as quickly foreclosed, foreshadowing the still largely hidden place of both authors in relation to Jewish, indigenous, and canonical accounts of American literature while underlining the fact that it is Sanford who is narrating this story, and not Riggs. This may very well be a Jewish fantasy of reciprocity and recognition without signaling real dialogue at all.

Conclusion: Encounters across Disciplines

As Sarah Phillips Casteel (this volume) notes, critical conversations about Jewish-indigenous interchange are likewise still, as Jeffrey Melnick wrote of black-Jewish relations, stories told *by Jews about* interracial relations.³³ What are the meanings that such literary encounters described here – admittedly a small selection from a long, diverse, and complex history – may bring to bear on contemporary dialogues and contestations between Native studies and Jewish studies, acknowledging the radical inequities of power and access that shape indigenous people and Jews as students, as scholars, and as "subjects" of scholarship in the academy?

Susannah Heschel's essay, "Jewish Studies as Counter-History" may serve as a crucial intertext for a leap from early Jewish American literary history, via Riggs and Sanford, to contemporary multiculturalism. The contemporary multiculturalist project, Heschel asserts, bears remarkable similarities to

that of the early *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars, who sought to destabilize the dominant Christian metanarrative of history largely by making Jews “the subjects of their own self-defined historical narratives.”³⁴ The potential for a radical disruption of Western knowledge and power through Jewish subjectivity was largely lost when Jewish studies moved into the American academy, Heschel argues. In the United States, Heschel writes, “Jewish Studies became transformed into a conservative field whose goal was the incorporation of Jewish history into the larger framework of Western civilization.”³⁵ The radical reordering of the American university in the late twentieth century ended up positioning Jews marginally in relation to both the West and those critical voices that sought to disrupt its hegemonies. Recuperating the original radical project of *Wissenschaft* would serve, Heschel concludes, to realign Jewish studies with multiculturalism.

In meditating on Jewish studies’ and Native studies’ historically vexed and ambivalent relationships with traditional Western academic structures and disciplines and now with the new academic multiculturalism, I have been struck by certain commonalities of critical concern in both fields: cultural and national autonomy and sovereignty; problems of identity, authenticity, definition, and citizenship; homelands, diaspora, cosmopolitanism, nationalism, transnationalism; linguistic and cultural rupture and creative renewal and revival. These possibilities for collaborative inquiry, however, seem exceedingly difficult to implement, as contestations and tensions emerge between Native and Jewish studies when put in direct dialogue. These tensions are rooted in the profoundly divergent experiences of indigenous people and Jews in relation to American colonialism, which continues to define and shape the political realities of indigenous communities as much as it constitutes the critical focus of Native studies.

While indigenous people and cultures had long been objects of study in the academy, it was the intellectual upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s that led to the emergence of Native American studies, along with other area studies programs, and transformed the way in which Native peoples and cultures were studied – from objects of formalist ethnographic analysis to dynamic social, political, and historical agents.³⁶ Many scholars of Native and indigenous studies, in their appraisals of the field, describe the emergence of two approaches in Native studies: a cohort of “tribalcentric” or “nationalist” critics in dialogue with another strain of cosmopolitan, comparative critics.³⁷

For the former, Native studies’ primary task would be, in the words of the scholar Robert Warrior, to develop “a Native school of thought,” with “Native people standing at the helm of their own intellectual and academic destiny.”³⁸

This is not so much a separatist impulse, Warrior writes, as “it is a recognition of the peoplehood of Native people and their right to self-determination.”³⁹ As Shari Huhndorf observes in her reflection on the state of the field of Native American studies, just as Native activism in the last fifty years has centered on the battle for political sovereignty for tribal communities defined as nations, so too a great deal of scholarly work has insisted on, in Warrior’s terms, “intellectual sovereignty,” “distinctiveness and autonomy rather than inclusion.”⁴⁰ Centrally, this project involves developing indigenous critical tools for interpreting indigenous literary texts, rooted in indigenous epistemologies, traditions, and community activism. For these scholars, housing Native studies within American studies or ethnic studies and discussing Native American literature as part of “multicultural literature” potentially constitute a form of intellectual imperialism, a recolonizing of Native texts and voices in a dynamic of assimilation and incorporation of which dominant American literary canon making as well as multicultural revisionism are both guilty. At the same time, though, as Shari Huhndorf observes, the exclusion of Native America from conversations in American studies “extends the erasure of Native people that was integral to conquest.”⁴¹

That Native students continue to serve as underrepresented populations in higher education, while most Jewish students are not flocking to Jewish studies programs, reproduces and reinscribes the troublesome situations that the development of both disciplines sought to correct: first, that non-Natives might dominate the field of Native studies and thus continue to function as the authorities on Native peoples in potentially problematic ways, and, second, that while Jews have succeeded spectacularly in the academy in the last century, thus affirming their status as white elites, it is not as Jews studying and developing a Jewish critical discourse. In the words of Sarah Horowitz, “the invisibility of Jewish Studies as an academic field . . . is hidden behind the presence of Jews as scholars in all fields.”⁴² Thus, despite their divergent experiences of access and privilege in the academy, Native studies and Jewish studies scholars alike report what they experience as a continuing marginalization, both in relation to subsuming disciplines where they are seen as adjunct and disposable, and as fields in their own right. Both have to wrestle continually with the central question of who should represent these fields and to whom they should write and teach.⁴³

In Riggs’s exchange with Sanford, the trope of the gift bears even further weight, because foundational Western ethnographic analyses of gift exchange in indigenous societies, such as Marcel Mauss’s 1924 “Logic of the Gift,” have formed a significant axis of misrepresentations of Native cultures – and

because lately many Native studies scholars have taken up the gift as a way to challenge dominant Western critical discourse through alternative economies and epistemologies. Rauna Kuokkanen, a scholar of Sami culture, argues that Mauss's reading of the gift is one entrenched in a patriarchal, individualistic, and competitive economy, where the logic of gift exchange creates a sense of debt and demands a return gift in kind. Addressing the university, which continues to support and reproduce systems of knowledge that rarely reflect indigenous worldviews, Kuokkanen reclaims the trope of the gift, which she argues represents a system of values different from those of economic exchange, rather foregrounding the values of interdependence, reciprocity, and responsibility toward others.⁴⁴

In this spirit therefore of interdependence, reciprocity, and a responsibility toward others, how might conversations in Native studies (which are considerably richer, more nuanced, and more diverse than I have been able to describe here) vibrate alongside and even serve to reorient Jewish American literary studies, particularly in a comparative or interdisciplinary framework? Can such interchanges acknowledge and transcend what Naomi Seidman has called "a (Jewish) politics of vicarious identity,"⁴⁵ in which Jewish gestures of solidarity with other marginalized identities either necessitate the incorporation of Jewish identity into a generalized whiteness or alternatively serve to bolster a sense of special or privileged Jewish difference – what Jennifer Glaser has termed the construction of "exceptional difference"?⁴⁶

As a tentative beginning, I want to conclude with a short list of key terms whose treatment within Native American and indigenous studies suggests possibilities for reevaluation by students and scholars of Jewish American literature, beginning with the centrality of literary scholarship itself in Native studies as a vehicle for interpreting culture, politics, and history. As Daniel Heath Justice writes, most scholars in the field "take for granted the idea that Native literature is an expression of intellectual agency as well as aesthetic accomplishment and that it has a role to play in the struggle for sovereignty, decolonization, and the reestablishment of Indigenous values to the healing of this wounded world."⁴⁷

Further, race has not been a primary or always useful critical paradigm in Native American studies for thinking about indigenous identity. Again, Heath Justice: "The color coding of 'race' in America may be a material reality, but it's not a natural state of affairs – it was constructed by human minds and biases, and it can be unmade in ways that are more responsive to the complicated realities of indigenous value systems."⁴⁸ Cultures, languages, and epistemologies all operate in Native literary criticism as more meaningful

ways of thinking about difference. This might sound a responsive chord with many who attempt to complicate the classic whitening narrative of Jews in the United States, which, as Jonathan Freedman observes, has had the effect of ending rather than enriching conversations about Jews and difference in the United States. On the other hand, to a large extent the growing emphasis on the performativity and unfixedness of identity, which many in the “new” Jewish studies take for granted, has not yet taken hold in Native studies, highlighting the need for careful negotiation across disciplines between an understanding of cultures and identities as persistent and meaningful as well as unsettled and labile.⁴⁹ There are, after all, texts, vocabularies, practices, referents, and “patterns of meaning” that are transmitted and contribute to a sense of both individual and collective Jewish identification, even as those identifications can never be said to be fixed or complete.

Native studies has likewise formulated its own unique and characteristically critical responses to the recent turn to transnationalism, though in fact Native studies has been thinking hemispherically (if not transatlantically or transpacifically) for a long time, in that Native nations transcend and transgress the political borders of the nation-states of the Americas.⁵⁰ What would happen if we mapped Jewish transnationalism differently? So that, alongside the Europe–United States–Israel axis, Jewish studies started to think hemispherically in the ways in which Native studies has? This volume in fact begins the work of reorienting Jewish American studies toward Latin America, Canada, and the Caribbean, particularly in Sarah Phillips Casteel’s essay in this volume, in which she explores the possibilities of the hemispheric approach and in fact suggests that Jewish-indigenous encounter can work as a linking trope across literatures of the Americas.

Huhndorf herself observes that while transnationalism might represent the next “turn” in Native studies (as in so many other fields), the urgent pull of local indigenous politics can reveal the limits of a transnational critique. Native American and indigenous studies thus remain unapologetic about their serious engagement with nationalism, against the grain of literary scholarship in general. As Huhndorf notes: “Native Studies remains grounded in questions of nation.” These are critical, substantive, and complex engagements with tribal nationalisms and pose fundamental challenges even to a “postnational” American studies, which has not turned its attention to the “ongoing colonial relationship between the U.S. and the American Indian tribes within its borders.”⁵¹ The affirmation of the continuing importance of the nation within Native studies should resonate with Jewish American literary studies scholars, who are increasingly obliged to confront the continuing if evolving

significance of Jewish nationhood to narratives of race, exclusion, and power in American studies.³²

What I suggest of literary Jewish-indigenous encounters is that they tell us less about Jewish or Native identities and histories in and of themselves, and more about the disruptive and even transformative possibility both *might* pose – particularly in critical dialogue with one another – to the superintending ideological structures within which they operate, be they nationalist, universalist, or multiculturalist. Ultimately, however, the difficulty of creating dialogue between Native and Jewish studies, despite their mutually provocative vocabularies, is rooted in the problem of, and problematic responses to, the multiculturalist project. Again, Huhndorf: “Native histories upset conventional resistance narratives, since every wave of immigration, whether forced or voluntary, dispossesses indigenous peoples, whatever complicated social relationships ultimately emerge from these interactions. Thus, while the notion of a multicultural nation of immigrants potentially counters that of a monolithic U.S. culture, both contribute equally to the subordination and erasure of Natives.”³³ An encounter with the Americas’ Native origins reveals that the desire for Jewish inclusion in the multiculture has historically been insufficiently imbued with an awareness of its ongoing imperialist effects. As a result, the impediments to a critical dialogue across fields are as political as they are historical, and now exceed the geographical borders of the United States. This is a critique and a challenge for those who would engage in comparative or transcultural work, as much as it is for those who do not.

Notes

- 1 John Sanford, *Scenes from the Life of an American Jew*, 5 Vols. (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1986), 3:24.
- 2 See Rachel Rubinstein, *Members of the Tribe: Native America in the Jewish Imagination* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010). Several new studies, in addition to my own work, have been published in the last few years that explore this complex historical dynamic and its resonances in Jewish, Native, and American literatures: Jonathan Boyarin, *The Unconverted Self: Jews, Indians and the Identity of Christian Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), focuses on the early modern period. Stephen Katz, *Red, Black and Jew: New Frontiers in Hebrew Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), examines representations of racial others in American Hebrew literature, including substantial discussion of the three significant Hebrew epic poems about Indians published in the early twentieth century. Michael Weingrad, *American Hebrew Literature: Writing National Identity in the United States* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), likewise discusses the

Hebrew Indian epics (as does Alan Mintz in *Sanctuary in the Wilderness: A Critical Introduction to American Hebrew Poetry* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011]) as well as features a wonderful discussion of Mordecai Manuel Noah and his afterlife in Hebrew literature. David Koffman's work in progress on historical encounters between Jews and Indians on the western frontier, currently titled *The Jews' Indian: Empire, Pluralism and Belonging in America 1854–1954*, extends these literary analyses to groundbreaking archival and historiographic work. I must also thank Jonathan Freedman, who is a most significant interlocutor here, especially in his commitment to the idea that "the series of representations created by gentiles and Jews alike, on the fly, out of their mutually constitutive and destabilizing encounters with each other, helped crucially to shape the stories and metastories U.S. culture tells about race, ethnicity, and gender and their shifting relation to normative and counternormative identities in a rapidly changing America" (*Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 6). My deep thanks to Sarah Phillips Casteel, who in carefully reading and commenting upon a draft of this essay, pointed out its potential responsiveness to Michael Rothberg's observation that "the comparative critic must first constitute the archive by forging links between dispersed documents . . . many of those moments of contact occur in marginalized texts or in marginalized moments of well-known texts" (*Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009], 18).

- 3 This is most effectively represented by Isaac Mayer Wise's editorial *The Fourth of July*, 1858 in which he compares the fourth of July to Passover: "Moses forms one pole and the American revolution the other, of an axis around which revolves the political history of thirty three centuries" and calls the fourth of July "the day of second redemption" whose promises of liberty and justice are destined to transform the world (*Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, and Kathryn Hellerstein [New York: W. W. Norton], 85–86). (Wise's blindness to the injustices of his own moment emerge by way of comparison to Frederick Douglass's Fourth of July oration of 1852, in which he declares "that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July.")
- 4 Boyarin, *The Unconverted Self*, 89.
- 5 Judith Laikin Elkin, *Imagining Idolatry: Missionaries, Indians and Jews* (Newport, RI: Touro National Heritage Trust of Newport, 1992), 28. See also Jonathan Schorsch's exhaustive work on the horizontal relations among Jews, Africans, and Indians in the early modern Atlantic in *Swimming the Christian Atlantic: Judeoconversos, Afroiberians and Amerindians in the Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Brill, 2009).
- 6 See Richard H. Popkin, "The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Indian Theory," in *Menasseh ben Israel and His World*, ed. Yosef Kaplan, Henry Mechoulán, and Richard H. Popkin (New York: E. J. Brill, 1989), 63–66. Jonathan Sarna discusses this theory in relation to Mordecai Noah's belief in it (Jonathan Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981). Boyarin and Schorsch discuss the history and circulation of ten tribist theories at length. Influential Puritans who subscribed to the theory included Edward Winslow, John Eliot, and Thomas Thorowgood.
- 7 The year 1775 saw the publication of James Adair's *History of the American Indian*, in which Adair argued at length the Hebrew origins of Indians, along with the reissue of

- Menassah's *Hope of Israel*. Mordecai Noah, discussed here, quoted liberally from Adair in his 1837 *Discourse on the Evidences of the American Indians Being the Descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel*.
- 8 And often reject it too (see David Koffman's forthcoming work). Another expression of this desire is the myth of Columbus's Jewish origins, which emerged much later, in the 1930s, and has not just been taken up by Jews but played with in at least two Native-authored novels: Michael Dorris and Louise Ehrdrich's *The Crown of Columbus* (1991) and Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991). See Sarah Phillips Casteel's compelling discussion of Jewish Columbus mythology in "Sephardism and Marranism in Native American Fiction of the Quincentenary," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 37:2 (Summer 2012), 59–81. Most relevant to my discussion here is Casteel's claim, in her discussion of both Columbus novels, that the year "1492 inherently draws apparently disparate histories of Jewish and indigenous displacement into profound and complex relation by virtue of its double resonance as the date of both the Sephardic expulsion and Columbus's first voyage to the New World. 1492 offers a way out of the impasse created by competitive memory by pointing to the overlapping nature of Jewish and indigenous histories" (63).
 - 9 My quotations are taken from Menassah ben Israel, *The Hope of Israel: The English Translation by Moses Wall, 1652*, ed. Henry Mechoulam and Gerard Nahon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). See especially the editors' discussion of the *Relacion* and the historical Montezinos (68–76). For an early discussion of Montezinos see Ronald Sanders, *Lost Tribes and Promised Lands: The Origins of American Racism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), 363–365. An extensive treatment of Montezinos' *Relacion* appears in Schorsch, *Swimming the Christian Atlantic*, 379–477. Also see Ronnie Perelis's essay on Montezinos, "'These Indians Are Jews!' Lost Tribes, Crypto-Jews, and Jewish Self-Fashioning in Antonio de Montezinos' *Relacion* of 1644," in *Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism 1500–1800*, ed. Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 195–212. Both Schorsch and Perelis work with the Spanish original of Montezinos's narrative, which contains notable additions to and departures from the English translation (the text was published in Spanish and Latin simultaneously and quickly translated into English and Dutch, and only after some decades Hebrew and Yiddish).
 - 10 Ben Israel, *The Hope of Israel*, 111.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, 110.
 - 12 Jonathan Israel, quoted in *Atlantic Diasporas*, ix.
 - 13 Schorsch, *Swimming the Christian Atlantic*, 1. My thanks to Sarah Phillips Casteel for this insight.
 - 14 Perelis, "'These Indians Are Jews!'" 205.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 210.
 - 16 While "Marranism" operates throughout this discussion as a persistent symbol for Jewish-Native dialogical possibility, I acknowledge the dangers of overmetaphorizing the term. Jonathan Freedman's use of Marranism as a figure for modern or postmodern Jewish identity rehearses and ideally in some way legitimizes some of the ahistorical and perhaps anachronistic collapses rendered here in presenting Montezinos's tale as the prototype for modern Jewish fantasies of indigenous Americanness.

Marranism as a New World identity resembles, Freedman notes, “our modern (or even postmodern) notions of ethnic identity: of a people within a people who believe themselves to have a separate identity but whose identity as such is available to them only through improvised, often invented cultural practices and constructed (often fictitious) narratives” (*Klezmer America*, 216).

- 17 Quoted in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1995), 115; italics added.
- 18 If a living Jewish and indigenous presence threatened the unity and stability of a young nation, then imagining as “natural” their disappearance as nations underscored the triumph of the American experiment. Indians “disappeared” in order to make way for territorial expansion and settlement; Jews disappeared in order to be reborn as individual American citizens. James Fenimore Cooper and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow offered the most popular literary articulations of a vanishing race: In the final lines of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) “the sage of the Delaware” mourns: “The pale-faces are masters of the earth, and the time of the red-men has not yet come again.” In the last lines of Longfellow’s epic “Hiawatha” (1855), having encountered the true religion of the “Black-Robes” Hiawatha sails “west” into the “Hereafter.” Longfellow eulogized a vanished Jewish nation in similar terms in “The Jewish Cemetery at Newport” in 1852:

But ah! What once has been shall be no more!
The groaning earth in travail and in pain
Brings forth its races, but does not restore,
And the dead nations never rise again.

- 19 For further works on Mordecai Noah see Harry Kroll Gutmann, *Mordechai Manuel Noah, the American Jew* (Cincinnati: np, 1931), Isaac Goldberg, *Major Noah: American-Jewish Pioneer* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1936), Jonathan Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), Abraham J. Karp, *Mordechai Manuel Noah, the First American Jew* (New York: Yeshiva University Museum, 1987), *The Selected Writings of Mordechai Noah*, eds. Michael Schuldiner and Daniel J. Kleinfeld (Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press, 1999). Noah’s Zionism anticipates and preempts Herzl, who also moved between advocating a Jewish homeland in Palestine and a Jewish territory in Uganda, and also dramatizes the ambivalent place of America as a temporary stopping point for Hebrew authors. Like Noah, Herzl was a playwright, who mined the theatrical possibilities of politics. Michael Weingrad suggests that referencing Noah and Ararat is frequently an opportunity for authors to meditate upon Herzl and Israel as much as on American-Jewish identity. Such authors include the Anglo-Jewish and Zionist-Territorialist writer Israel Zangwill, in his short story “Noah’s Ark” (*Ghetto Tragedies* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1899]), the American Hebrew and Yiddish writer Harry Sackler, in his 1928 play “Major Noah” (Yiddish, later translated into Hebrew with the title “Messiah, American-Style”); the graphic novelist Ben Katchor, in *The Jew of New York* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); and the Israeli author Nava Semel, in her 2005 novel *I-yisra’el*, translated as *Isra-Island* (see Weingrad, *American Hebrew Literature*, 143–185).

- 20 See Noah's account of the dedication ceremonies in the *Buffalo Patriot-Extra* (September 17, 1825) as well as the *New York Advocate* (September 1, 1825), the *Herald* (October 27, 1842), and the *American* (September 21, 1825).
- 21 Mordecai Noah, *She Would Be a Soldier: Or, The Plains of Chippewa*, reprinted in Noah, *Selected Writings*, 25–64.
- 22 Noah, "Ararat Proclamation and Speech," in *Selected Writings*, 114.
- 23 See Sandra Gustafson's comparative reading of Apress, Noah, and Joseph Smith in "Nations of Israelites: Prophecy and Cultural Autonomy in the Writings of William Apress," *Religion and Literature* 26:1 (Spring 1994): 31–53. Gustafson notes that Noah's and Apress's "alternative separatist rhetoric," designed to resist "a hegemonic Puritan identity," emerges at the height of controversies concerning Indian Removal (35).
- 24 For Apress's ten tribist theories, see the appendix to his autobiography *A Son of the Forest* (1829, 1831), as well as his sermon *Increase of the Kingdom of Christ*, with its companion piece *Indians: The Ten Lost Tribes* (1831). For his antiracist arguments invoking Jews, see his *An Indian's Looking Glass for the White Man* (1833).
- 25 Solomon Nunes de Carvalho, *Incidents of Travel and Adventure in the Far West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 135–136.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 185.
- 27 See Dean Franco, *Race, Rights and Recognition: Jewish American Literature Since 1969* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), for a provocative discussion of what post-1969 Jewish American literature has to say about the possibilities of multiculturalism.
- 28 Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), and Alan Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880–1930* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2004).
- 29 See, for instance, the Montreal-based filmmaker Jennifer Podemski and the artists Howard and Adler and Nathan Adler, all Ojibwe and Jewish.
- 30 Sanford, *Scene from the Life*, 284–285.
- 31 Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 101.
- 32 Sanford, *Scenes from the Life*, 285–286.
- 33 Casteel, "Sephardism and Marranism," 61. Casteel does much to correct this state of affairs in her discussion of representations of Jewishness in Native-authored texts.
- 34 Susannah Heschel, "Jewish Studies as Counter-History," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 105.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Scott Richard Lyons, "Actually Existing Indian Nations: Modernity, Diversity, and the Future of Native American Studies," *American Indian Quarterly* 35:3 (Summer 2011): 295. This issue of *AIQ*, guest edited by Jace Weaver, was a special issue devoted to the future of American Indian/Native American studies.
- 37 More recently, some Native studies scholars are recasting the "contest" between nationalist and cosmopolitan schools as more multiple, multivalent, interacting, and mutually reinforcing critical perspectives. See *AIQ* 35:3 (Summer 2011 Special Issue).
- 38 Robert Warrior, quoted in Shari Huhndorf, "Literature and the Politics of Native American Studies," *PMLA* 120:5 (October 2005), 1618.

- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid., 1619.
- 41 Shari Huhndorf, *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 18.
- 42 Sara Horowitz, "The Paradox of Jewish Studies" in *Insider/Outsider*, 123.
- 43 Huhndorf, "Literature and the Politics," 1621.
- 44 Rauna Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007). Kuokkanen "offers the gift as a way of understanding how the academy could exemplify a genuine hospitality to Indigenous epistemes. . . . Universities thus have a responsibility to receive the gift of Indigenous epistemes with respect and gratitude, with openness and an ethic of sharing rather than exchange. The logic of the gift requires recognition that this will be an ongoing process and needs commitment to overcome entrenched institutionalized ignorance. Thus, this will not be an easy or uncontested process" (Cathy Howlett, review in *American Indian Quarterly* (Spring 2011), 272).
- 45 Naomi Seidman, "Fag-Hags and Bu-Jews: Toward a (Jewish) Politics of Vicarious Identity" in *Insider/Outsider*, 254–267.
- 46 See Jennifer Glaser's work in progress, titled *Exceptional Differences: Race, Chosenness, and the Postwar Jewish American Literary Imagination*.
- 47 Daniel Heath Justice, "Currents of Trans/National Criticism in Indigenous Literary Studies," *AIQ* 35:3 (Summer 2011): 336–337.
- 48 Daniel Heath Justice, "Go Away, Water! Kinship Criticism and the Decolonization Imperative," in *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*, ed. Craig S. Womack (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 159.
- 49 As Stephen Whitfield notes, "the case for contingency and plasticity can be taken too far. Jewish identity cannot be satisfactorily reduced to capricious historical forces that make cultures into options . . . the recent scholarly emphasis on social construction obscures the determinacy that governs cultural persistence" (Stephen Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 11).
- 50 Huhndorf's additional paradigm of "tribal transnationalism" broadens its view to "comprehend a global indigenous subject acting on the world stage, a context marked not only by colonialism but increasingly by neoliberalism." Chadwick Allen, in *Trans-Indigenous* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) also argues for the need to develop methodologies for a global Native literary studies. Militating against comparativism are Native studies scholars' "material concerns about the need to develop the field before engaging in comparative work and well-founded fears about further marginalization" (Huhndorf, "Literature and the Politics," 1624).
- 51 Huhndorf, *Mapping*, 17.
- 52 As recent decisions by the American Studies Association and the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association to boycott Israeli academic institutions demonstrate.
- 53 Huhndorf, *Mapping*, 17.

PART II



GENRES: ADOPTING,
ADAPTING, REINVENTING

Immigration and Modernity 1900–1945

WERNER SOLLORS

From American Strangeness to Familiarity

In an 1898 sketch, “Imagined America,” Abraham Cahan describes his vision of America as a “luxuriant many-colored meadow, with swarms of tall people hurrying hither and thither on narrow footpaths. They were all young and beardless and all men.”¹ Seeing Staten Island confirms his image of America as a meadow, yet Cahan remains struck by the “unreality of things.” “The ice here is not cold, . . . the sugar is not sweet and the water is not wet,” he tells himself. When he sees a cat he rejoices, “They have cats here! . . . And just like ours, too!” Yet soon he wonders whether the cat was just “a mechanical imitation of one,” for he expects that there might be “artificial dogs and artificial cats” in America. Similarly he suspects that a Christian missionary might not be “a genuine man,” for the froglike way he pronounces the American R. For the Russian- and Yiddish-speaking immigrant from Lithuania, everything American seems “artificial, flimsy, ephemeral, as if a good European rain-storm could wipe it all off as a wet sponge would a colored picture made with colored chalk on a blackboard.”

“America is not Russia”² became the formula for Jewish migrants to make sense of a world divided between the familiar place of birth and the strange place of arrival. Cahan’s beardless men suggest religious pressures that made Jewish migrants change appearance and customs, while the missionary’s guttural R that Cahan cannot imitate points to linguistic obstacles.

In 1952, *Partisan Review* ran the symposium “Our Country, Our Culture.” In the aftermath of World War II, when artists could “no longer depend fully on Europe as a cultural example and a source of vitality,” the editors wondered whether a “reaffirmation and rediscovery of America” was under way.³ Jewish intellectuals who responded generally adopted an American point of view, and only David Riesman referred to Jews. While “Germans, Frenchmen, and Jews can testify that it is hard to detach one’s loyalties from a weak, threatened,

or defeated nation,” Riesman wrote, “it is perhaps even harder to attach one’s loyalties to a newly powerful one.” Leslie Fiedler’s comment that “there is no better place for the artist than America” was more representative.⁴

In the first half of the twentieth century the strange New World became a more familiar home to Jewish migrants, a process called “assimilation.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines assimilation as the “action of making or becoming like; the state of being like; similarity, resemblance, likeness.”⁵ To what extent can a reading of selected major works by Jewish American writers from Mary Antin to Isaac Rosenfeld illuminate this growing “likeness”? And can one imagine an alternative literary history? These are the questions the following pages will address.

First-Person-Singular Narratives of Migration and Assimilation

Mary Antin (1881–1949)

Immigrant narratives represent the process of migration and assimilation and help to give shape to an individual’s transformation. The classic American text that gave life to the underlying “from . . . to” formula was Mary Antin’s autobiography, *The Promised Land* (1912), offering a vivid account of her transformation from early life in Polotzk (now Belarus) to her adolescent and adult years in Boston, including the Dover Street ghetto. Having completed her manuscript when she was only thirty years old, she begins her book dramatically:

I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. Is it not time to write my life’s story? I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead, for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell. . . . I could speak in the third person and not feel that I was masquerading. I can analyze my subject, I can reveal everything; for *she*, and not *I*, is my real heroine.⁶

Antin’s dance with pronouns expresses her life in a doubled world. The third-person-singular *she* spoke Yiddish and belonged to a world defined by faith and family. The first-person-singular *I* is a modern individual who writes in (often quite beautiful) English. As a girl, *she* did not have access to a full Jewish education. As a Jew, *she* was fearful of Russian pogroms and the power of the czar. *I*, on the other hand, benefited from America’s public educational system and the democratic country’s offer of extending citizenship to immigrants. Appropriately, *The Promised Land* consists of a Russian and an American section. Driving home their dissimilarities, Antin employs the

formula “America is not Polotzk.”⁷ She associates Russia with a mediaeval mind-set and America with the modern spirit.

Antin wrote a personal, introspective memoir as well as a book that “speaks for thousands; oh, for thousands!”⁸ Antin explains, “All the processes of uprooting, transportation, replanting, acclimatization, and development took place in my own soul. I felt the pang, the fear, the wonder, and the joy.”⁹ *The Promised Land* inspired educators and reformers, was used in civics lessons, and became a model for other immigrant writers. Antin recognizes the power she had as a democratic citizen, and it fuels her patriotism. She experiences hardships, caused not only by poverty but also by prejudice. Yet the most dramatic test occurs when her beloved teacher Miss Dillingham serves ham, “forbidden food,” giving Antin “a terrible moment of surprise, mortification, self-contempt.” Antin confesses, “I ate, but only a newly abnegated Jew can understand with what squirming, what protesting of the inner man, what exquisite abhorrence of myself.”¹⁰ She did something that her “inner man” found repulsive.

Antin originally wrote the lively account of her 1894 transatlantic voyage in Yiddish and addressed it to an uncle.¹¹ She then translated and adapted the letter for publication in her first book, *From Plotzk to Boston* (1899) (a “from . . . to” title that misspelled the name of her birthplace), addressed to a philanthropic American Jewish audience. Antin adjusted the text yet another time for inclusion in *The Promised Land*, now appealing to a general, non-Jewish American reader. The textual changes in these three versions embody the transition that Antin underwent and the parallel changing presentation of her own self.

Antin looks at migrants like her as “the strands of the cable that binds the Old World to the New.”¹² Having made the shift from Yiddish to English, Antin plays the role of a mediator and translator and offers English explanations as appositions in the text (“a *yeshibah bahur* – a student in the seminary”) and in footnotes (she defines *mezuzah* as “a piece of parchment inscribed with a passage of Scripture, rolled in a case and tacked to the doorpost”).¹³ She appends a substantial glossary of terms, for example: “Earlocks (Hebrew *peath*). Two locks of hair allowed to grow long and hang in front of the ears. Among the fanatical Hasidim, a mark of piety.”¹⁴ Antin leaves some words untranslated, such as *schwimmen* or *Zukrochene Flum*, mentions a “buzzing sound to the dreadful English *th*” that a schoolteacher could not eradicate, and indicates that, despite her unequivocal love of English, her origins left traces in her pronunciation: “I learned at least to think in English without an accent.”¹⁵

Antin writes about her family as “frightened pilgrims from Polotzk” and claims that her upward route from “the tenements of the stifling alleys to a

darling cottage of our own . . . was surveyed by the Pilgrim Fathers.”¹⁶ Antin was criticized for telling an American success story; thus Michael Gold called her a “bright slum parvenu.”¹⁷ A century later, her autobiography could be read in tandem with her self-deprecating self-description in a 1926 letter to her publisher. By then her marriage to Amadeus Grabau, a Lutheran German American paleontologist, a love marriage to which she only alluded in *The Promised Land*, had ended. Her lectures in support of an open-door immigration policy had proved futile, and she had suffered a nervous breakdown: “Seldom has an author created so much of a flurry by such a meager literary performance,” she wrote about herself.¹⁸ Perhaps she had simply published her autobiography too early in her life.

Abraham Cahan (1860–1951)

Sometimes, when I think of my past in a superficial, casual way, the metamorphosis I have gone through strikes me as nothing short of a miracle. I was born and reared in the lowest depths of poverty and I arrived in America – in 1885 – with four cents in my pocket. I am now worth more than two million dollars and recognized as one of the two or three leading men in the cloak-and-suit trade in the United States.¹⁹

Thus begins Abraham Cahan’s best-known novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), in which Cahan plays with the first-person-singular and success-story format of the immigrant autobiography, transforming it into a fictional account. The Russian Jewish protagonist and narrator from the Lithuanian town of Antomir (then a part of Russia) shares many experiences with his author while also becoming a ruthless capitalist entrepreneur who stands in nearly complete antithesis to everything that his socialist-reformist creator cherished. Whereas Cahan wrote critical comments on exploitation in the socialist press, Levinsky is excoriated as a “fleecer of labor” in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* – but feels, after an initially indignant reaction, grateful since “The same organ assailed the Vanderbilts, the Goulds, the Rothschilds, and by calling me ‘a fleecer of labor’ it placed me in their class. I felt in good company.”²⁰

David Levinsky leaves Russia after his mother is killed in an Easter Sunday pogrom while protecting David. On New York’s Lower East Side David soon dons American clothes, cuts off his side locks, and sports a “modern” look. He barely recognizes himself in the mirror: “It was as though the hair-cut and the American clothes had changed my identity.”²¹ In America, he not only assimilates but also mass-produces the “ready-made” clothes that help so many others to assimilate. Yet despite his “rise,” his business victory over

the German Jewish establishment, Levinsky never feels completely at home in America.

Levinsky's attitude toward English alternates between repulsion and attraction. He regards some English words (such as "*satisfaction*," "*think*," and "*because*") as so obnoxious that his strong reaction facilitates his memorization.²² David hears the phrase "all right" so often that he guesses the meaning from context. As the first bit of English David acquires, "all right" appears more than thirty times in the novel. Cahan's narrator comments on his own mistakes and his tendency to fall into a Talmudic singsong when speaking English. He makes more than a hundred references to incomplete linguistic assimilation in other characters, such as mispronunciations and language mixing: For example, Mrs. Margolis takes "pains to produce the 'th' and the American 'r,' though her 'w's were 'v's."²³ Readers have noticed a certain stilted quality in Cahan's own diction that might be attributed to his own lingering unfamiliarity with idiomatic English.²⁴ Like Antin, Cahan offers translations of Jewish terms, though he gives the English meaning first, as in "a school for religious instruction or *cheder*."²⁵

The notion of falling "in love" appears as part of America's strangeness to Levinsky, who, after multiple courtships, ends up lonely at the end: "To be 'in love' with a girl who was an utter stranger to you was something unseemly, something which only Gentiles or 'modern' Jews might indulge in."²⁶ Levinsky's uniformly ill-fated courtships highlight his inability to strike up a lasting relationship. "There is always something!" as Leslie Fiedler comments on the impediments to Levinsky's search for the right woman, which makes the novel also a story of failed love.²⁷

The migrant's divided world separates his life into the times before and after migration. Cahan expresses this sentiment when he writes, "The day of an immigrant's arrival in his new home is like a birthday to him. Indeed, it is more apt to claim his attention and to warm his heart than his real birthday."²⁸ Accordingly, Levinsky celebrates the twenty-fifth anniversary of his landing with his shipmate Gitelson. However, Levinsky realizes that the gap between him and Gitelson, who has remained a poor tailor, has become so unbridgeable that Levinsky's ostentatious largesse at the Waldorf Astoria does nothing but embarrass Gitelson. Levinsky is revolted by Gitelson, both feel awkward in front of the hotel waiter, and afterward his heart is heavy with "self-disgust and sadness."²⁹ One of the last "episodes of a lonely life" (the title of the last book of the novel), it reveals that Levinsky sees his life as a tragic failure and regards himself as a "victim of circumstance." Though he has become an atheist, a successful American businessman, and a member of a fashionable

German American synagogue, he finds, with nostalgia, that “David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher’s Synagogue” in Antomir, “seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer” in New York.³⁰ Antin’s *Promised Land* started with the divided world of Russia and ended on a note of unified fulfillment in America; Cahan’s *Levinsky* inverts this process and shows the successfully assimilated protagonist reminiscing about his lost Old World identity.

Anzia Yeziarska (1880–1970)

Anzia Yeziarska’s *Bread Givers* (1925) continues the genre of first-person-singular immigrant narratives.³¹ Like Antin, the narrator identifies with American beginnings: “I felt like the pilgrim fathers who had left their homelands . . . and trailed out in search of the New World.”³² Sara seems animated by a direct authorial investment, close to Yeziarska’s ego myth. The novel inserts a few non-English – mostly Yiddish – words here and there, including *Nu*, *Ach!*, *yok*, *gazlin*, and *gefülte fish*, without explanations. Occasionally, the sense of a Yiddish original shines through the prose, as if one were reading a literal translation. This is the case when characters speak directly (“Give only a look on the saleslady”) and in Sara’s own narrative voice: “But from always it was heavy on my heart the worries for the house as if I was mother.”³³

Unlike Antin’s Polotzk or Levinsky’s Antomir, Yeziarska’s place of birth and childhood, Mały Płock, in Russian Poland, does not become a fleshed out site of memory. When asked what she remembers of Poland, Sara answers, “Nothing – nothing at all. Back of me, it’s like black night.”³⁴ Hester Street serves as stand-in for the Old World, and the dualism of two worlds within one person turns into the generational conflict the book names in its subtitle: *A Struggle between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New*.

Reb Moishe Smolinsky, Sara’s father, embodies the Old World; he keeps studying the Talmud and does not work for a living. Sara’s mother, Shenah, wishes she were a widow, for people would then pity her rather than “think I got a bread giver when what I have is a stone giver.”³⁵ The father wants to arrange financially advantageous marriages for his four daughters. The Smolinsky girls Bessie, Mashah, and Fania agree to their father’s disastrous schemes rather than marrying the men they love. But rebellious Sara exaggeratedly views her father as “a tyrant more terrible than the Tsar from Russia.”³⁶ (Sara’s father also draws a political analogy in giving Sara the German nickname Blut-und-Eisen, alluding to Bismarck’s “iron and blood” strategy to achieve German unity.)³⁷

Sara refuses to enter the kind of marriage her sisters did: “No! No one from Essex or Hester Street for me. . . . I’d want an American-born man who was his own boss. And would let me be my boss.”³⁸ Sara turns down a marriage proposal by a wealthy suitor for the reason that “it wasn’t the real love.”³⁹ She goes her own way, attends college to get a teacher’s degree, and becomes independent. Sara tells her father, “I’m going to live my own life. Nobody can stop me. I’m not from the old country. I’m American!”⁴⁰ Her father declares her dead to the family: “May your name and your memory be blotted out from this earth.”⁴¹ She later also defies Jewish law when her mother dies by not tearing her garment as a sign of grief.⁴²

One does not have to match the four Smolinsky daughters to Tzeitl, Hodl, Chava, and Beilke, to read *Bread Givers* as a rewriting of Sholem Aleichem’s *Tevye the Dairyman*.⁴³ But there the father, Tevye, narrates, whereas Yeziarska lets Sara tell the story. At first, therefore, Sara’s father appears like the tyrant his rebellious daughter sees in him. When Reb Smolinsky is finally reduced to peddling wares on a pushcart he laments that his daughters leave him in his old age, “as they left King Lear – broken – forgotten.”⁴⁴ The reference to Lear may seem far-fetched, but Sara does resemble Cordelia, the daughter who cares most for her father. “A longing to see Father came over me,” Sara tells the reader, and her father will not have to end with Lear’s howl.⁴⁵

Sara’s marital choice, Hugo Seelig (the surname means “blessed” and evokes *Seele*, or soul), can see the world from both perspectives. Seelig asked Sara what she remembers of Poland, and in contrast with her, he still has a few memories: “The mud hut where we lived, the cows, the chickens, and all of us living in one room. I remember the dark, rainy morning we started on our journey, how the whole village, old and young, turned out to say good-bye.”⁴⁶ In this brief account the Old World setting has shrunk to a departure scene. Still, the “wonderful discovery” that Sara and Seelig are from the same “government” in Poland makes her rejoice that they have “sprung from one soil,” are “of one blood,” and are “*Landsleute* – countrymen!”⁴⁷ Happily, Seelig is also a boss – he serves as a principal at the school where Sara teaches Jewish children to lose their Yiddish accent and assimilate to an English-speaking world.

At the end father and daughter reunite. As if she had not earlier questioned this very notion, Sara asks her reader, “Can a tree hate the roots from which it sprang? Deeper than love, deeper than pity, is that oneness of the flesh that’s in him and in me.”⁴⁸ Seelig’s readiness to take Hebrew lessons astonishes Smolinsky, softening the old man’s belief that in America “Jewishness is no Jewishness.”⁴⁹ Sara and Seelig invite her father to stay with them, and as the

old man chants, “Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble” from the Book of Job, Sara ends the narrative: “But I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn’t just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me.”⁵⁰

Yeziarska’s autobiographically inspired mode of writing makes most of her works “somewhat similar.”⁵¹ Her ego-myth centers on recurrent themes: growing up in poverty; breaking with the patriarchal religious orthodoxy of a father figure; falling in love with an idealized man; achieving success and fame but snobbishly being unable to enjoy it; and suffering from loneliness and feeling a powerful nostalgia for the *gemeinschaftly* ghetto. Yeziarska’s fiction is often read biographically, and *Bread Givers* has therefore been faulted for the absence of Yeziarska’s brothers; her autobiography, on the other hand, is considered fictionalized.⁵² While she has been praised for sounding a fresh voice, she clearly also aimed for the popular vein of feuilleton romances that draw on easily readable clichés. Readers of *Bread Givers* will have to judge whether the remarkable translated effect of sentences like “Hugo’s red roses on my table – almost I could have wept for them” will prevail over such subliterary ones as “Every drop of blood seemed to leave my heart”; “I sighed with happiness”; or “Mother’s dying eyes rose before me.”⁵³

Samuel Ornitz (1890–1957)

Haunch, Paunch and Jowl: An Anonymous Autobiography (1923) is a first-person-singular narrative told by a cynical, corrupt, Tammany Hall-connected, and overweight judge named Meyer Hirsch. Meyer’s belly and double chin make him the target of socialist caricature and give him the nickname that serves as the novel’s title.⁵⁴ The American-born author Samuel Ornitz, a son of immigrants from Russian Poland, withheld his name from the published novel. The historical setting in the 1890s gives Ornitz an opportunity to sound sensationalist themes with a mildly modernist accent. The triple-period indicating elision “...” appears more than fifteen hundred times, contributing to the breathless, hurried quality of the writing that has been taken for stream-of-consciousness prose. With epigraphs from Montaigne, Rousseau, and Henry Adams, the book promises the reader a confession – “I want to tell everything” – but immediately reneges on that promise by adding, “even if I tell pathological lies the truth will shine out like grains of gold in the upturned muck.”⁵⁵ *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl* is a mock-autobiography.

Born in steerage on a transatlantic ship and milk-fed by a goat (which is why his mother calls him *ziegelle*), Meyer can remember only as far back as the

Lower East Side and his Ludlow Street gang of youngsters. Ornitz explains Yiddish terms parenthetically, even, quite annoyingly, in direct speech. Thus his mentor, Uncle Philip, tells Meyer: “Speak to me *momme loschen* (mother tongue) not that nasty gibberish of the streets,” English.⁵⁶ At the same time, Meyer makes clear that “Yiddish, the lingo of greenhorns, was held in contempt by the Ludlow Streeters who felt mightily their Americanism.”⁵⁷ Ornitz also provides parenthetical translations of underworld slang, like “‘roll a lush’ (rob a drunken man),” “‘stick up’ (highway robbery),” “‘open a big safe with ‘soup’ (nitroglycerine),” or “‘fix’ (bribe) cops and judges.”⁵⁸ Meyer explains “allrightniks”: “The newly rich Russian, Galician, Polish and Roumanian Jews have squeezed out the German Jews and their Gentile neighbors. Great elevator apartment structures are being put up to house the clamoring *Allrightniks*.”⁵⁹

Ornitz made fun of the clichéd “from ... to” narrative, “From Wretches to Riches,” as an “anarchist with a weakness for puns” puts it.⁶⁰ Meyer looks at the generational divide between “street gamins” and “old-world parents” in transatlantic terms: “an ocean separated us.”⁶¹ Uncle Philip (whose father, Meyer’s grandfather, was a “clever horse thief” in Europe) tells Meyer, “We’ve got nothing to look back to. It’s up to us to be ancestors.”⁶² Meyer reports a political speech, “a hair-raising recital of the horrors of Jewish persecution in Russia that splashed vitriolic denunciations upon the Tsar and his government as being officially responsible for the pogroms.”⁶³ Such Old World stories aim only at securing electoral votes.

The novel fans out to a panoramic mode, and figures keep reappearing from childhood gang times to life on Riverside Drive, or “Allrightniks Row.” Different characters articulate inflammatory opinions on Jews. The socialist Simon Gordin, for example, echoes William Z. Ripley’s argument that Jews are not a race but the “composite people of the world” with whom they have intermingled. “Jews are not Jews. They are Germans, Russians, Britons, Italians, Turks, Africans, and so on.”⁶⁴ The Harvard-trained Lionel Crane, né Lazarus Cohen, who specializes in “race psychopathology,” maintains that the Jew’s “outlandish ways and attire, his beards and ear-locks,” his “maddening belief” in being “the chosen of the One and Only God,” mark him as “always the repellent foreigner awakening unpleasant associations.”⁶⁵ The American Jew misses the chance of demonstrating that he is not “the grasping, merciless, self-centred Shylock” or Dickens’s Fagin (out of whose name Ornitz creates an –ism). Crane criticizes Jews for importing “Old World ways of gaining a livelihood” that may have been excusable there. “But here, in America, shall we condone usury, faginism, receiving stolen goods, corrupting officials,

procuring, brothel-keeping, sharp-dealing, legitimatizing the cheating and over-charging of Gentiles, labor-sweating?"⁶⁶

The atheist Avrum Toledo gives a campaign speech in which he argues, "Jewish ways made it easy for the Russian *agents-provocateur* to inflame the peasants," who "find themselves systematically cheated and impoverished by the wily Jewish traders." Avrum says, "We know the Government inspires the outrages," but then he asks: "How about the people whom it is so easy to incite against our people? Have we wronged them in any way? Where is our fault, in what way do we help along the happening of pogroms!"⁶⁷ Of course, Avrum loses the electoral campaign, is nearly lynched, is accused of "justifying – justifying pogroms!," and, as a Sephardic Jew, is loathed as a "Spaniard."⁶⁸

Ornitz imagines Jewish assimilation in America not only as becoming similar to Anglo-Americans (or German Jews) but also as cultural blending in music.⁶⁹ At the Rathskeller, Sam Rakowsky and Al Wolff play an Irish jig and suddenly "slip into a Jewish wedding *kazzatzka* (Russian-Jewish lively dance)" to an enthusiastic crowd.⁷⁰ The mixing with African American music surpasses this blend, for as Meyer puts it: "Ragtime has the whole country jogging. From the World's Fair in Chicago it sent syncopated waves bounding across the length and breadth of the land. The negroes had given America its music. Soon the white man started stealing the negro's music and making it his own."⁷¹ Urged "to make use of the negro plantation, levee and spiritual songs with their pulsating African rhythm and ornament them with Semitic colors and figures," Al and Sam create ragtime hits and become immensely rich in a song-publishing enterprise.⁷² The verb "jazz" emerges: "Whenever they appropriated a melody or strain they simply jazzed it up into one of their syncopated hodgepodes."⁷³ Meyer comments, "And their music became the music of America, and its leading motive was always the throbbing African rhythm."⁷⁴

Such passages may be Ornitz's freshest contribution to American Jewish literature. Antin mentions comb music in Polotzk, where she knew "the polka and the waltz, the mazurka, the quadrille, and the lancers," and she represents one brief African American encounter in *The Promised Land*; Levinsky encounters no single black character, and the dances he mentions are mostly waltzes; Yezierska has Sara's mother remember "dancing the *kozatzkeh*" in Poland and gives Sara one evening in a Manhattan club, where "drunk with the fiery rhythm of jazz," Sara loses "herself in the mad joy of the crowd."⁷⁵ Ornitz gives full stage to the African American-inflected music scene and the vocabulary of jazz, ragtime, and "syncopated hodgepodes."

Michael Gold (1894–1967)

Unlike Ornitz, the American-born Michael Gold loathed ragtime and jazz. Instead he believed in “conversion to Socialism” as his version of Jewish assimilation.⁷⁶ Gold’s *Jews without Money* (1930), more “an unstructured memoir than a novel,” is a first-person-singular narrative of twenty-two somewhat chronologically arranged vignettes.⁷⁷ In two segments the narrator’s father tells the story of his immigrating to America; he left Romania after he scandalously refused to go through with a marriage his parents had arranged, whereupon his father told him: “Go, infidel, and eat the bread of sorrow and shame in America. I am no longer your father.”⁷⁸ In the rest of the book the narrator himself dominates. The novel begins, “I can never forget the East Side Street where I lived as a boy.”⁷⁹ Gold clearly invites the reader to think of narrator and protagonist as the same “Mike Gold” and arranges episodes in his life from his fifth birthday to age twelve. Despite the fact that Gold was born Itzok Isaac Granich, published under the name Irwin Granich, and only in his twenties adopted the pen name “Michael Gold,” his child protagonist goes by “Mechel,” “Mike,” or “Mikey.”⁸⁰ Fictionalization further appears in the substantial revisions Gold undertook of previously published material. He intensified the melodramatic effect upon the reader while reducing any sense of guilt of the narrator.⁸¹

Like his predecessors starting with Mary Antin (whom Gold loathed but to whom he owed much), Gold offers numerous translations and explanations for a presumably Christian audience. Gold italicizes Yiddish, Hebrew, German, and Romanian words like *chaider*, *goy*, *mezuzah*, and *gefulte fish* and explains them by apposition or by context.⁸² When Gold resorts to a Christian baseline, one wonders what the Yiddish or Hebrew translator did with a simile like the following: “The Jewish holidays were fascinating to children. It was like having a dozen Christmases during the year.”⁸³

Gold explains not just Jewish words, but Jews themselves: “Jews are as individualized as are Chinese or Anglo-Saxons. There are no racial types. My father, for instance, was like a certain kind of Irishman more than the stenciled stage Jew.”⁸⁴ He describes Jewish customs in broad generalizations: “Tattooing is forbidden to Jews; the body must be returned to God as He created it.”⁸⁵ “Jews are not drunkards; they think it is disgraceful and Christian to be heavy drinkers,” Gold’s narrator states in his authoritatively generalizing voice – even though the protagonist’s father had said a few pages earlier: “I was always fighting and drinking.”⁸⁶ As promised by the book’s programmatic title, *Jews without Money*, the narrator also wishes to correct anti-Semitic stereotypes. Gold’s narrator also asserts: “There never were any Jewish gangsters in Europe,” a

claim that would have surprised Ornitz's Philip.⁸⁷ Echoing Mary Antin, Gold writes: "The Jews had fled from the European pogroms; . . . from a new Egypt into a New Promised Land." Only Gold adds: "They found awaiting them the sweatshops, the bawdy houses and Tammany Hall."⁸⁸ Corrupt politicians and ruthless employers have created the trap of poverty in which immigrants find themselves, amid filth and bedbugs, in the Chrystie Street red-light district where Mikey shockingly finds prostitutes commonplace: "The girls winked and jeered, made lascivious gestures at passing males. . . . They called their wares like pushcart peddlers. At five years I knew what it was they sold."⁸⁹ Gold embellishes what the child saw with paradoxical metaphors: "Earth's trees, grass, flowers could not grow on my street; but the rose of syphilis bloomed by night and by day."⁹⁰

Many forms of violence compose daily life, and Gold describes some incidents graphically. When the protagonist's friend Joey Cohen falls and is killed under a horse car the narrator describes the bystanders picking up "the broken body," without a head. "Later it was discovered under the car, hanging from the bloody axle."⁹¹ Sometimes the communist Gold adds a political point. When Louis One Eye tries to rape the protagonist's beloved aunt Lena and everyone judges him, the narrator comments, "I hate more those who took an East Side boy and turned him into a monster useful to bosses in strikes, and to politicians on election day."⁹²

Gold gives the reader snapshots of Lower East Side life, for example, when he describes Moscovitz's restaurant, decorated with a chromo of Theodore Roosevelt at San Juan and a crayon portrait of Theodor Herzl draped with a Zionist flag; the owner plays traditional Rumanian folk tunes (the *doina*) that the vestmaker Mottke considers "better than your American ragtime," for it is "music – not this pah-pah-pah ragtime." Mikey's father agrees, "music of the soul."⁹³ (Here one could imagine another dialog with Ornitz.)

Assimilation appears in the waning authority of Reb Samuel. A member of his Chassidic congregation takes off his orthodox beard "because in America beards are laughed at" and argues successfully that he has not broken Mosaic law since he did not use scissors or a razor but a "white powder . . . that eats away the beard without cutting or shaving."⁹⁴ This satirical scene goes along with Gold's reported statement that he was "one of those who only see good in assimilation" and was ready to give up all that "is good in the Jewish tradition in return for a greater good."⁹⁵

Jews without Money quite shamelessly employs sentimental strategies, in passages that have been called "mawkish" and full of "schmaltz."⁹⁶ For instance, Gold writes, "My humble funny little East Side mother! How can I ever forget

this dark little woman.” The narrator soon turns to apostrophe and a political punch line: “Mother! Momma! . . . I cannot forget you. I must remain faithful to the poor because I cannot be faithless to you! I believe in the poor because I have known you. The world must be made gracious for the poor. Momma, you taught me that.”⁹⁷ It sounds as though Gold’s Mikey would walk a million miles for one of Momma’s smiles.

Gothic episodes, political points, and sentimental passages help to prepare the reader for the concluding apostrophe to the workers’ revolution: “You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit.”⁹⁸ After Gold, the vogue of first-person narratives ebbed, then returned in the mid-1940s as a changed genre that would ultimately flourish with Saul Bellow’s 1953 novel *The Adventures of Augie March*.

Breaking Up the First-Person Narrative

Henry Roth (1906–1995)

The year 1934 witnessed an aesthetic revolution in Jewish American fiction with the publication of Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*. While remaining close to the tradition of autobiographically inspired fiction, Roth’s protagonist David Schearl is eight years old at the *end* of the novel, an age with which autobiographic fiction more likely begins. Roth also discards the sustained first-person-singular format and refracts his novel into different patterns of narration. Yet entering an individual consciousness and exploring the world from the sensory point of view of a fearful immigrant child who begins to wonder about sexuality, death, and family origins render a fuller understanding of David’s mind.

In the “prologue” an informative historical-social narrative voice orients the reader in place (Ellis Island, New York) and time (a Saturday in May 1907, “the year that was destined to bring the greatest number of immigrants to the shores of the United States”). One expects to be in the hands of a knowledgeable and reliable third-person narrator, who soon introduces the Schearls, as Albert meets his arriving wife, Genya, and his son, David. An ominous description of the Statue of Liberty in a rather striking sentence cancels that expectation: “Against the luminous sky the rays of her halo were spikes of darkness roweling is the air; shadow flattened the torch she bore to a black cross against flawless light – the blackened hilt of a broken sword. Liberty.”⁹⁹ A Kafkaesque shadow hangs over the Schearls. Sullen Albert doubts that he is David’s father and, in an assimilative gesture, throws David’s embarrassingly old-country hat overboard.

A new narrative voice takes over at the beginning of book one, “The Cellar,” and dominates throughout the novel, except in three later chapters. David, who was twenty-two months old in the prologue, is now five. Roth’s new third-person narration takes small David’s point of view with strikingly beautiful images – the high-up water tap out of reach and Genya, his beloved mother, “tall as a tower.”¹⁰⁰ When David leaves the apartment for the dark hallway, he represents the closing of the door with an anthropomorphic simile: “Behind him, like an eyelid shutting, the soft closing of the door winked out the light.”¹⁰¹ Roth describes with alliterating lyricism the sudden return of light when David opens the front door: “A dazzling breaker of sunlight burst over his head, swamped him in reeling blur of brilliance, and then receded.” David fears everything: darkness, the cellar, his unsuccessful father’s irascibility, Luter’s flirting with his mother, and Annie’s sexual advance toward him.

David’s memory of Europe consists of nothing but weak images and sensory impressions: “Fragments of forgotten rivers floated under the lids, dusty roads, fathomless curve of trees, a branch in a window under flawless light. A world somewhere, somewhere else.”¹⁰² Dialogue often appears in direct discourse, and here Roth employs the method of using beautifully phrased, sometimes Yiddish-inflected English when characters are speaking Yiddish (the mother’s “lips for me . . . must always be cool as the water that wet them”) and terribly accented and at times quite vulgar English when characters use English, as in the boy Yussie’s “We usetuh find cigahs innuh gudduh” or his sister Annie’s “Put yuh han’ in my knish. . . . Jus’ once.”¹⁰³

David’s inner thoughts are expressed in free indirect discourse (sometimes set off by an initial dash), alternating with third-person narration and direct discourse. This method sets in when David sees the cellar door bulging with darkness: He wonders, “Would it hold?” and is relieved: “It held.”¹⁰⁴ The method intensifies and reaches a high point when David cannot find his way home (“I’m losted”), and his interior monologues expand.¹⁰⁵ Thus a striking paragraph describes telegraph poles that he addresses as “Mr. High Wood” and ends with a sentence about a cat that “eyed David as he passed.” Roth follows this with David’s thoughts, first in free indirect discourse (“Milk-supper, maybe, when he came upstairs”) and then in present-tense direct speech in which David’s “I” appears:

Like it, like it, like it. I – like – it. I like cake but I don’t like herring. I like cake, but I don’t like what? I like cake, but I don’t like, like, like, herring. I don’t don’t – How far was it still?

The sidewalks were level again.¹⁰⁶

Blending three modes of narration in seemingly effortless transitions, Roth captures the feeling of a small boy lost in a strange city. The sentences alternate from beautifully sprawling lyrical prose to staccato fragments of lined-up nouns.

In book two, “The Picture,” the family has relocated to Manhattan’s East Side, to a place based on the Roths’ apartment at 749 East 9th Street that the narrator describes laconically, Hemingway-style, distilled from a much longer passage in the manuscript: “There were four rooms in the flat they lived in. There were eight windows. Some faced 9th Street, some faced Avenue D, and one looked out upon the dizzying pit of an airshaft. There was no bathtub.”¹⁰⁷ David overhears conversations between his mother and her comic counterpart, Aunt Bertha, who offers comic relief in off-color and bilingual puns. They talk about Veljish, their Galician hometown in Austrian Poland, which Bertha describes as “still as a fart in company” and mention vague stories about his mother’s scandalous relationship with Ludwig, a Christian organist.¹⁰⁸ David spins this into a growing family-romance fantasy:

She liked somebody. Who? Lud – Ludwig, she said. A goy. An organeest. Father didn’t like him, her father. And his too, maybe. Didn’t want him to know. Gee! He knew more than his father. So she married a Jew. What did she say before? Benkart, yes, benkart in belly, her father said. What did that mean? He almost knew.¹⁰⁹

In book three, “The Coal,” David is seven and encounters religion in a fuller way. He goes to cheder, learns Hebrew words (Roth gives no translation) that he incorporates into some of his interior monologues, and thinks about dietary rules: “First you read, *adonoi elahenoo abababa*, and then you say, *And Moses said you mustn’t*, and then you read some more *abababa* and then you say, *mustn’t eat in the traife butcher store*. Don’t like it anyway. Big brown bags hang down from the hooks. *Ham*.”¹¹⁰

They recite the *chad godya*, and David becomes fascinated by the biblical story of Isaiah’s coal: “– And why did the angel do it? Why did he want to burn Isaiah’s mouth with coal? He said, *You’re clean*. But coal makes smoke and ashes. . . . – With a *zwank*, he said it was . . . Wonder if Isaiah hollered when the coal touched him. Maybe angel-coal don’t burn live people.”¹¹¹ David is surrounded by foul language, and his quest for a ritual purification now takes on Isaiah’s rhetoric. This combines with numerous other leitmotifs of the novel, among them David’s quest for “flawless light” (an expression introduced in the prologue), “brighter than day,” which is fueled by a vision he has at the East River: “In the molten sheen memories and objects overlapped. Smokestacks

fused to palings flickering in silence by. Pale lathes grew grey, turned dusky, contracted and in the swimming dimness, he saw sparse teeth that gnawed upon a lip; and ladders on the ground turned into hasty fingers pressing on a thigh and again smokestacks.”¹¹²

Book four, “The Rail,” is the longest, most intense, and most experimental part of the novel. David, now eight years old, has experienced all kinds of threats and slights from other children, has betrayed his cousins to his Polish Christian friend Leo Dugovka in return for getting a rosary, has been whipped by his father, and has announced to the rabbi his more fully developed belief that he is not his parents’ child; he now wants to do the heroic deed of inserting a ladle into the high-voltage third rail of the Eighth Avenue trolley line to produce perfect light. The tempo of the book accelerates, as David once again runs “screaming northward.”¹¹³ Thus ends chapter 15, and the following chapter begins: “Threading his way among the hordes of children, hurdles of baby carriages,” making the reader expect David to be the subject.¹¹⁴ But as if Roth were playing a joke on his dominant form of narration, he has suddenly switched the center of consciousness from David to Rabbi Yidel Pankower, calling attention to the narrative pattern itself. The rabbi offers a different point of view, as he worries about the future of Yiddish youth, this “sidewalk-and-gutter generation . . . brazen, selfish, unbridled.”¹¹⁵ Pankower, who has earlier warned David that “God’s light is not between car-tracks,” has a point, but he would be more convincing if he did not worship the old-time Reb R’fuhl, who flogged when he was angered, “and when he flogged he took their pants down and spread the flap of their drawers” and Pankower himself “held the culprit’s legs while the straps sank into the white buttocks.”¹¹⁶ Two chapters later, Roth again breaks up the pattern by presenting another scene, mostly in dialogues, in which David is absent.

And as if these variations in narrative form were not enough, Roth adds a carefully structured experimental section in the long penultimate chapter of the novel that splices segments of different narrative strands into each other, a literary method inspired by film montage. This serves as the high point of the novel, both thematically and formally, as David goes through with his triumphantly self-destructive project, sticks a metal dipper into the rail, and causes a short-circuit along the trolley line, subjecting himself to a severe shock. At the center of this long, dramatic scene are the italicized passages that follow David, as in:

– So go! So go! So go!
But he stood as still and rigid as

*if frozen to the wall, frozen fingers
clutching the dipper.*¹¹⁷

These segments, ranging in length from one line to more than twenty lines and set as if they were poetry, are interrupted, sometimes in midsentence or even midword (“*cross-ing*”) by voices from various points of Lower Manhattan: Bill Whitney’s warehouse at the East River, Callahan’s beer saloon, Jim Haig’s ship at the Cherry Street pier, the prostitutes Mary and Mimi, and the motorman Dan MacIntyre on the Eighth Street trolley approaching Avenue A, where a political orator invokes 1789, 1848, 1871, and 1905 and the “laboring poor, . . . the masses embittered.”¹¹⁸ David’s dipper is “consumed in roaring radiance, candescent,” and after a few pages of diverse bystanders’ surprised reactions to the shock, David’s italicized voice returns, in parentheses as if to indicate his weakened state, and reiterates such keywords of previous scenes of the novel as “*M-s-ter. H-i-i-i-i. Wo-o-o-d,*” “*Chadgodya!*,” “*Zwank!*,” and “*David touched his lips. The soot / came off on his hand. Unclean.*”¹¹⁹ At the end, David is taken home, cannot answer his mother’s question why he did it, and hears his father acknowledging that David is “My sawn. Mine. Yes. Awld eight.”¹²⁰ Roth leaves the boy’s ultimate fate open, ending with a long lyrical passage from which the novel’s title is taken. “He might as well call it sleep. [. . .] It was only toward sleep that ears had power to cull again and reassemble the shrill cry, the hoarse voice, the scream of fear, the bells, the thick-breathing, the roar of crowds and all sounds that lay fermenting in the vats of silence and the past. [. . .] One might as well call it sleep. He shut his eyes.”¹²¹

Alienation

Isaac Rosenfeld (1918–1956)

The return to the first-person singular narrative was not a return to the migration story. In Isaac Rosenfeld’s *Passage from Home* (1946), the title’s “passage” refers to the temporary summer relocation of the fourteen-year-old protagonist Bernard Miller from West to North Chicago. He leaves his petit-bourgeois family and moves to the apartment of his bohemian Aunt Minna, Bernard’s deceased mother’s sister, who has become a stranger to the family. Bernard is struck by the freedom of her place and its modernist decor: “The pictures on the wall, their wild, broken colors and unrecognizable forms, took on meaning and welcomed me. Here dwelt that spirit which we barred from our lives, and in its freedom it was friendly, not raging, and not destructive, but liberal.”¹²² The novel starts with a lovingly and lavishly described Passover

Seder, with the *chad godya* explained to the reader as “a song in the manner of The House that Jack Built.”¹²³ Present at the Seder are not only the extended family, but also Willy, a Christian who incongruously sings, “It’s that old time religion / And it’s good enough for me,” with a Bible-country voice and a southern drawl.¹²⁴

What attracts Bernard to Minna (who does not attend the Seder) is her non-conformism, “her withdrawal from the family, . . . her striking out into a cold, aloof, inaccessible world, essentially Gentile, where one became, as my stepmother put it, ‘*wie die goyim*,’ or even worse.”¹²⁵ Bernard associates Minna with erotic freedom; however, when he tries to kiss her, she rebuffs him, and Bernard now schemes to put Willy together with Minna. Increasingly detached from his father, Bernard visits his grandparents in the old Jewish neighborhood. He feels embarrassed by his aged, untidy, bearded grandfather, who wipes “his hands on his jacket before drawing out a crusty handkerchief.”¹²⁶ In earlier fiction, disgust was often provoked by the New, by non-Jewish American features (like Cahan’s missionary’s English) or nonkosher food (Antin’s ham), but here it is generated by the stereotypically Old. Yet Bernard finds his grandfather “transformed into a new person,” “raised to nobility,” when elated to genuine enthusiasm in a Chassidic synagogue.¹²⁷

In part two, Bernard’s stepmother asserts that Minna had supposedly kidnapped him when he was still young and proposed that Bernard’s father marry her shortly after the death of Bernard’s mother. Bernard seeks out Minna. He waits for her outside the office building where she works, and in the city’s crowd he has contradictory emotions of feeling part of these other lives and “alone, an object among objects.”¹²⁸ He wonders, “why was there so wide a gulf between person and person” and why “should one man be a Negro, another have freckles on his nose, a third, a yellow moustache?”¹²⁹ “Or the Negro, . . . why was he a Negro and I a Jew? Why not the other way around? Or both of us Negroes, or both Jews?”¹³⁰ Such questions prompt Bernard to meditate on human diversity, on every man’s isolation from his fellow man, and on his own identity in a long passage close to the center of the novel that has been seen as the core of Bernard’s alienation and of Rosenfeld’s existentialism.¹³¹

I had never been without the realization that an empty space, which one might never hope to fill, stretched between person and person, between ignorance and knowledge, between one hand and the other, condemning all to loneliness. . . . As a Jew, I was acquainted, as perhaps a Negro might be, with the alien and the divided aspect of life that passed from sight at the open approach, but lingered, available to thought, ready to reveal itself to anyone

who inquired softly. I had come to know a certain homelessness in the world, and took it for granted as a part of nature.¹³²

The family gathering at a holiday might be a moment at which assurance “would rush back in flood, and one could feel the presence of God in it,” but then, “this too would vanish” and leave only the unanswerable question “‘What am I?’ For as the Negro might ponder his outer body, asking himself why it should differ from other men’s when inwardly he felt his common humanity, so I would consider my skin, my eyes, my hair, and wonder why I should feel an inner difference when outwardly I feel the same as other men.”¹³³ One can detect a faint echo here of Cahan’s David Levinsky, to whom Rosenfeld devoted an essay. Bernard may be more fully assimilated than Levinsky and “feel the same as other men,” but his feeling of “inner difference” and homelessness is both more vague and more intense.¹³⁴

Minna is married to a man named Fred Mason, adding more complexity to her relationship with Willy. Fred reveals that Bernard’s father assaulted Minna shortly after Bernard’s mother’s death and asked her to be his mistress. This confrontation changed her from a pious Old World girl to a cynical Chicago bohemian. Fred’s revelation intensifies Bernard’s feeling of dissolution that he experienced earlier: “I felt myself again dissolving, as I had on the crowded street, divided and drawn off into others.”¹³⁵ Fred’s story is dramatically confirmed when Minna arrives, uninvited, at Bernard’s father’s fortieth birthday party and blows up the placid family façade. Meanwhile his grandfather, “in all his shabby patriarchy,” calls Minna, in Yiddish, “a devil and a plague, an evil woman, an abandoned creature, a black soul, a streetwalker, a whore, a disgrace to women and a temptation to men, and altogether unfit to remain for one moment in a Jewish home.”¹³⁶ Bernard, too, leaves and moves in with Minna and Willy but soon finds himself humiliatingly excluded from their lives, and even a conversation about forests between Willy and Minna makes him feel left out: “It was only I who had never set foot in a forest.”¹³⁷ The image of the forest that distances Bernard from Minna and Fred’s Old World memories is not a pleasant country scene but a *memento mori*, evoking sinister “old German fairy tales” about “some of the worst cruelties, chopping a head off, eating someone alive, getting imprisoned in a tree or a rock. . . . It’s the woods that do it.”¹³⁸ One wonders whether, in a novel published in 1946, this might be a veiled allusion to what Rosenfeld, in a 1944 essay, called “recent sufferings.”¹³⁹ Perhaps an undertone of post-Holocaust emptiness pervades the novel.

Bernard soon sheds his rosy idealization of Minna’s world. A nauseating roach in the sink turns the kitchen “into a room of utter disorder,” and a

precisionist, three-paragraph-long description of bedbugs (that should have made Mike Gold happy) introduces a new revulsion. The lure of Minna's bohemian existence fades: "Proximity had robbed it of its charm."¹⁴⁰ Bernard returns home, but there is no reconciliation. He feels that talking with his father "established nothing. I might as well never have left, or never come back."¹⁴¹ (That last sentence reads like the death certificate of the "from . . . to" narrative.) The novel ends with Bernard's open-ended summary: "My only hope had been to confess that I did not love him, to admit that I had never known what love was or what it meant to love, and by that confession to create it. Now it was too late. Now there would only be life as it came and the excuses one made to himself for accepting it."¹⁴² *Passage from Home* projects a sense of ironic detachment, of a more generally human inability either to reach others or to eradicate the yearning to do so.

Jewish? American? Literature?

In the first half of the twentieth century, the representation of specific places of origin shrank to brief references or abstractions but did not yet lead to such generalizing terms as "shtetl," a word first documented in English only in 1949.¹⁴³ Works representing the receding themes of migration and forms of assimilation in ready-made clothing, name changes, public schools, marital choice, ragtime music, and socialism reveal other shared features: nonidentity of the Old World and the New; references to pogroms and the czar and the motif of haircuts and beardlessness; upward mobility; generational tensions; marriage based on romantic love; and linguistic and cultural mediation.

Yet drawing a story line from strangeness to feeling at home in America may simplify a complex set of contradictory developments. Antin already used the American "we" at the beginning of the period, while Rosenfeld's novel suggests that the end point of assimilation may mean homelessness, or becoming a "lost young intellectual, a marginal man twice alienated," as Irving Howe characterized a new Jewish social type who "has largely lost his sense of Jewishness, of belonging to a people with a meaningful tradition, and . . . has not succeeded in finding a place for himself in the American scene or the American tradition."¹⁴⁴ In fact, alienation made the Jewish figure in midcentury literature attractive as *outsider* rather than as the bland embodiment of assimilation, now understood as undesirable conformism.

Does Jewish difference or Americanness define Jewish American literature? In 1947 Elliott Cohen, the editor of *Commentary*, wondered what constitutes

Jewish culture in America and suggested that its touchstone could be neither “similarity to our neighbors” nor “complete Jewish distinctiveness.”¹⁴⁵ Cohen had a humorous streak and mocked the reduction of Jewishness to *kozatzky*, “etchings of Jews with beards” (problematic, “now that beards are disappearing”), and to literature about “the East Side (downtown): the Jews of the East Side (uptown) . . . , lacking beards, . . . are presumably not ‘real’ Jews.”¹⁴⁶ Cohen offered a more general assessment:

The truth is that Jewish culture, like all other cultures, is a combination of likeness and difference, of the particular and the universal, of elements contributed by men of both Jewish and “non-Jewish” blood. Even the Jewish culture of Biblical Palestine was not exclusively Jewish. Nor is – or will be – the culture of the Jewish homeland being built in Palestine today.¹⁴⁷

Hence Jewish culture would always have “plural sources” and include “the heretic, the rebel, and the ‘alienated.’”¹⁴⁸

Could one perhaps imagine a literary series of Jewish-themed works that do address Cohen’s point? This is the question that I would like to answer briefly in the concluding section, with a focus on a truly remarkable but too rarely read Jewish American novel of manners, and on a novel that traces a development *away* from America, before concluding with a reading of a subtle short story about listening to an American immigrant tale and about alienation.

Being American, Being Jewish

Sidney L. Nyburg (1880–1957)

I wish I could tell you I had landed in America with only one rouble in my pocket and one English word – a profane one at that – in my vocabulary; I’d like to write of starvation in a garret and membership in a trade’s union of striking garment workers, and ultimate wealth and success gleaned by superhuman toil and patience. But prosaic truth constrains me to admit ruefully having been born right here in Baltimore, where my parents also were born, and the only garret I can speak of at first hand is the one I used to hide in as a boy when I wanted to eat apples and read novels instead of dutifully visiting my music teacher.

Responding to questions about his novel *The Chosen People* (1917), the lawyer and novelist Sidney L. Nyburg described himself in explicit antithesis to the beginning of Cahan’s *Rise of David Levinsky*.¹⁴⁹ *The Chosen People* is breezily told by an ironic, near-omniscient narrator, who can move from one social setting to another, enter various consciousnesses, and make the reader understand

their contradictory motives. Nyburg mentioned George Eliot and Robert Louis Stevenson among the writers he cherished, and his narrator feels comfortably at home in English and takes pleasure in holding up in quotation marks, in the manner of Henry James, such new or local words as “news,” “magnificent splash,” “kept in,” “square,” “make-up,” “taxi,” or labor union “local.” Place and time of the action, the city of Baltimore from 1915 to 1916, are represented with such precision that the central conflict seems to emerge directly from the setting. Rather than tension between Jews and Gentiles, an intra-Jewish opposition advances the plot. The area around Eutaw Place, where the German Reformed Beth El Temple and its president’s posh residence are located, makes a dramatic contrast to the “absurd quarters” of the Russian Jews’ East Baltimore ghetto around East Lombard and Albemarle Streets. Capital and labor, German and Russian Jews, Reform and Orthodoxy are stacked against each other, just waiting for a violent incident to catalyze a big crisis, all within a Jewish world.

Nyburg’s major Jewish characters are doubly *unalienated*, for they generally feel comfortable in their various and often conflicting forms of Jewishness as well as in their American identities. The central figures marking the axis of the plot are the twenty-three-year-old idealistic German Jewish Reform rabbi Philip Graetz and the Russian-born Jewish lawyer David Gordon, a sarcastic pragmatist and a confirmed agnostic. Philip’s “knowledge of men and women,” we are told, “was based altogether upon his own imagination, and the books he had read.”¹⁵⁰ Socially “shy and ill at ease,” he is given to enthusiasms in valiant pursuit of such ethical ideals as social justice, and he craves to “live his sermons.”¹⁵¹ Such characteristics make him a well-intentioned rabbi, but less an effective hero than a “Jewish Don Quixote” fighting windmills.¹⁵² An orphan from a western village, Philip has no social connections at the beginning, but as a charismatic rabbi he soon builds up a strong following, most especially among female congregants. He becomes the unofficial fiancé of orphaned Ruth Hartman, a wealthy heiress and the strong-willed niece of Clarence Kaufman, the synagogue’s president and owner of the large Pioneer Clothing Company.

David Gordon, Baltimore’s most successful lawyer, serves as Philip’s counterpart and foil. He radiates self-confidence, has an uncanny political sensibility, can manipulate the press, and impudently wisecracks his way through anything. “I get my relaxation by saying whatever I happen to please – except, of course, regarding matters of business. I even talk impudently to myself, when there’s no one else to stir up,” he says.¹⁵³ Though not observant, he cannot make himself eat oysters. David comes across as

a cynic, but he is actually a tempered idealist toward Baltimore's divided Jewish world as well as a supporter of Zionism. Whereas Philip's innocent seriousness sometimes makes him appear ridiculous (though never to the extent that the reader stops identifying with him), David's street smarts convey solemn messages in the form of jokes. When asked whether he can get his people to stand behind any agreement reached, David quips, "I'm like the Czar, . . . my word is absolute law, but if I stretch my despotism too far, I'm apt to lose my head."¹⁵⁴ Quite a wisecrack for a novel published six months before the October Revolution!

The first inkling of the gulf that divides Baltimore's Jewry occurs in a chapter ironically entitled "The Brotherhood of Man," when Philip is summoned to Johns Hopkins Hospital in the middle of the night to speak to a dying Jew. Bertel Thorvaldsen's huge marble statue in the hospital's rotunda of "the Christ, the arms outstretched, the face filled with Divine Compassion," stuns Philip. Pondering "the Great Rabbi of Bethlehem," Philip thinks, "He too was a Jew" and "we, who will not believe Him to be more than He truly was . . . understand Him best, – who can best teach the world what He meant it to know."¹⁵⁵ Philip visits the patient, "whose every feature proclaimed the Jew," whose "long and untrimmed beard was coarse and of the blackness of charred wood," accentuating "to an almost ghost-like whiteness the deathly pallor of his brows." Philip realizes, however, that he cannot "understand one single phrase the poor creature was racking his soul to utter!"¹⁵⁶ Feeling that "this forlorn immigrant shared with himself the wonderful traditions of the Martyr Race," Philip ignored the language obstacle, yet his efforts to communicate in German with the injured man prove futile.¹⁵⁷ Philip can only understand "the contemptuous syllable 'goy' – which he knew to be this dying man's pitiless judgment upon himself as one who was in truth no Jew at all – a stranger and an alien."¹⁵⁸ Apart from "goy," the otherwise omniscient narrator withholds from the reader the dying man's Yiddish words, thus rejecting the role of mediation that played such a large part in the literature of migration and assimilation.

Philip feels terrible and gives a contrite sermon to his "parishioners" (as the members of his synagogue are called), who admire him all the more for his public penance. He moves them to tears with his reminder that Moses said man should love his neighbor as himself. "Philip naively accepted these tears without any doubts, but really, they were tokens of the type of grief one thoroughly enjoys as a proof of his own unusually delicate sensibilities; such unrestrained emotion as we love to display under the spell of a great tragedian."¹⁵⁹ Nyburg's narrator takes this opportunity to make sarcastic

observations on the congregation's lack of self-analysis: "The men and women who heard his words were, for the time at least, profoundly sympathetic toward their less fortunate brothers and sisters. They would, in fact, have made any sacrifice to bring them happiness – provided, of course, it was not unreasonable, and had no tendency to disturb existing economic conditions or the niceties of social distinctions."¹⁶⁰ Although David warns Philip that "it wasn't only the Yiddish" that prevented his understanding the Russian, Philip takes Yiddish lessons from a boy from the ghetto who wonders why this rabbi who was "almost a Christian" "should want to learn Yiddish, when he could already speak with amazing fluency four other languages – real languages – the kind one had to know to win college degrees."¹⁶¹

As a Jew, Graetz experiences some social distancing from Christians, who like to meet him but never invite him to their homes; he also notices that Dr. Manning pauses slightly before using the word *Hebrew*, "as though he were anxious to choose a term bearing the least offensive significance," and the narrator informs the reader that Manning "secretly wondered at the strange quality of these Jews who were willing to leap eagerly from their comfortable beds at the call of some pauper with no claim upon them except the tie of a common race."¹⁶² On the other hand, the form of worship in Philip's temple barely differs from that of the Unitarian, and Orthodox Jews regard him as a goy who does not eat food "prepared according to the dietary laws set forth in the Scriptures."¹⁶³ What does it mean to be Jewish in modern America, the novel asks, and can Jewishness unite people who are divided by language, manners, and especially class? It is Philip's quixotic belief that it can, and in more ways than through philanthropy, for he does not want to be merely an "apostle to the genteel."¹⁶⁴

The center of the novel puts this belief to a comprehensive test. The rabbi finds out that a strike has started at the Pioneer Clothing Company as a result of Kaufman's refusal to employ union labor. This alienates Philip somewhat from Ruth (Kaufman's niece). In the daily confrontation of picketing strikers, scabs, and police an incident occurs that heats up the conflict, as the chapter title has it, "A Little Matter of Homicide." An American-born prounion Russian Jew named Israel Ginzberg, who speaks English and Yiddish, is fired: He finds "in a pay envelope a politely impersonal note announcing the ability of his employers to continue their commercial careers without further aid from him."¹⁶⁵ Ginzberg gives intemperate speeches at a labor rally. As a result of a chain of coincidences, a striker

kills a scab by throwing a brick. Ginzberg is charged with incitement to murder. As Ginzberg's attorney, David Gordon successfully manipulates his public image and makes him a popular hero. Philip Graetz visits Ginzberg's wife in the ghetto, and she yells at him to leave. Now Philip, frustrated but still filled with good intentions, meets Ellen Stewart, a slightly older, "unmistakably Celtic," socialist nurse, who, as an "out and out Christian" (though she is not religious), is more readily accepted by Russian Jews than is the rabbi. He keeps meeting with her and loves talking with her and arguing about socialism, with Philip demanding that it is necessary to "be sure that the remedy isn't worse than the disease."¹⁶⁶ Before they fully realize it, they have fallen in love.

This makes for a double conflict. Philip wants to end the strike by drawing together capital and labor. He also has to decide whether to follow his love for the non-Jewish Ellen, thus ending his career as a rabbi at Beth El. This love, however, would also push him toward more engagement with poor Jews than if he allied himself with the Jewish heiress Ruth. In the labor plot, Philip goes to the union office and visits Kaufman but accomplishes little. The union representatives look at him as Kaufman's rabbi, and Kaufman tells him the story of his Bavarian immigrant parents and how he worked his way up and built a company that he simply will not share with any union, Jewish or not. David Gordon's publicity campaign against Pioneer Clothing resolves the problem, forcing Kaufman to make a deal in which Gordon gets as much for the workers as possible. In the love plot, Philip is equally ineffectual, as Ruth and Ellen decide for him. Ruth realizes that Ellen is on Philip's mind when she sees him look at her from afar: "There's nothing I wouldn't have given to have him look at me like that," she tells her brother-in-law, the surgeon Rob Frank, "but he never did."¹⁶⁷ Determined to get Philip back, Ruth schemes to buy Kaufman stock so as to get a say in the company and to force Pioneer to settle – all this to put Philip's enthusiasm to rest. And Ellen, realizing that their relationship would endanger Philip's position, suddenly leaves Baltimore. When the strike is settled in a secret meeting and a press statement is needed, Kaufman hypocritically proposes "to give some credit for this agreement to Dr. Graetz – our Rabbi, you know," and he lies, "His arguments have had great weight with me."¹⁶⁸ Philip knows that he has failed but is now publicly celebrated as a great mediator. At such a "Happy Ending" even David Gordon must chuckle and "appreciate the irony of existence in general, and of Rabbis, clothing merchants and labor disputes in particular."¹⁶⁹

The narrator's Olympian irony is a constant presence in this novel, whether directed at characters and their manners or at situations; it even informs the description of settings. Thus Ginzberg's prison cell is "sufficiently roomy to enable its occupant to indulge in three uninterrupted paces."¹⁷⁰ Yet with all its self-consciously genteel humor, *The Chosen People* is not a frivolous novel. An epigraph from Exodus (omitted in the modern reprint) reinforces its seriousness: "And ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The novel's examination of a Jewish ideal is in part informed by George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, the proto-Zionist novel that inspired Emma Lazarus to describe Eliot as the writer "who did most among the artists of our day towards elevating and ennobling the spirit of Jewish nationality."¹⁷¹ George Eliot drew on Heinrich Graetz's famous *History of the Jews*, and it has been noted that Nyburg signals this connection by choosing this very surname for his rabbi.¹⁷²

Nyburg, whose grandfather immigrated to Baltimore from Holland, shared with Philip and David the belief in a Jewish idealism. David, near the end of the novel, drops his cynicism and tells Philip that he believes in one thing, "the Jew. There's something about us – I don't know what – that the world needs."¹⁷³ Such a pronouncement resembles Nyburg's own belief in "a distinctive Jewish idealism" that he formulated in an article, "Jewish Ideals in a Changing World."¹⁷⁴ The American pluralist Nyburg expected that there would be, after World War I, many ways to express Jewish idealism and striving for justice, internationally and nationally. It could be Zionism, for "right or wrong, wise or wholly an illusion," it is "a splendid example of Jewish idealism."¹⁷⁵ It could be religious faith, as long as that produces "inspiration for the work before us"; and it could even be assimilation: "For if we are to be assimilated, at least it is our duty to discuss and determine the terms upon which we are to be merged, and accomplish this solution in such manner that our dearly bought racial attributes may be given to other races as a contribution, and not idly lost in mere thoughtless disappearance."¹⁷⁶ Capitalists like Montefiore exemplified this idealism, as did a "Jew, Marx, who gave to hosts of despairing men a new gospel of freedom."¹⁷⁷ No matter which expression Jewish idealism takes, the "facts of history and heredity are not to be brushed aside."¹⁷⁸ In a nearly all-Jewish cast, *The Chosen People* portrays a rabbi, a lawyer, a surgeon, a factory owner, and a banker as well as workers and union officials, with different degrees of irony but never completely without sympathy. Nyburg's novel pays very little attention to any tension between being American and being Jewish and feels as if it originated in a different fictional universe than most of the migration and assimilation tales. Taking it as the starting point

of a Jewish American tradition thus yields a new story line, a decade later, a better-known novel, also inspired by *Daniel Deronda*, did explore a tension between American identity and Jewishness.

Ludwig Lewisohn (1882–1955)

The Island Within (1928) opens dramatically: “Until the other day we Americans lived as though we had no past.”¹⁷⁹ While “we Americans” is the subject of Ludwig Lewisohn’s novel’s first sentence, by the end an intense Jewish knowledge defines its central character, a knowledge anchored in history, genealogy, and a forward-looking quest for a fulfillment of Jewishness in a mission that lies ahead for the protagonist and challenges his American assimilation.

Lewisohn opens most of the novel’s seven books on topics that provide broader historical, political, and psychological contexts for the overall plot: immigration restriction and the American sense of the past, global migrations and comparative patterns of assimilation, Jews and the inferiority complex, Pharisees and Jewish resistance, protective mimicry, the notion of progress, as well as King Haman, pogroms, and White Terror. The last two books’ contexts directly bear on the novel’s plot, as the marital crisis between the psychiatrist Arthur Levy and the gentile writer and “new woman” Elizabeth Knight, narrated in the third person, comes to a head. While Lewisohn obsesses over the marriage crisis plot, here he presents it as merely the foreground to a much deeper Jewish crisis in Levy and in America. Assimilating Jews like Arthur who try to fold Jewishness into a general American identity and deny “any tradition or character of their own” are in reality “trying to do a thing that was inhuman, that no one else was trying to do,” for even the most radical spirits relied on their various national cultures. Arthur realizes the tenuousness of the assumption that assimilated Jews were Americans like other Americans when he asks Elizabeth whether he is an American, and she answers distractedly, “No, of course not!”¹⁸⁰ Though she quickly revises her answer, her first unconscious response carries more weight.

Arthur is drawn to Judaism in several ways. Like George Eliot, he reads Graetz’s *History of the Jews*.¹⁸¹ Working in a Jewish hospital, Arthur realizes that in an all-Jewish environment one is “less consciously and agonizedly Jewish.” The orthodox Reb Moshe Hachohen then approaches and tells Arthur, “I believe we are *meshpocheh* – kinsfolk; do you know the expression?”¹⁸² And, indeed, it turns out that their great-grandfathers were brothers and that Arthur descends from a famous rabbi. The richness and texture of Jewish life entrance Arthur more than the “poor and colorless and thin” state of the “Americanized Jew.”¹⁸³

When Reb Hacohen gives Arthur an eleventh-century manuscript that had come down in their family, about the Crusaders slaying Jews in the Rhineland, Arthur reads it with horrified fascination and realizes that the Jews' "actual martyrdom" has never ended. "Yesterday in Russia, today in Rumania, tomorrow where?"¹⁸⁴ He decides to go to Romania on a mission for Reb Hacohen to investigate the condition of Jewish communities there. Arthur's father, Jacob Levy, who had heard the story of the manuscript, articulates in his accented diction what amounts to an answer to the novel's first sentence when he states that "it's natural of people to be proud of deir ancestors" and that "America used to say: Dis is no place vere ancestors count. Only individooal vorth. . . . But det didn't last long."¹⁸⁵ Now that Arthur Levy identifies with his Jewish ancestry and history, the novel can end with his new certainty "that the sky curved over him like a tent against the outer darkness and that the earth which his foot trod was his natural habitation and his home."¹⁸⁶ This completes the movement from America to his "island within."

An appreciation of George Eliot as a Zionist uncovered the similarities between *Daniel Deronda* and *The Island Within*, for in both novels "a strange, mystical, prophet-like character" meets a modern Jew, and "the result is a warm, powerfully responsive return to Judaism."¹⁸⁷ Of course, unlike Daniel Deronda, Arthur Levy knows that he is Jewish all along, but does not act on this knowledge until his family history and the more general Jewish past catch up with him; and while Deronda does not pursue a romance with Gwendolen Harleth, Levy separates from his wife, Elizabeth. Ludwig Lewisohn had a long-standing familiarity with George Eliot, and his references to the Mainz rabbi Kalonymos in *The Island Within* constitutes an additional hint to *Daniel Deronda*.¹⁸⁸ Lewisohn's ambitious novel challenges the fiction of assimilation and reminds us that "dissimilation" tends to accompany assimilation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "dissimilation" as the "action of making, or process of becoming, unlike," and it is a word that accurately describes Arthur Levy's development.¹⁸⁹

The novels by Nyburg and Lewisohn do suggest an alternative *Deronda* tradition in Jewish American literature as they present, in their different ways, modes of being Jewish in America outside the migration and assimilation narrative. Nyburg's capacious understanding of Jewish idealism in America has a pluralistic openness that welcomes the Zionist and the assimilationist, the rabbi and the atheist, as well as the Russian worker and the third-generation settled elite. Lewisohn explores the tension between Jewish and American identity and, resolving it in favor of the former, takes his protagonist away from America.

Coda

Delmore Schwartz (1913–1966)

Delmore Schwartz's short story "America! America!" (1940, 1948) focuses on an artist who recognizes that he had been fleeing from his Jewish family and America. He returns because World War II ends his expatriate life in Paris and he listens distractedly to his mother telling him a sad story of the Russian immigrant Baumann and his family.¹⁹⁰ Because of his ease in establishing social contacts, Mr. Baumann has been successful as an insurance salesman. His American-born children, Dick, Martha, and Sidney, grow up in comfort. But despite the parents' efforts, Dick and Sidney never amount to anything, and Sidney attempts suicide. "America! America!" was the immigrants' exclamation in astonishment at the new country's inventiveness, but Mrs. Baumann says with bitterness, "this is what we came to America for, forty-five years ago, for this," meaning Sidney.¹⁹¹ The frame closes with the mother's shocking comment that human beings are "ruined by their best qualities."¹⁹² Narrated in the son's third-person perspective, and switching between the narrative situation and the Baumann tale, the story asks what difference it makes for a son to understand himself in the context of preceding and surrounding lives. The story is beautifully developed, subtly nuanced, and remarkably balanced, a miniature *Absalom! Absalom!* that also anticipates the kind of tale Philip Roth would tell in *American Pastoral*.

Two versions of the story – from 1940 and 1948 – differ significantly, starting with the artist's name and profession. Originally a musician named Belmont Weiss, he became the writer Shenandoah Fish.¹⁹³ Both versions of the story highlight trendy words or worn-out clichés that add up to the idiom of the American tale, like "insurance game," "goods," "stopped at nothing," or "this was a cut-rate, cut-throat world."¹⁹⁴ Mrs. Fish both reports and uses these italicized words, at times giving her own irony, criticism, and interpretation to the story she tells. The Baumanns' story is thus doubly mediated. It first filters through the mother and then through the son's irony, as he reacts to the Baumanns' imagined "America! America!" to his mother's story, and finally to himself.

Between 1940 and 1948 Schwartz extensively revised, and not exclusively for stylistic reasons.¹⁹⁵ For example, topographic specifics relating to the migration experience (Romania and Ellis Island) and to New York (Wall Street, Brooklyn, the Catskills, and "a well-to-do suburb on Long Island") disappear, and Schwartz relocates the Baumanns' apartment from "near Eastern Parkway" to "near a great park."¹⁹⁶ Schwartz also reduces specifically Jewish

references. Originally, Mrs. Baumann tells “endless stories of her children, of friends, and of Jewish activities,” later only “many stories.”¹⁹⁷ Schwartz trims the phrase “during the high holy days, during Passover” to “on religious holidays,” changes “Judaism” to “Zionism,” and Jews from a “race” into a “people.”¹⁹⁸

This thinning out of Brooklyn Jewish specifics is offset by added passages that give the reader a fuller understanding of Shenandoah’s detachment. The would-be expatriate is as distant from others as the Old World is from the New or as one generation is from another: “He reflected upon his separation from these people, and he felt that in every sense he was removed from them by thousands of miles, or by a generation, or by the Atlantic Ocean.”¹⁹⁹ Schwartz once joked that he was “of Russian-Jewish distraction,” and his story holds up Shenandoah’s glib feeling of ironic superiority to the elders and their stories.²⁰⁰ Like Rosenfeld’s Bernard Miller, Shenandoah Fish experiences an identity crisis and has to ask himself repeatedly who he is.²⁰¹ Shenandoah questions the nature of his work as an expression of a generation that was “full of contempt for every thing important to their parents,” and, as he listens to his mother, he realizes that perhaps this “was the starting point and compelled the innermost motion of the work to be flight, or criticism, or denial, or rejection.”²⁰² This detachment imbues both versions of the story, but the ending changed from the earlier feeling that “all those lives inhabited the air he breathed and would be present wherever he was” and that “their America would always be present in him” to the later conclusion: “No one truly exists in the real world because no one knows all that he is to other human beings, all that they say behind his back and all the foolishness which the future will bring him.”²⁰³

This essay has sketched two ways of narrating Jewish American literary history. Though the end point in both cases is alienation, the reader will have to decide whether the story of increasing assimilation that begins with Antin and Cahan or an alternative story that, inspired by *Daniel Deronda*, would start with Nyburg’s Jewish idealism and Lewisohn’s dissimulation might have more resonance today.

Notes

I am grateful to Amy Robinson for researching sources as well as editing and proofreading the text of this essay.

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- 21 *Ibid.*, 101.
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- 23 *Ibid.*, 229.
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- 28 Cahan, *Levinsky*, 513.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 516.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 530.

- 31 Julian Levinson, "Cinderella's Dybbuk: Anzia Yezierska as the Voice of Generations," in *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 94–95.
- 32 Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers: A Struggle between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New* (1925; repr., with introd. by Alice Kessler-Harris, New York: Persea Press, 1975), 209.
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- 35 *Ibid.*, 127.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 65 and 205. Nicholas Karl Gordon, "Jewish and American: A Critical Study of the Fiction of Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, Waldo Frank, and Ludwig Lewisohn," Diss., Stanford University, 1968, 92.
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- 39 *Ibid.*, 204.
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- 41 *Ibid.*, 208.
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- 48 *Ibid.*, 286.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 293–294.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 297.
- 51 Harap, *Creative Awakening*, 47–48. See also David Martin Fine, "In the Beginning: American-Jewish Fiction, 1880–1930," in *Handbook of American-Jewish Literature: An Analytical Guide to Topics, Themes, and Sources*, ed. Lewis Fried (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 15–34, here 28.
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- 110 *Ibid.*, 226.
- 111 *Ibid.*, 230.
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- 155 *Ibid.*, 59.
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- 157 *Ibid.*, 64, 65.
- 158 *Ibid.*, 65.
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- 162 *Ibid.*, 61, 69.
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- 181 Ibid., 286.
- 182 Ibid. 306, 307. Lewisohn also develops partial analogies between Jews and Negroes, 306, 320.
- 183 Ibid., 320. Here the novel resonates with the introductory essay of Book II, where Lewisohn examined assimilation and found that in America there are “Jewish gangsters on the East Side and rabbis who make religion hum with gyms and teams and get-together meetings and business men of the red-blooded go-getter variety.” 42–43.
- 184 Ibid., 341.
- 185 Ibid., 348.
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- 196 Schwartz, *Partisan*, 118; Schwartz, *Dreams*, 19.
- 197 Schwartz, *Partisan*, 117; Schwartz, *Dreams*, 19.

- 198 Schwartz, *Partisan*, 114: “You had to join various lodges and societies of your own class and race”; Schwartz, *Dreams*, 15: “It was necessary to join the lodges, societies, and associations of your own class and people.”
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- 202 Schwartz, *Dreams*, 23–24; Schwartz, *Partisan*, 121.
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Making It into the Mainstream 1945–1970

BENJAMIN SCHREIER

It is easy to argue that the years between 1945 and 1970 stand as one of the most overdetermined periods in the history of Jewish American fiction. This is the period in which Jewish American writers broke into the mainstream of American literature; in which so many of the Jewish American writers whose names are now most well known started writing and gained prominence; in which the great stylists of a Jewish American vernacular that is now recognized to the point of cliché as much in Peoria as it is in Manhattan discovered and honed their craft; in which the Jewish American writers who would go on to win all the major U.S. literary awards entered the scene; even in which a writer working in Yiddish could become a major American author. It is not for nothing that this was also the sociologically and historically significant period in which American Jews broke out of the urban ghetto, moving into the suburbs, into the professions, into American society more generally. These were the years of Jewish American emergence, and the period's literary historical overdetermination has a lot to do with this sociohistorical narrative of emergence being so normatively available, so ready at hand, so just plain recognizable.

Emergence. The literary history of this period screams out to be read through, read as, a narrative of emergence. This was the period during which Jewish American fiction witnessed magisterial debut books like Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Family Moskat*, an epic look at a diverse cast of Jews living in pre-Holocaust Warsaw, published originally in installments between 1945 and 1948 in the Yiddish language daily newspaper *Forverts* and in two-volume complete Yiddish and one-volume English editions in 1950 (Singer almost always published originally in Yiddish and then closely participated in the English translation of his works) – though arguably the more signal event in Singer's representation of Jewish American literary emergence was the appearance in *Partisan Review* of Saul Bellow's translation of Singer's short story "Gimpel the Fool," with its brilliantly drawn eponymous narrating schlemiel, in 1953.

At least as significant were debuts like Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* and Grace Paley's collection *The Little Disturbances of Man*, both in 1959. Though Saul Bellow's first novel, *Dangling Man*, was published in 1944, a year before our period opens, this was the period when he muscularly leapt onto the scene, publishing six novels and a short story collection, all but one or two of which continue to appear regularly on university course syllabi, and essentially any one of which most other writers would be lucky to publish in a lifetime; it was during these years that Bellow published such impressive novels as *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), a kind of picaresque bildungsroman that gave us a newly vital ethnic American hero; *Herzog* (1964), the chronicle of a university professor's alienation as much about the seductions of language as it is about modern anomie; and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), about a supercilious Holocaust survivor in late-1960s New York lacking both will and desire to recommit to society or family, each of which won a National Book Award (!), along with *Seize the Day* (1956), *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), and the collection *Mosby's Memoirs* (1968). Bernard Malamud debuted in 1952 with his Christianity/baseball myth *The Natural*, and then followed this novel with three others: *The Assistant* (1957), *A New Life* (1961), and *The Fixer* (1966), the first about Italian-American Frank Alpine redeeming himself out of criminality and anti-Semitic abjection through his relationship with long-suffering Jewish grocer Morris Bober and becoming a Jew in the process and easily standing as one of the very best Jewish American novels, the second about a Jewish teacher from Brooklyn moving out west to an Oregon agricultural university and remaining one of American literature's best academic satires, and the third about the victim of anti-Semitic persecution in tsarist Kiev and winning both a National Book Award, Malamud's second, and a Pulitzer Prize. In 1958, moreover, Malamud published the remarkable short story collection *The Magic Barrel*, containing some of the most collected and significant Jewish American short stories – including “The First Seven Years,” “The Mourners,” “Angel Levine,” and the eponymous “The Magic Barrel” – cementing many of the key themes through which we now recognize Jewish American literature and winning Malamud his first National Book Award, and he published two more collections through the 1960s. Among many other Jewish American debuts during this period were two of America's most important novels about World War II, both of which addressed the mismatched conflict between individual and system: Norman Mailer's searingly cynical *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and Joseph Heller's satirical masterpiece *Catch-22* (1961), the former more significant still for debuting as well the phenomenon of “Norman Mailer.” Though Cynthia Ozick would achieve

much of her fame in the years following 1970, this period saw her sprawling debut, the 1966 novel *Trust*, and more significantly the 1969 short story “Envy; or Yiddish in America,” centered on a relatively obscure Jewish writer in New York who struggles in the shadow of his much-translated, celebrity fellow Yiddishist, whom he finds a fraud, her masterful, unresolved inquest into the post-Holocaust life of Yiddish language and literature and a brilliant critique of diasporic Jewish nostalgia.

These years also saw the appearance of popular middlebrow novels that digested historical transformations into easily consumed, frequently sentimental narratives, introducing Jewish writers and/or Jewish topics to a wide and accepting gentile American audience – books like Laura Hobson’s *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947), which daringly took on America’s rich tradition of genteel anti-Semitism; Irwin Shaw’s *The Young Lions* (1948), which interlaced the stories of three soldiers in World War II, a German, an American Jew, and an American gentile; John Hersey’s *The Wall* (1950), a story of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising presented as a fictive journal (though Hersey was not himself Jewish, and was in fact the child of Christian missionaries, the book won the National Jewish Book Award in only that award’s second year of existence); Edna Ferber’s *Giant* (1952), an epic satire of Texas wealth; Howard Fast’s *Spartacus* (1953), a novel about the Roman slave rebellion; Herman Wouk’s *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955), a story of assimilation and its discontents; Leon Uris’s *Exodus* (1958), which narratively domesticated and naturalized the founding of the state of Israel; and Harry Kemelman’s *Friday the Rabbi Slept Late* (1964), the inaugural offering in a mystery series centered on the rabbi of a suburban Massachusetts congregation whose Talmudic training helps his sleuthing, this last book going so far in its efforts at normalizing the Jewish presence in America as to compare anti-Semitism to the Salem witch trials. These books often gave narrative form to recognizably “Jewish” problems such as assimilation, the Holocaust, Zionism, and identity, but importantly articulated them in popular national contexts, rendering them recognizably American, as well.

Another way to imagine or inscribe the emergence narrative is to return hegemonically to that oft-quoted, assertive opening paragraph of Bellow’s *Augie March*: “I am an American, Chicago born – Chicago, that somber city – and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man’s character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn’t any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles.”¹ For many critics then and

since, this opening amounted to a proud announcement, a bold declaration of literary citizenship. Here is the Jew as American, but Bellow's American Jew is *embodied, actual* – an individual created by multivalent human contexts, an urban operator traversed by diverse influences and allegiances and traditions, a tough with just enough reading to throw around clichés with a characteristic style. In his 1961 essay “Writing American Fiction,” Philip Roth wrote that *Augie March* “combines literary complexity with conversational ease, joins the idiom of the academy with the idiom of the street (not all streets – certain streets); the style is special, private, energetic, and though it can at times be unwieldy, it generally serves Bellow brilliantly.”² I've always been taken with Roth's “certain streets” comment – because that is precisely it: What is so impressive – one of the things that are so impressive – about Bellow's writing is its indomitable weight of particularity. Augie is not the representative Jew, he is not the Jew or Every Jew, or the New American Jew, or the Immigrant Jew, or the Second Generation Jew; he is *a Jew*, an American and a Jew, produced from a particular place and not necessarily like or representative of others. Decades later, Roth identified what was so transformative about Bellow's writing: All of a sudden experience became something to use, a kick in the pants – not a policeman, but a compelling imaginative resource. About reading *Augie March* when it came out, Roth explains,

I didn't know what to make of it. I had never read anything like it in my life. I didn't know what freedom was in a writer until I read that book. That you can do anything, that you go can anywhere. You could use your back-ground. Just as Bellow used his in Chicago, the West side of Chicago, and Malamud used his in a grocery store in Brooklyn, I can use mine in Newark. It never occurred to me. I wrote stories in college. . . . They were awful little things. Not a one of them mentions Jew, Newark; you'd think I was the child of Lord Chesterfield. Suddenly I began writing stories set in my neighborhood.³

Indeed, there are few cities that can be said to have had a more devoted literary native son than has Newark in Philip Roth. Starting with the stories and novella in *Goodbye, Columbus* and continuing through his supposedly final novel, 2010's *Nemesis*, Roth's consistent subject, with only a few exceptions, has been Newark as seen by the working-class Jews of the community in which he was raised. “Goodbye, Columbus,” his masterfully cynical class satire about the summer love affair between working-class urban son Neil Klugman and nouveau-riche suburban daughter Brenda Patimkin, is as much about the transformative, destabilizing cultural and demographic

geography of Jewish greater Newark as it is about independence, identity, love, assimilation, ethnicity, coming of age, or family. Even if he would continue to work at it throughout his career, and even if he was to extract from it yet more profound and moving effects much later, the Bellovian lesson that the writer's experience and background can lend his or her writing a required particularity and weight is all over Roth's early work. From *Augie March*, Roth learned that he could write in a voice he already recognized about characters he knew; again, these characters are not the Jew in abstract, but particular Jews such as might have walked the same streets he walked – nearly always, characteristically, properly named in Roth's work. In stories like "Epstein," about a middle-aged Jewish man who begins an affair with a neighborhood woman; "The Conversion of the Jews," about a young boy who cannot in good conscience reproduce the self-righteous clannishness of his Jewish elders; and "Defender of the Faith," about a Jewish drill sergeant who refuses the self-serving identitarian shibboleths of a coreligionist recruit; all published along with "Goodbye, Columbus" in Roth's 1959 debut, we see Jews busy at the business of lived and concrete actuality – with all the unseemly trimmings – rather than at the business of representative iconicity.

As is well known, Roth ran into a great deal of trouble for these literary portraits of imperfect, embodied Jews. As Roth himself described it in the early 1960s, at the opening of his famous essay "Writing about Jews," "my work has been attacked from certain pulpits and in certain periodicals as dangerous, dishonest, and irresponsible. . . . Among the letters I receive from readers, there have been a number written by Jews accusing me of being anti-Semitic and 'self-hating,' or, at least, tasteless; they argue or imply that the sufferings of the Jews throughout history, culminating in the murder of six million by the Nazis, have made certain criticisms of Jewish life insulting and trivial."⁴ But Roth countered that these critics and readers "seem to me often to have cramped and untenable notions of right and wrong," mistakenly "looking at fiction . . . in terms of 'approval' or 'disapproval' of Jews, 'positive' or 'negative' attitudes toward Jewish life," and therefore "are likely not to see what it is that the story is really about." Roth's counterargument was that to read literature through an identitarian lens that would police it for sanctioned or legitimated representations of an authorized subject, that would prescreen it for what Roth indicted as "the oratory of self-congratulation and self-pity," is to read literature badly, to act on a bad theory of literature. "Fiction is not written to affirm the principles and beliefs that everybody seems to hold, nor does it seek to guarantee the appropriateness of our feelings. The world of fiction,

in fact, frees us from the circumscriptions that society places upon feeling.” He wrote “Epstein,” he explains, not

to make evident whatever disapproval I may feel for adulterous men. I write a story of a man who is adulterous to reveal the condition of such a man. If the adulterous man is a Jew, then I am revealing the condition of an adulterous man who is a Jew. . . . The story of Lou Epstein stands or falls not on how much I know about tradition but on how much I know and understand about Lou Epstein. . . . The story is called ‘Epstein’ because Epstein, not the Jews, is the subject.⁵

What Roth sees emerging in this period, in other words, not least in his own writing, is a Jewish American literature that more profoundly demands literary evaluation than it demands small-minded identitarian assent or sociological evaluation.

As Roth explained much later, citing not just “Epstein” but also the novella that gave his debut collection its name,

Goodbye, Columbus was a spontaneous and immediate response to the world I had come out of. But there were those who were offended. And there were the rabbis who gave sermons denouncing me as an anti-Semite. I suppose what riled them about *Goodbye, Columbus* was a story about a Jewish middle-aged man who is an adulterer, a Jewish girl having sex who bought a diaphragm. I maintained then, as I do now, that there were Jewish girls who bought diaphragms, and there were Jewish husbands who were adulterers. You know, Isaac Singer, when he was criticized by Jewish critics and Jewish readers for his stories, they would say, rather, “Mr. Singer, why must you write about Jewish whores and Jewish pimps?” and Singer said, “What should I write about, Portuguese whores? Portuguese pimps?”⁶

Playing precisely on the identitarian expectations that his sanctimonious readers took to his writing, Roth’s key term “Jewish” here circulates as a descriptive term allied to the experiential and historical toolbox on which Roth drew – on which he had no choice but to draw – as an imaginative resource, not as a prescriptive anchor morally defining or censoring his subject. One does not have to accede whole hog to Roth’s perhaps self-congratulatory Jewish bad-boy autonarrative to recognize the biting profundity of his analysis of postwar Jewish American literary transformation; if “Jewish” attains categorical legibility as a term necessary to the coherence and viability of an emerging field of Jewish American literature during the decades between the war and 1970, there was at the same time no way it could stand as a sufficient, anthropologically self-evident anchor for that field.

And so Roth, by way of explaining the lesson Bellow embodied in his writing, offers us another way in which to focus this period through the historical lens of emergence: for it is during these years that the signifier “Jewish” for literary history must necessarily become *a* determining factor within a manifold of historical and critical significance, rather than *the* determining factor, rather than the master identitarian signifier administering and organizing everything else. In its emergence, therefore, Jewish American literature can no longer be considered self-evidently the literature of – by, about, belonging to, appropriate to – a specific historical population; instead, postwar Jewish American fiction is always already caught in the act of transcending this limit, one foot safely in bounds, confident of its Jewish identity; one foot safely out, confident of its American literary status. As Roth explains in a recent interview, “I’m not crazy about seeing myself described as an American Jewish writer. I don’t write in Jewish; I write in American. My – most of my work, nine-tenths of it, takes place in America. I was raised in America. I am an American. Therefore I’m an American writer.”⁷ Thus the emergence narrative works only by way of a paradox: Emerging into literary historical maturity in this period, Jewish American fiction escapes easy categorical definition.

So what we find is that this concept of *emergence*, deployed as an explanatory narrative of the overdetermined Jewish American literary history of the years between 1945 and 1970, is itself overdetermined. Close to the beginning of this period, in 1949, the critic Irving Howe protested the superficial nature of so much American writing about Jews – by both Jews and gentiles. The title he chose for his complaint does not demand much careful exegesis to yield his point: “The Stranger and the Victim: The Two Stereotypes of American Fiction.” As he begins the essay, “Most novels about American Jews are afflicted with stereotypical characterizations. Seldom does the Jew appear in them as an individual; almost always he is made the representative of a group or subgroup (a ‘kind’ of Jew: a good or a strange Jew); in the eyes of both writer and reader he is first *the* Jew and second *a* person.” The problem is that America’s literary Jews are always representative – of the alien ghetto, of foreign exoticism, of immigrant communities, of allrightnikism, and so forth. Whether this literary Jew is drawn out of conscious or unconscious hostility, or made the object of philo-Semitic sympathy,

it makes little moral or aesthetic difference . . . since both deny the one right the Jew needs most: existence as a unique human being, with an individuality of his own. . . . Whether novels indulge in aggressive denunciation of Jews or sentimental pleading for them, they are bound together by one common

assumption: that the Jews are not human like other people, somehow not subject to the same pressures of experience as other men. Whether illimitably sinister or uncannily wise, Jews appear in fiction as odd, strange, different by nature.⁸

As we have seen in Roth's resistance twelve years later to the "Jewish American Writer" label, however, this period between 1945 and 1970 was to be known for literary history's escape from this superficial categorizing tendency. Interestingly, two works by Jewish writers that Howe isolates as laudable *exceptions* to this stereotyping paradigm are Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, published in 1917 after being serialized a few years earlier in *McClure's*, and Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, published in 1934 but largely forgotten in the depths of the Depression – both works that enjoyed literary historical renaissances during the postwar decades, providing a further turn of the screw for reading the period between 1945 and 1970 through a narrative of Jewish American cultural emergence.

Twenty years later, writing toward the end of the period, in 1968, Howe offers a second reference point, and these two coordinates can help focus the examination of the Jewish American fiction of the period. Writing about the New York Intellectuals, that group of largely (though by no means exclusively) Jewish literary, cultural, and political writers that initially coalesced in the 1930s and 1940s around magazines like *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* in the act of challenging the Stalinist Left but who went on through the 1950s and 1960s to stage a much broader liberal critique of totalitarianism in culture and politics, Howe explains that though as a purely "literary group and no more than a literary group" the New York writers "will seem less important than, say, the New Critics, who did set in motion a whole school of poetry," the "main literary contribution of the New York milieu has been to legitimate a subject and tone we must uneasily call American Jewish writing." The point is not simply that many of the magazines associated with the New York intellectual milieu provided a venue for the publication of fiction by the leading Jewish American writers of the era; Howe explains that though themes such as escape and the dwindling persuasiveness of religion had been apparent in literature written by Jews in America since the end of the nineteenth century, he argues for an important transformation in the focal investments of the literature written during the postwar period. It is not simply that the "fiction of urban malaise, second-generation complaint, Talmudic dazzle, woeful alienation, and dialectical irony" appeared in the pages of journals like *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*; it is that this fiction, "in which the Jewish world is not

merely regained in memory as a point of beginnings” but “is also treated as a portentous metaphor of man’s homelessness and wandering,” is staged as the field of an analytic, of a method of literary criticism.

The New York intellectuals “legitimate[d]” the “subject and tone we must uneasily call American Jewish writing” not simply by being Jews who wrote about Jews, and not simply by escaping a determinately Jewish milieu by which they had been determined, but by legitimating a critical vocabulary and thereby constituting a field of literary analysis; the New York writers produced a set of themes – including “urban malaise,” “second-generation complaint,” “Talmudic dazzle,” “woeful alienation,” and “dialectical irony” – as a characteristic index of Jewish history. And yet it is a complex analytic, functioning at once centripetally and centrifugally: At the same time that this canonization of themes was consolidating a field as the “expression” of Jews, it was also being constructed as an “emblem” of something universal, precisely insofar as these themes “form a notable addition – a new tone, a new sensibility – to American writing.”⁹ On the one hand, Howe assumes that Jewish writing is now part of the American national product – that Jewish writers are now identifiably American. On the other hand, even as they are American, their heritage segregates them, identifies them as belonging, at the same time, to a separate category – by the same nationalist logic that purportedly renders them American. Howe’s ideological maneuver puts to work a very distinctive kind of Jewish predication: Only in traversing Jewish particularity does this sensibility rightfully claim the mantle of specifically Jewish categoricity.

Coordinating Howe’s two reference points provides us a means of reinscribing the overdetermined narrative of emergence: The advent of writers such as Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Grace Paley, I. B. Singer, Cynthia Ozick, and Bernard Malamud; of middlebrow fiction that presented Jews in sentimental-nationalized plots palatable to a popular gentile American readership; and of nationally important magazines whose contributors were recognizably and characteristically Jewish, for example, signified that “Jewish writing” itself could never again stand as a sufficient or self-evident criterion of evaluation. If we are going to narrate an emergence in this period, in other words, it will in fact be the emergence of Jewish American literary culture as a disciplined object of interpretation – as a rich object of interpretation, that is, with the kind of depth that can sustain multiple analytical vectors, multiple methodological approaches, multiple theoretical investments while resisting the will that would reduce it to a single anthropological narrative. It is not for nothing that Jewish American literature becomes an object of scholarly analysis during this period, comes to constitute a field. If Howe in 1949

laments the absence of deep Jewish characterizations in a literature dedicated to the reproduction of clichés and then in 1968 points to certain themes that were by then cohering as the categorical stamp of an emerging field of Jewish American literature that could support critically complex interpretations, it was because the best examples of this emergent writing could no longer be contained by historical bromides about the communitarian immigrant histories from which these writers could be seen to have emerged.

The historicist tendency to read a canon of literature as representative of or an index to already-legible historical or sociological meaning ignores the processes by which the cultural phenomenon that is now so easily recognized by the name of “emergence” often in fact encodes any number of manifestations of an interplay between interpretive concepts (be they historical, sociological, literary, etc.) of particularism and universalism. The canonic power of Bellow’s *Augie March* is instructive: Augie’s powerful opening line, “I am an American, Chicago born,” engages a dialectical pathos about contested, intersecting contexts that this canonicity inscribes as already familiar. Just as an earlier generation of Jews experimentally deployed various forms of Marxism and socialism as a universalist challenge to particularist religious communitarianism or the restrictions of the ghetto to which they had historically been consigned but from which emancipation had constituted ostensible liberation, so Augie’s declaration repeats a universalist claim for literary history against the limiting confines of “immigrant” or “ghetto” fiction. Key for this canon, as Howe helps us see, is not only the legibility of texts like Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* and Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*, which provide opportunities to contest an earlier generation’s residual socialist pieties even as they pointed toward a later generation’s ascendant liberal pieties, but also New York intellectual journals, which provided fertile ground for American cultural reimagination of the Jew even as they supplied venues for the publication of Jewish American fiction. In the figure of Augie March, *Augie March* insists that the field of Jewish literature can no longer be contained as an immigrant or regional genre. And yet Jewish particularism is dialectically reinscribed by historicist identifications – where once socialism was read as a Jewish ideology or the Lower East Side as a Jewish place, so now Bellow’s novel is read through clichés about Jewish American emergence.

In fact, what we realize is that what “emerged” in this period was an academically legitimate and socially sanctioned way of talking about a coherent field.¹⁰ Therefore, it is important to resist the temptation to think about this field of literature, coalescing at precisely this period into something it makes sense to talk about as categorically both “Jewish” and “American,” as an already

categorical fact. Indeed, the chief, and dubious, virtue of the “emergence” narrative seems to be its power to reduce the field of Jewish American literature into a form more or less available to regnant historicist forms of thought. A more precise way to describe the explosion of interpretive possibility in the field after World War II might be as a kind of literary critical “decontainment”: Jewish American literature “emerged” during this period, so to speak, because it was not possible to talk about it simply as representing, or contained by, a single, self-evident, and determining recognizable – historical – narrative. Indeed, the fact is that the Jewish American fiction of this period demands multiple frames that cannot necessarily be administered or accounted for by one master narrative. More complexly and more diversely than simply repeating a historicist narrative about linked emergences – of Jews into the mainstream of American society and of Jewish writers into the mainstream of American culture – the Jewish American literature of this period must be charted simultaneously along a fairly wide array of sometimes interlocking, sometimes parallel, and sometimes contradictory narratives. What could from a certain perspective be called the “emergence” of Jewish American fiction, therefore, is better seen as a kind of critical or interpretive expansion or saturation of Jewish American fiction, as a proliferation of vocabularies through which to fix our attention on American Jews coincident with the accretion or binding of a recognizable field of Jewish American literature that coherently grounds the analytical deployment of those vocabularies.

Paradoxically, some of the literary historical frameworks in which Jews became legible during this period were in fact grounded in historical phenomena that were arguably making Jews less legible. Emergent in this period, in other words, is a justified method, a kind of institutional facility, for labeling literature that treats the destruction either of Jewish bodies or of Jewish categorical definitiveness as itself “Jewish.” The Holocaust, which rather conspicuously showcases problematics of Jewish presence and absence, predictably features prominently in, and serves as a significant heuristic for, resolving the legibility of “Jewishness” in a lot of the fiction of the period. In works like Edward Lewis Wallant’s *The Pawnbroker* (1961) and Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970), survivors find that they cannot disappear – or erase their marked “survivor” or, to perhaps coin a term, “Jewed” status – despite their best attempts. Some of Cynthia Ozick’s stories collected in the volume *The Pagan Rabbi* (1971), like the title story (published originally in 1966) and “Envy” (first published in 1969), take as their central concern the twinned problems of Jewish cultural disappearance and ethnic cleansing (the term may be anachronistic, but it works), and both draw significant explicit links to the

Holocaust. Among his many other values in the field of Jewish American literature, Bernard Malamud was a pioneer of what I sometimes think of as a kind of Holocaust style – dark, beautiful, and uncompromising even as it is haunted by a comic consciousness that so often announces itself as an inevitable reaction to genocidal modernity. Holocaust allusions can be found throughout Malamud’s oeuvre by any literary historian interested in finding them – his novel *The Fixer* (1963), whose more immediate (if not explicit) historical reference is the 1913 Menahem Mendel Beilis case, is often cited in this regard. But his stories “The Lady of the Lake,” about an American intent on suppressing his Jewish identity (he has changed his name from Levin to Freeman, free of the shame he equates with Jewishness) who, on vacation in Italy, falls in love with the beautiful daughter of what he assumes is an aristocratic family and who he assumes must be anti-Semitic but who turns out to be a survivor who finally rebuffs him because she insists on marrying a Jew, and “The Last Mohican,” about an American Jewish scholar in Italy trying to finish a book who is hounded by the schnorrer Susskind, representing poverty, the Holocaust, and every other intimation of American Jewish guilt. Both appearing in *The Magic Barrel* (the former appeared for the first time in Malamud’s collection, while the latter had originally appeared in *Partisan Review*), they fairly explicitly confront the problem of responsibility in the face of the Holocaust for American Jews who were finding it all too easy to suppress signs of legible Jewishness. Similarly, “The German Refugee,” about a poor Jewish student who struggles to help a Jewish scholar who has just fled Germany, leaving behind his gentile wife (the story takes place during the summer of 1939), translate into English a lecture on German poets’ failure to learn from Whitman the lesson of universal brotherly love – the story ends shortly after the refugee commits suicide when he learns that his wife was rounded up and killed after she converted to Judaism when he left and with the American student realizing that neither could “say what was in them to say” – appearing originally in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1963 and then collected in Malamud’s second book of short stories, *Idiots First* (1963), works, with its themes of responsibility, fraternity, linguistic difference, and interpretive failure, like Ozick’s “Envy” masterfully to link language and population, culture and bodies, linguistic survival, and postgenocidal demography.

The period’s other great phenomenon of Jewish disappearance that would end up underwriting a significant body of legibly Jewish American fiction was of course American cold war assimilation, a very common theme in this period’s writing. In this regard we should consider not only writers like Philip Roth, who initially built his career on acute representations of

Jewish American assimilation that would themselves become field defining, and books like Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar* (whose great fame is inversely proportional to the frequency with which it is actually read), but also what I call the "Oy Oy Vlashkin" phenomenon, named for the uncontrolled reaction the Yiddish Theater performer Volodya Vlashkin would elicit from the swooning women in his audience in Grace Paley's story "Goodbye and Good Luck," from her collection *The Little Disturbances of Man*: As Rosa narrates her stunted youthful romance with Vlashkin, the Valentino of Second Avenue, to her niece Lillie, the story evokes the lost world of Jewish Broadway, which by the time of the story's publication in 1959 had long been in decline. But it would be wrong to describe Paley's story as simply nostalgic; just as Rosa acknowledges that Vlashkin had "no place to go," much of the Jewish American fiction of this period acknowledges that the experience and metonyms that have been recognizably and familiarly Jewish, and that persist as the piercing, intractable object of Jewish American desire, are no longer accessible. We witness a kind of paradoxical identification or recognition in much of the best fiction of the period – in its refusal to perform a simple historicist evocation of a coherent Jewish American subject with a recognizable history.

While much of what I have been calling the critical proliferation or expansion of American Jewish fiction during the postwar period was occasioned by various historical processes of Jewish disappearance, we must also acknowledge other social and historical forces that worked to increase Jewish American visibility. Even as events like the Holocaust and assimilation could be seen to threaten the identitarian self-evidence of American Jews, a counterforce can be found in multiculturalism, which began its rise to social and academic ideological dominance in America during the late 1960s – and which helps retrospectively account for the decisively "Jewish" identification of so much of the writing of this period. Much has been written about the place of Jews in, and the relation of Jews to, multiculturalism, often about the purported neglect of Jews within the multicultural regime – that is, about the question of whether Jews are accorded the same kind of standing or prestige within multiculturalism as are other identity groups like Latina/os, Asian Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans. But it is not my aim to engage these debates here; what is significant for our purposes is the emergence of the hegemonic concept of identity that multiculturalism heralded, and in this emergence American Jews have shared just as much as everybody else. Walter Benn Michaels is probably the scholar most responsible for our recent ability to grab critical hold of this emergence and of its powerful articulation of

concepts of culture and race.¹¹ In the multiculturalist era of identity, positively construed and recognizable “difference” becomes a social virtue: Given cultural identification’s indomitably and inevitably biological foundation in multiculturalism, we experience a mandate to recognize the ethnicized other as one of many varieties of the same democratic subject. Allied to this transformation was what Mark McGurl has called “the vertiginously dialectical mobilization of the distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’” in U.S. culture, an ethnic intensification of “the ironic centrality of the figure of the outsider” as both threat and salvation.¹² During the late 1960s, just like “African American,” “Latina/o,” and “Asian American,” “Jewish” became a privileged cultural and academic focus¹³ – and literature was articulated and managed as an access point through which Americans could learn about Jewish identity in the interest of manifesting a democracy that was increasingly thinking about society, culture, and governance in biologically administered, and therefore ostensibly unproblematic, terms of ethnicity and race.

The postwar period saw, in addition to the other phenomena we have examined, literature that can be fruitfully analyzed as asking to be read through a multicultural lens, as offering readers anthropological access through which to fix Jewish culture as an object of examination. Thus can we account for the prestige of a book like Chaim Potok’s *The Chosen* (1967), which sold millions of copies and remains a mainstay of high school lesson plans, but that, with its plot enslaved to long and earnest extradiegetic lectures on Jewish history, practices, and current events, taxes the attempt to justify it as good literature. Character development in Potok’s novel, such as it exists – the book tells the story of the friendship between the respective sons of a Hasidic rebbe and a modern Orthodox scholar in Brooklyn during and shortly after World War II – serves primarily, and often only, the pedantic goal of sympathetically educating cold war readers increasingly adhering to the emergent protocols of multiculturalism about matters of relevance to American Jews, including Jewish history, Zionism, and varieties of traditional practices, among others – but always in order to justify thinking of Jews, even in their non-gentile difference, as perfectly good Americans. Flawlessly adapted to the multicultural occasion, the book endures as one of the most popular Jewish American novels, especially among non-Jewish readers.¹⁴

In conclusion, I would be remiss if in discussing Jewish American fiction of the period between 1945 and 1970 I did not mention Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), every American’s favorite Jewish literary reference.¹⁵ The book, which with Saul Bellow’s *The Victim* (1947), an earnest (and admittedly apprentice)¹⁶ exploration of anti-Semitism, can be seen to bookend the Jewish

American fiction of the period, proves how much ground must be covered in even the most cursory critical examination of the field. I have been throughout this discussion analyzing the overdetermination of the field of Jewish American literature, so it is perhaps fitting that I close it with one of the field's most overdetermined books. What I mean is that it is exceedingly difficult for scholars of Roth, of Jewish American literature, even of American literature more generally to get closer to this book than the constellation of its literary historical "significance."

Toward the end of Roth's novel, Alex Portnoy justifies his irredeemable sexual fixation on shiksas by explaining to the good Dr. Spielvogel, "I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds – as though through fucking I will discover America. *Conquer* America – maybe that's more like it. Columbus, Captain Smith, Governor Winthrop, General Washington – now Portnoy."¹⁷ He goes on to itemize his patriotic bonafides, what a good all-American kid he was, working himself up a page later to a rousing climax: "now I want what's coming to me. My G.I. bill – real American ass. The cunt in country-'tis-of-thee! I pledge allegiance to the twat of the United States of America – and to the republic for which it stands."¹⁸ Portnoy has paid his American dues – quite impressively – and now he expects to reap his reward, pruriently embodied in the beautiful gentile women of "Davenport, Iowa! Dayton, Ohio! Schenectady, New York, and neighboring Troy! Fort Myers, Florida! New Canaan, Connecticut! Chicago, Illinois! Albert Lea, Minnesota! Portland, Maine! Moundsville, West Virginia! Sweet land of shiksa-tail, of thee I sing!" And indeed, he seems to have been fairly successful in collecting on his debt – in this he may be distinguished from his insurance-salesman father's onerous "collecting the colored debit" for the profit of M. Everett Lindabury, the president of the Boston and Northeastern, his father's employer¹⁹ – as Kay "The Pumpkin" Campbell of Davenport, Iowa; Sally "The Pilgrim" Maulsby of New Canaan, Connecticut; and Mary Jane "The Monkey" Reed of Moundsville, West Virginia, successively reveal themselves to his amorous explorations.

Unsurprisingly, however, the American Jew never really is paid back by America in the only legal tender that counts, American identity – and is instead often left to duke it out with other others, most conspicuously figured by African Americans (that is, by the canons of a lot of recent literary history and of a popular narrative that intertwines the postwar histories of the two populations), among whom Jack Portnoy toils daily for the benefit of his family and for whom young Alex Portnoy wants to stand as a just representative in open revolt against his family. As Portnoy admits to Spielvogel,

“Sally Maulsby was just something nice a son once did for his dad. A little vengeance on Mr. Lindabury for all those nights and Sundays Jack Portnoy spent collecting down in the colored district. A little bonus extracted from Boston and Northeastern, for all those years of service, and exploitation.”²⁰ Alex certainly does not seem to believe that America has made good on its side of the bargain, and he feels justified – and compelled – to exact some aggressive recompense. Explicitly engaging a discourse of race with sociological and historical valences, *Portnoy’s Complaint* heads into the home stretch expressing a suspicion that Jewish identity can never be seamlessly mapped onto American identity.

And so begins the last chapter of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, titled “In Exile.” Readers will remember that Portnoy moves from exacting sexual revenge on gentile America in the final lines of the penultimate chapter to an idyll of the masculine elegance of the Jewish men of his youth, natives all of the Weequahic neighborhood of Newark, playing softball in the opening lines of this final one. If his father’s Jewish manhood was subverted by Lindabury’s avatar of WASP America, then these idealized Jewish men whom he watched in his youth promise its redemption: “Because I love these men! I want to grow up to *be* one of those men!”²¹ Lindabury may never have allowed his father to be an American man – constipated and incapable of hitting a baseball as Jack Portnoy was – but Alex Portnoy’s fantasia of the Jewish masculine promises a response, a rebuke, a righting of the wrong.

Yet the novel crosses this gendered return to his youth with an odd line of flight. Even as he imagines “growing up to be a Jewish man! Living forever in the Weequahic section, and playing softball on Chancellor Avenue from nine to one on Sundays,” Portnoy admits:

I remember all this where? when? While Captain Meyerson is making his last slow turn over the Tel Aviv airport. My face is against the window. *Yes, I could disappear, I think, change my name and never be heard from again* – then Meyerson banks the wing on my side, and I look down for the first time upon the continent of Asia, I look down from two thousand feet in the air upon the land of Israel, where the Jewish people first came into being, and am impaled upon a memory of Sunday morning softball games in Newark.²²

Thus, if Portnoy “love[s] these men” and “want[s] to grow up to be one these men,” it is complicating that he goes to Israel to do it. He gets on the plane to “escape” (the word is his) from the Monkey – whom he leaves in Athens, where they had traveled after overextending a threesome with an Italian prostitute with a heart of gold – presumably by “disappear[ing]” into

the anonymity of his Jewish past, rather than returning to his professional life in New York. The false civilizational idols of *goyishe* Greece and Rome are exchanged for the real [Jewish] biblical deal, The Real civilizational McCoy. But then there is that “then,” in “then Myerson banks the wing on my side,” which seems to act a lot like a “but,” and he gazes down a mere two thousand feet upon the Holy Land. What is Portnoy’s relationship to the land “where the Jewish people first came into being”? In this question, repeated parodically, but also irresistibly, in his comedic rhetorical prompts “where? when?,” Israel prevents him from disappearing. Alex is not entirely sure why he goes to Israel instead of back to New York, where he now lives and works as the assistant commissioner of human opportunity for New York City, or indeed back to Newark, the newly articulated originary site of his identification fantasies. Israel, the ostensible Zionist solution to the problem of politicized identity, further muddles Portnoy’s attempt at identificatory clarity. As his failed resistance to his parents shifts to and is transposed by a failed escape from Jewish history, Portnoy’s Oedipalized reinscription of authority is complete. If he had been hoping to disappear into a fantasy of history, this fantasy is suspended, and ultimately foreclosed, by post-1967 Israel and the identitarian inevitability of history. It is as if Portnoy desperately wants, through Israel, to access something like identity in its hegemonic postmulticulturalist formation: a very compelling assertion that the individual is always – for lack of a better word – biologically articulated with the community that historicism figures as a population. But nothing is very easy in this book.

If Portnoy claims to have had enough of the “improbable” with Ms. Reed, and to have gone “running aboard the El Al flight” in order “to make some sense of the impulse” that drives him to shiksas, we perhaps suspect that we are being led to expect that “the land of Israel, where the Jewish people first came into being,” will exorcise this impulse. That is, escaping does not have to be “disappear[ance],” fleeing history into oblivion; it can also be return from exile into one’s proper history. But in the Jewish American fiction of the years between 1945 and 1970, the discourse of Jewishness rejects anything so self-evident as the proper. He may want to flee the chaos he has made of his life to the simply legible past, but his memories of Newark return him to a very complicated historicity of the Jews.

Even though confusion and uncertainty drive him to what his anxiety demands despite his better judgment is the ostensibly God-given proper homeland of the Jews, Portnoy wants to normalize his relationship to Israel. He sets about “travelling through the country as though the trip has been undertaken

deliberately, with forethought, desire, and for praiseworthy, if conventional reasons.”²³ Once there he studies “maps” and “historical and archeological texts,” hires “guides,” and “doggedly in that sweltering heat, I searched out and saw everything I could: tombs, harbors, ruins, the new ones, the old.” And indeed, leveraging the “as though” that announces this campaign, Israel yields itself to him: “everything I saw, I found I could assimilate and understand.”²⁴ But what remains “incredible and strange” is precisely, paradoxically, its normalization, the “implausible fact” that “I am in a Jewish country. In this country, everybody is Jewish.”²⁵ Parroting the Zionist claim that post-1967 Jewish literary history imagines as an expectation, he insists that “it’s home!” and that the Jews here are “returned,” and “natives,” but it is also a fantasy of home that is already alienating, given the emotional cathexis engaged by the rest of the book, not least in the figure of Lindabury’s privileged abuse of his ethnicized father: “Hey, here *we’re* the WASPS.” In a nation grounded in statist racist solidarity, Portnoy loses the ability to normalize his relationship with the Jews.

So, immediately after the revelation that he is “home,” he is almost mugged, fears he has a venereal disease, suffers a bout of impotence, and then, a final humiliation, is upbraided by the Zionist sabra Naomi, “The Jewish Pumpkin,” as a “self-hating Jew” who trades in “Ghetto humor” and whose “culture of the Diaspora” helped sow the seeds of the Holocaust. In Israel, “where other Jews find refuge, sanctuary, and peace, Portnoy now perishes!”²⁶

When I say that *Portnoy’s Complaint* is exceptionally overdetermined, I mean that the book’s interest to us, rather than aiding us in fixing a Jewish American referent, can ultimately best be formulated in the context of an analytical or literary historical interest in Roth’s career in particular and Jewish American literature more generally. That is, the real literary historical significance of this discussion of identity in *Portnoy’s Complaint* is really a function of, and a proleptic commentary on, the history of Jewish American writing and the works and reputations of Jewish American writers. In its exception, Roth’s book is in fact representative. The book’s anxiety about Jewish identification; its restless fixation on gender; its inability to avoid talking about race; its disquiet about the relationship between Israel and Jewishness – these really attain their critical depth only in relation to what happened not only to Roth in the wake of the book, how this scandal was linked to his pre-*Portnoy* career, how he reacted to it in his writing, and what we continue to say about all of this, but also to our ability to think, and think about, the category of Jewish American literature. To hear *Portnoy’s Complaint* tell it, by 1969 it is not at all obvious that a coherent Jewish American subject is anything we can with any confidence expect to recognize in the pages of Jewish American fiction. But given the

critical overdetermination of the whole field I have been charting here, I think this can stand as a representative claim about the Jewish American literary history of this period. The point is neither that Portnoy is trying to escape a Jewish communal identity nor that he is trying to find one – nor that either of these is essentially (or historically) a “Jewish” phenomenon. It is that Portnoy’s American Jew desires – which is to say conspicuously lacks – precisely the kind of normalizing, nationalizing history that would allow us to say with any confidence that a particular history is essentially or necessarily Jewish in the first place. In its anxious inability to express its intractable identity with confidence, the book paradoxically points toward the availability of a recognizable field of Jewish literary study. In this period “identity” emerges as the space of an inquiry more pressingly than as a represented history. For Jewish American fiction, the years between 1945 and 1970 decisively mark literature’s being cut imaginatively free from any erstwhile determining anchor in recognizable fact or self-evident historical bedrock – whether that be the immigrant experience, assimilation, post-Holocaust morality, postemancipation Jewish modernity, and so on – and its relocation in a formal, disciplined field of inquiry capable of treating it as an imaginatively productive space – but only insofar as it was capable, too, of being nationalized.

Notes

I would like to thank Emily Sharpe for some much-needed research on the Jewish fiction of the period.

- 1 Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 3.
- 2 Philip Roth, “Writing American Fiction,” in *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1975), 129.
- 3 *Philip Roth Unmasked*, written and directed by William Karel and Livia Manera (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 2013), Web. Though I quote from this recent documentary here, this is a point Roth has been making for some time in various versions; for example, he says something quite similar in *The Facts*, his ludic “novelist’s autobiography” from 1988.
- 4 Roth, “Writing about Jews,” in *Reading Myself and Others*, 135.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 149, 150, 151, 169, 152, 154–155.
- 6 *Philip Roth Unmasked*.
- 7 *Philip Roth Unmasked*.
- 8 Irving Howe, “The Stranger and the Victim: The Two Jewish Stereotypes of American Fiction” *Commentary* 8:2 (August 1949): 147–148.
- 9 Irving Howe, “The New York Intellectuals: A Chronicle and a Critique,” *Commentary* 46:4 (October 1968): 42.
- 10 This emergence is obviously linked to (that is, as a part of) the postwar expansion of the academy in general and of literary studies in particular.

- 11 Starting in *Our America*, though this larger project has remained the bread and butter of his work since then. We should also acknowledge Christopher Douglas, whose *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009) follows in the wake of Michaels.
- 12 Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 196–197.
- 13 See Dean Franco, *Race, Rights, and Recognition: Jewish American Literature Since 1969* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).
- 14 One might also argue in this context that Potok's anthropological fiction stands as the ancestor of a rising tide of late twentieth and early twenty-first century middle-brow Jewish American writers, among whom we can count exemplary figures such as Allegra Goodman and Tova Mirvis.
- 15 A revised portion of my discussion of *Portnoy's Complaint* here can be found in my article "Literary Historical Zionism: Irving Kristol, Alexander Portnoy, and the State of the Jews," *Contemporary Literature* 55:4 (Winter 2014), 760–791.
- 16 Indeed, it is hard to overestimate the transformation in Bellow's writing between 1947's *The Victim* and 1953's National Book Award–winning *The Adventures of Augie March*.
- 17 Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 235.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 236.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 240–241.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 245.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 244.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 252.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *Ibid.*, 253.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 271. Parts of this closing discussion of *Portnoy's Complaint* are derived from remarks I made at the Roth@80 conference in March 2013, which were published as part of a special Forum section on the conference in the journal *Studies in American Jewish Literature*; see Benjamin Schreier, "Why It's Impossible to Teach *Portnoy's Complaint*," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 32:2 (Fall 2013): 205–207.

New Voices, New Challenges 1970–2000

MICHAEL WOOD

Hanging On

By 1970 Jewish American fiction had not so much come of age – it had always been freighted with care, troubled by excesses of knowledge – as stepped into the limelight. Bellow, Doctorow, Elkin, Heller, Malamud, Mailer, Paley, Roth, Singer: It seemed at moments as if there was no other American fiction. This amazing achievement brought at least two questions with it. First, how could works that were so thoroughly haunted by darkness be so funny – why was this “largely a comic literature,” as Ruth Wisse said?¹ “Largely” is a word that leaves room for exceptions, and we might argue that these exceptions form a tradition of their own. But the question is still intriguing and covers a large amount of ground. The second question is whether such success can be lived with, or in Morris Dickstein’s amused formula, whether Jewish American writing will have been able to survive “even the best-informed predictions of its demise.”² Dickstein’s query was actually “how” rather than “whether,” and time has only enlarged its reach.

Wisse is thinking of Saul Bellow’s phrase “laughter and trembling,” an angst that can’t or won’t take itself as solemnly as other cultures take theirs, and Bellow’s novels deepen this proposition in all kinds of ways. All of his works of this period represent new stages of thinking – *The Dean’s December* (1982), *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987), *A Theft* (1989), *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989), *The Actual* (1997) – but two in particular – *Humboldt’s Gift* (1975) and *Ravelstein* (2000) – closely address the language of trembling laughter and frame our period with obliging neatness.

Both books are ostensibly memoirs, composed of the rambling acts of recall of the friend of a dead great man – or in the case of the poet Von Humboldt Fleisher, a man whose lurid failure to be everything he wanted to be eclipsed the real virtues of his poems. Humboldt’s casual remarks would make anyone else’s fortune. “He was always accompanied by a swarm, a huge volume of

notions.” “He said that history was a nightmare during which he was trying to get a good night’s rest.” But this book is also, as Jeffrey Eugenides reminds us,³ just as much about the memoirist as about his subject, and Charles Citrine is a master of the casual remark himself: “Just because your soul is being torn to pieces doesn’t mean that you stop analyzing the phenomena”; “I had a talent for absurdity, and you don’t throw away any of your talents.” Taken together, and mingled with the long story of Citrine’s entanglement with the Chicago mob, these characters and thoughts add up to an unruly glamorizing of a certain America, a place where the dream is not social or economic but cosmic. That swarm of notions is human possibility itself, but pictured as wreckage and transcendence at once. Humboldt’s last words to Citrine, in the note accompanying his literal gift, a treatment for a movie he thinks will make Citrine rich beyond belief, are “Remember: we are not natural but supernatural beings.”⁴

Ravelstein, thinker and pundit, a flamboyant, hedonistic figure of immense learning and even more immense appetites, also simply called “this large Jewish man from Dayton, Ohio,” is a kind of remake of Humboldt as academic and public intellectual, or if you prefer allusive, historical shorthand, of Delmore Schwartz as Allan Bloom. Chick, the narrator of the novel, explains to his wife why he can’t fully engage with or ignore the horrors of the twentieth century: “I had a Jewish life to lead in the American language.” The remark is clearly related to his assertion on his first page: “Anyone who wants to govern the country has to entertain it.” Chick doesn’t want to govern the country, but he does want to live in its language, and he can’t do this in Ravelstein’s expansive manner. “Abe’s character was far more cheerful than mine. . . . He was more like a normal person. But he was anything but innocent.” It sounds briefly as if Chick does the trembling while Ravelstein does the laughing, but it is Ravelstein who accuses Chick of refusing “to do the unpleasant work of thinking it all through.” “It all” is the spectacular triumph of anti-Semitism in the twentieth century, or in Chick’s definition, the century’s willingness to “underwrite such destruction.”⁵ The dramatized case is complex here: Ravelstein has thought it all through but doesn’t talk about it; Chick talks about it but can’t get to the other side of his thought. Together of course they represent something more than laughter or trembling or even both. They are leading mindful Jewish lives in the blithe or forgetful American language, but Ravelstein is a hero and a legend because he can remember without seeming to remember, because he can enjoy his fame and his costly Lanvin suits without needing to apologize to the lost and the dead. He is a kind of dream and Chick is closer to our idea of moral reality. But the dream

is worth dreaming, and it is hard to imagine a more spectacular last novel – Bellow died in 2005. Ravelstein, we remember, was “anything but innocent,” just as Humboldt, in his memorable way, was anything but supernatural.

What Bellow’s novels suggest is that our two initial questions may have just one answer: Art survives its success by making its every achievement a candidate for swirling comic doubt. This suggestion is confirmed by the work of Stanley Elkin and Grace Paley, although the swirling is slower: different achievements and different doubts, but a similar interlocking structure for one and the other.

One of the characters in Elkin’s *Searches and Seizures* (1973) is said to be “greased by daily contact with the surreal.” Another remarks that logic was invented to “tame surprise and make the world consecutive.” Neither claim is consoling – the grease doesn’t make the contact smoother; the taming doesn’t take. But these three stories, recounting a day in the life of a Cincinnati bail bondsman, the quest for life and meaning of “probably the last young man in America still looking for himself,” and the madness and death of a man who inherits a condominium in Chicago, do entwine alienation with a desperate wit that constantly relates styles of life to styles of language. “Many are called but few are chosen,” the man with the condo quotes to himself. “And some, like himself, weren’t even called.” At another moment he says, “My life is a little like being in a foreign country. There’s a displaced person in me. I feel – listen – I feel . . . Jewish. I mean even here, among Jews, where everyone’s Jewish, I feel Jewish.”⁶ This is a perfect, knowing reversal of Kafka’s famous “What do I have in common with Jews? I don’t even have anything in common with myself.”⁷

The voice of *Searches and Seizures* echoes again in Elkin’s *The Franchiser* (1976): “All in all he felt pretty good. Not physically of course. Physically he’d never been worse.”⁸ But the ground has changed. Now the problem is not feeling Jewish among the Jews, but not feeling different enough from anyone, because no one is different enough from anyone else. Ben, the franchiser of the title, is godson to a man who has eighteen children. They come in seven clusters, four sets of triplets, three sets of twins, and they all look very much alike. They are distinguished only by their mysterious debilities. Toward the end of the novel most of the now-middle-aged children die off in manners gothically suited to their plights. One of the girls, for instance, has iron in her bones instead of marrow. When she is cremated, it takes three men to carry her ashes. Ben, meanwhile, his franchises tied up in a failing motel chain, his nerves gone haywire from multiple sclerosis, ends the book happy, grateful for all the things that might have happened to him and didn’t. He is too simple and too passive to be an individual: buried under names of his businesses. And

beyond Ben and the freak family there is only a synthetic America, Ben's territory and the family's echo. If in Elkin's ironic lexicon to be Jewish in America is to be separate (and plenty of non-Jews aspire to this condition), the project seems permanently threatened by a failure of pitch. One will be too separate or not separate enough, and this will be a complementary version of leading one life in the language of another.

The surreal and the surprising make more discreet entrances into Grace Paley's work. They appear at the corner of sentences: "In the morning she became interested in reality again, which she had always liked"; "I often see through the appearance of things right to the apparition itself." In *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974), Paley writes about New York City as if it was a whole small country of damaged but perky citizens. A character called Faith sits perched in a tree as two men walk past. They are listening to Bach on a transistor radio, and talking too much for Faith's taste. She thinks, "Well, I must say, when darkness covers the earth and great darkness the people, I will think of you: two men with smart ears. . . . If it's truth and honor you want to refine, I think the Jews have some insight. Make no images, imitate no God. After all, in His field, the graphic arts, He is pre-eminent." At another point she thinks, "You have to be cockeyed to love, and blind in order to look out the window at your own ice-cold street." In a remarkable story in this volume Paley has a writer visit her very old father, who asks her to write a simple story, "the kind de Maupassant wrote, or Chekhov, the kind you used to write."⁹ The writer devises a crisp ironic tale about a woman who becomes a junkie in order to remain close to her junkie son. The son then gives up dope and his mother is hooked for good. The father says the writer has left everything out, but when she tries again, she puts in all kinds of dippy details, writes a Grace Paley story, in fact. The father, in the vein of Ravelstein talking to Chick, says her problem is that she won't confront tragedy and despair. We might answer, on her behalf, that she has confronted these things – and in a way that Maupassant, certainly, couldn't have dreamed of. Paley's world is another construction of not quite the right life in not quite the right language.

The question of language is at the heart of E. L. Doctorow's extraordinary novel *Ragtime* (1975). The sentences themselves mime the problem they face: how to evoke a history that is at once too familiar and entirely alien, littered with legend masquerading as fact, and vice versa. "Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900's. . . . There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants." A chapter or so later a WASP entrepreneur on board a ship in New York's East River sees "an incoming transatlantic vessel packed to the railings with immigrants. . . . It was a rag ship with a million dark eyes staring

at him.” The man is seized by “a weird despair” but we are not told why. This language doesn’t deal in reasons, just in short declarative sentences, right or wrong, “Apparently there *were* Negroes. There *were* immigrants.”¹⁰ The packed vessel is far from the first to arrive. It’s a rag ship; this is rag time.

The Negroes, the immigrants, and the well-off old residents carry the stories of the novel. They don’t have a whole lot to do with each other but together they make American history and get lost in it. They mix with celebrities like Emma Goldman, Harry Houdini, J. P. Morgan, and one of them, a black musician called Coalhouse Walker, owes more than a little to his phonetic namesake in a classic German novella, Kleist’s *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810). Fredric Jameson makes the fine point that reality itself in *Ragtime* is made up of heterogeneous materials, of “as it were incomparable substances,” since “historical” figures mingle with ones who are “narrative” (i.e., fictional) and others who are “intertextual.” And this is why the language of the book creates the effect of “some profound subterranean violence done to American English.”¹¹ The effect is profound because it is everywhere, and subterranean because it has no effect on the “perfectly grammatical sentences of which this work is formed.” It is as if the characters and the narrator have all become immigrants, inhabitants of an America that is not “new yet unapproachable” in Emerson’s phrase but ancient, mythical, and lost.

The chief immigrants in this novel are Jews, but they are not alone in living a life in someone else’s language – or perhaps in this case in a language that now belongs to no one. *Ragtime*, as music and as the name for an age, catches the sense of this world when it was alive, but already full of its own future vanishing. There is a character in the novel simply called the boy – he is the entrepreneur’s son – whose frame of mind is perhaps the author’s and certainly resembles ours as we read this spare, haunted prose. “The boy treasured anything discarded.” He “found proof in his own experience of the instability of things.” When he watches people skating he concentrates “only on the tracks made by the skaters, traces quickly erased of moments past, journeys taken.”¹² The epigraph to the novel is an instruction from the pianist Scott Joplin: “Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play ragtime fast.”¹³ We don’t have to read very far into Doctorow’s book to realize the pathos of this warning: Fast or slow, we shall never find a speed that will restore this old time to us.

Starting Again

Philip Roth was a well-known, even notorious writer by 1970, the author of the extraordinary stories in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), as well as the novels

Letting Go (1962), *When She Was Good* (1967), and *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). There were important works in the early 1970s too – *The Great American Novel* (1973), *My Life as a Man* (1974), *The Professor of Desire* (1977) – but there is a strong sense in which *The Ghost Writer* (1979) represents a new beginning, and not just for Roth. As Morris Dickstein suggests, this novel “launched the next stage of Jewish American writing,” where “the inevitability of assimilation gives way to the work of memory.”¹⁴ Dickstein called this stage that of “the return, or the homecoming,” and I pursue just this suggestion in this chapter. I am adding to it, by a perhaps unwisely broad definition of Jewish American writing as the writing of Jews in America, another grouping, not so much a stage in a process as a set of options for the imagination, departing from or radically transmuting Jewish topics and embracing regions of fiction often thought to be beyond ethnicity. This is what I am calling (after Philip Roth) getting away.

“The inevitability of assimilation” is also the probability of a certain continuing displacement, as the examples of Bellow, Elkin, and Paley indicate. And Roth’s fresh start is a complicated affair. The narrator of *The Ghost Writer*, who figures in a number of novels by Roth, is Nathan Zuckerman. Here we meet him at a very early stage of a career that looks remarkably like Roth’s – later he will have a huge success with a book that resembles *Portnoy's Complaint*, and in *The Facts* (1988) he will exchange letters with someone called Philip Roth, whom he accuses of blandness (“Because if there isn’t a struggle, then it just doesn’t seem like Philip Roth to me. It could be anybody, almost”). At this moment he is twenty-three and has just published his “first short stories.”¹⁵ He is visiting one of his heroes, the writer E. I. Lonoff, in the wilds of Massachusetts; sees something of the difficulties Lonoff’s wife has in living with an austere genius, as well as something of Lonoff’s own difficulties in being the austere genius; and meets a (to him) exotic young woman who is Lonoff’s protégée and perhaps a little more. Zuckerman is metaphorically in search of a new father and perhaps a whole new family, his own having proved all too loving and constricting and unable to appreciate his fictional art. Well, they are unable to appreciate that the art is fiction, and perhaps they are not entirely wrong. Zuckerman’s father especially feels that in depicting the Jewish community in which he grew up Zuckerman has only created one more picture of what bigoted readers will expect of such worlds, has handsomely fed their prejudices by confirming their stereotypes. The family has consulted an ineffable judge, who thinks the criticism is entirely correct. “Can you honestly say,” he writes to Zuckerman, “that there is anything in your story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher, or a Joseph Goebbels?” This is Roth’s satire of easy anti-anti-Semitism, but the father’s view is more subtle. “I

wonder,” he says to Zuckerman, “if you fully understand just how very little love there is in this world for Jewish people.” This is a mild man’s version of a stark perception that haunts Jewish American fiction. Assimilation may or may not be a question, but the historical excesses of others are beyond doubt. Zuckerman knows this too, or says he does. He also knows that his father and the judge are wrong to think literature has to paint only pretty pictures – of anyone. But he has lived too sheltered a life to understand how far that “very little love” can go, and how its trivial forms are related to its disastrous ones. In a later novel he registers more clearly the degree to which his identity is composed of the need to be free of who he was and what he was taught at home. “Never again,” he cries after the death of his father, “to feel such tender emotion and such a desire to escape.”¹⁶

“I think of you,” Zuckerman says to Lonoff, “as the Jew who got away.” What an idea. And in this novel Zuckerman’s fantasy of getting away is only a fantasy of being more Jewish than the Jews. What if the mysterious protégée were Anne Frank, and Zuckerman were to marry her? Wouldn’t that take care of the carping judge and the whole cloying community? Well, probably not. Zuckerman sees that the fantasy includes its own refutation. “Far from being unchallengeable, far from acquitting me of their charges and restoring to me my cherished blamelessness, [it was] a fiction that of course would seem to them a desecration even more vile than the one they had read.”¹⁷

The Plot against America (2004) falls outside the period this chapter is exploring, but I cite it now because it brings into utmost clarity what Zuckerman’s plight, and that of many other characters in Roth’s work, was all the while making for and meaning, to borrow a turn of phrase from Henry James. Much of Roth’s writing is all-American rather than Jewish in its themes – especially when it elaborates the recurring wish of his heroes to find freedom in the limitless satisfaction of sexual desire. The central figure of *Sabbath’s Theater* (1994), for example, has “simplified his life” in this direction, leaving “the pursuit of money, power, politics, fashion, Christ knows what it might be” to others. It is in this sense that we may understand Roth’s wish to be seen simply as an American writer. “I regard myself as an American writer,” he said in response to an invitation to contribute to a volume celebrating Jewish American writing, “always have done, always will.” But such identities don’t have to be exclusive literary destinies, and this is what is so beautifully expressed in a dialogue in *The Plot against America*, set in a world where Jewish children are sent to camps that will educate their ethnic past out of them. The program is called “Just Folks.” When the mother of the character called Philip Roth says, “We only think we’re Americans,” the boy’s father replies: “They

think we only think we're Americans. It is not up for discussion, Bess."¹⁸ This is a perfect clarification of what anti-Semitism does, especially in its supposedly mild forms. It makes candidates for exclusion look as if they wanted to exclude themselves. The biographer of Marcel Proust's mother says that "her marriage to Adrien Proust might have given her the illusion that she was a Frenchwoman, like everyone else. But the Dreyfus affair lifted the veil."¹⁹ There was no veil to lift; her belief was not an illusion, even if the reality it represented was under threat. It was true, however, that many people around her were rabidly trying to change the idea of what a French person was; and the right to resist what *they* think we think, to be as French or American or Jewish as one wants has always been a central value in Roth's work.

Similar questions arise in Rebecca Goldstein's novels, and especially in *The Mind-Body Problem* (1983), although they are viewed from very different angles of gender and class. And the wit we have found in all the texts we have looked at so far is also here in abundance. Perhaps we should refine Wisse's definition a little. This is not so much a comic literature as a witty one, a literature of minds endlessly alert to irony. "Although my interior is unmistakably Jewish," the narrator of this novel tells us, "I have an exterior that would have inspired a poster for Hitler Youth." She is not unhappy with either disposition, but both cause problems, especially in the place where she has chosen to pursue her doctorate in philosophy: "There were Jews at Princeton, of course, but nobody *seemed* Jewish. At Columbia even the non-Jews had seemed Jewish." Still, Renee Feuer does manage to marry one of the local great men, Noam Himmel. He is Jewish too, but has none of the strict intensity of her inheritance. She describes her family much in the way Nathan Zuckerman evoked his, but without his rebellious tone. She is not worried about any ponderous judge, but she knows how this kind of portraiture can look: "Can I help it if I come from a family of Jewish-American stereotypes?" This sounds more like Portnoy than Zuckerman, but Goldstein adds her own sophisticated note. Even better than Roth's characters she understands the ways in which the Jewish joke in America has become a denial of denial, a form of loyalty without piety. She knows too how that loyalty can translate into action. Renee is contented in her marriage at first but becomes more and more dissatisfied with her husband's dedication to his work and what she calls "the supremacy of Noam's thinking." She has an affair and returns to the marriage only when she understands how much Noam is distressed by what he thinks of as the loss of his genius, the passing of the moment when he could make a difference to philosophy. She thinks of her father the cantor and remembers the words of the congregation at Yom Kippur: "But repentance, prayer and charity cancel

the stern decree.” She no longer believes in these words, she says, but registers their continuing, secular power. They allow her to come close to Noam again. “People and their suffering matter. Noam suffers, and his suffering matters no more nor less than anyone else’s. The only difference for me is that I might be able to make a difference for him. I would like to.”²⁰ Making a difference is precisely the opposite of hating or fearing or exploiting a difference.

Getting Away

Ted Solotaroff once suggested that a certain short story by Susan Sontag was “psychologically unsigned.”²¹ This is certainly not true of her later novels, *The Volcano Lover* (1992) and *In America* (2000), of which she was justly proud. But in her very best fiction, represented in my view by her short stories, her characters, if not the author herself, are intensely preoccupied with questions of signature, of what it means to have or not have a self that could sign its name. This is not quite the same as failing to sign, of course. The very title of the brilliant collection *I, Etcetera*, (1977) evokes and mocks the problem. Why does the I have all the best neuroses and get all the attention? How come the others turn into mere extensions, mentionable only in a formula of abbreviation? The questions have many shapes for Sontag. We can have too much self or too little; we can be discontented with the self we have, or far too contented with it. Simone Weil is quoted as saying that the only thing more hateful than a “we” is an “I”; a character in one of these stories delegates his life to a dummy because he is “tired of being a person”: “Not just tired of being the person I was, but any person at all.” The theme of the un-lived life looms large here too, so that Dr. Jekyll, in Sontag’s inventive reworking of the famous tale, envies Mr. Hyde for his access to his energetic and criminal activities. “‘Nothing is going to happen to me,’ Jekyll says. ‘I mean, I know what’s going to happen to me. . . . I could already write my obituary.’” He devotes his time not to living but to thinking of “all the imaginary crimes he has committed, and of all the real crimes he has never imagined.” “Old Complaints Revisited” shows us a narrator who wishes to leave an organization but can’t. It resembles Catholicism or Judaism or communism in certain ways – it has martyrs, high ideals, traditions of fidelity. But it is not religious and doesn’t appear to be politically active. No one is born into it, and for some it is simply a variety of freemasonry, a means of making business contacts or finding a wife or husband. But for the anguished narrator it is an extravagant moral commitment that bleeds life away. “I accuse the organization of depriving me of my innocence. Of complicating my will.”

At other times this exile from immediate experience looks like a chance to unpack the clutter of the mind a little. “Perhaps I will write the book about my trip to China before I go,” the narrator says at the end of the opening story, and this casual-seeming possibility carries the weight of a whole perfect portrait: The story is already a part of the book. Travel is the ideal metaphor for the unlived life, since all trips are overloaded with expectation, and visited places are scarcely ever quite real when they are actually seen. “Does every country have a tragic history except ours?” a voice asks in the book’s last story, anticipating the concerns of the narrator of Bellow’s *Ravelstein*. Sontag’s stories crackle with epigrams: “Literature tells us what is happening to words”; “Don’t take Méliande to see *Pelléas et Méliande*”; “Wisdom is a ruthless business”; “It’s not Paradise that’s lost.”²² And among these sparkling lines a life gets lived after all, even if it is always threatened by excesses or deficiencies of intelligent attention.

The characters in Paul Auster’s fiction, and especially in *City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986), and *The Locked Room* (1986), later collected as the New York Trilogy, are not short of selves or signatures, but they do keep running into a complementary, related difficulty: more selves than they can manage, echoes of versions of their lives and identities that seem to overpopulate their world. They are questing figures often, looking for someone or something, inhabitants of a universe that seems to have been created by Samuel Beckett and Raymond Chandler working in partnership. In *City of Glass*, for example, a man called Daniel Quinn writes novels under the name (borrowed from Poe) of William Wilson. His real affinity, however, is not with himself as author but with Max Work, the detective who is that author’s creation. “In the triad of selves that Quinn had become, Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist, Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise.”²³ Nevertheless it is as Quinn that he answers a strange phone call and takes up the task – at first of protection of a damaged son, then the pursuit of a deranged father – that swallows up his life. The other two novels in the sequence follow quite different stories but are interested in similar patterns and projects: what a later Auster novel calls the music of chance, for example; the idea of a lost language; the dizzying whirlpool of too many identities. In an interview Auster said he “was always drawn to books that doubled back on themselves . . . even as the book was taking you into the world,”²⁴ and this is precisely what his novels do. They find curious, missing zones of the real by multiplying layers of illusion.

Jay Cantor wrote two remarkable novels in the period we are looking at in this chapter – *The Death of Che Guevara* (1983) and *Krazy Kat* (1988) – and

a little later published *Great Neck* (2004), an amazing work about a well-off Long Island community that gets involved, through its children and its awareness of historical horrors in Europe, in the adventures of radical America. The range of these fictions, and especially their changes of pace and persona, even levels of imagined reality, makes them very hard to evoke briefly. In Cantor's first novel Guevara's revolutionary politics are evoked with sympathy and intelligence but also with a critical awareness of shifting occasions. A comrade in the novel evokes the hero's "boundless honesty," adding "in which we all might freeze." ²⁵ But the novelist never forgets the inequalities that give rise to revolutions in the first place and invites us to think about what we shall do instead if we comfortably refuse all radical routes to change. The same question animates many of the complicated portraits in *Great Neck*. Cantor's most unusual tour de force, though, is his middle novel, *Krazy Kat*. Here George Herriman's famous newspaper comic-strip characters (last appearance 1944), the Kat, Ignatz Mouse, Offissa Pup, Mrs Kwakk-Wakk, and others continue to live after their print demise, still in Coconino County, still busy, the Kat still in love with the Mouse, the Mouse still in the habit of throwing bricks at her. They are not working, though; they don't have their old public life; and the plot of the novel is driven – well, mildly pushed – by Ignatz's plans to get Krazy to come out of retirement. He offers all kind of ingenious temptations: a visit to Los Alamos, a glimpse of Oppenheimer, an awareness of what the Bomb has done to the world; psychoanalysis, Ignatz-style, underinformed and rather violent; a chance of a new career in the movies for them all, which falls apart when the Hollywood producer realizes that these characters are not only not human (they are not round; they don't have sides to them) but they are not in a position to sign contracts because the Hearst Corporation owns everything they do. They can think, though; worry about aging; and try to keep up with what humans are up to. It's not always easy. The Kat spells any new words she hears as if they were combinations of words she knows, so that Caesar becomes Seizeher and capitalism becomes keepitallism. It's a good job perhaps that these creatures can't bring their energy and wit and innocence into the world – they might do more damage to the status quo than Che Guevara. And in the midst of these swift and funny explorations of troubling topics we meet again the question of identity. If these brilliant two-dimensional animals aren't persons, who is?

Richard Price's novel *Clockers* (1992) may seem to take us a long way from *Krazy Kat*. But if we think of the world of contemporary crime as one of the darker alternatives to what we think of as normality (and humanity), the

distance shrinks quite a bit. Here too is a question about what we are doing to the world, and why anyone outside it might regard it with horror. Or inside it, for that matter. The novel, now rightly regarded as one of the classics of crime fiction, is set in the fictional city of Dempsy, which occupies much the same geographical space as Newark, New Jersey, combined with Jersey City. The whole novel is steeped in the world of teenage dope peddlers and weary middle-aged cops. There is no real hope for anyone, but there is a tremendous wit and energy in the day-to-day life and talk of all these people. Their invention and resilience deserve a better world, and the deep and powerful sadness of the book lies in its eloquent presentation of the reasons why that world is not going to appear. One scene will stand for many. It takes place in a barber shop in Harlem. A young black man who looks “like the ghost of Malcolm X” stands in the doorway and makes a speech to the hairdressers and their clients. He wants to remind them of “the time.” “What time is that? The time for you to start respecting yourselves, the time for you to start taking care of yourselves, the time for you to stop victimizing each other, the time for you to pass on the easy dope money, the blood money.” Our representative in this scene, a youthful drug dealer from Dempsy, expects some sort of angry response from the tough-looking clients, but everyone agrees. Even he agrees. It’s just that no one is going to do anything about it. The young man concludes his speech: “The time for you to give something to the community instead of take . . . it is the time, the time, the time to realize that you got to understand that no one’s gonna help us, ‘cause no one wants to see a black man with true power, so we got to love ourselves, do it ourselves, spread it ourselves. . . . Thank you and I love you all.” The young man leaves, and barbers, having “retreated politely from the heads in the chairs during the man’s rap,” go “back to work without expression.”²⁶

It’s not quite so far from this region of Harlem to a Brooklyn that is described as motherless. Jonathan Lethem arrived there in fiction (he had grown up there in person) via an inventive novel, *Gun with Occasional Music* (1994), that used the voice of American hard-boiled fiction to narrate adventures in an alternative future world of mutant kangaroos and much interspecies skullduggery. In a very attractive touch, one gets and spends karma through the use of a debit card. *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) is a realistic work by comparison, with plenty of named New York streets and lots of stops for White Castle burgers. The deviations from the real occur not as part of the novel’s setup but by means of the interventions of the central character, Lionel Essrog, who is afflicted (or endowed) with Tourette’s syndrome. He is part of a band of small-time detectives, also involved in a bit of mild mobster work, and when

the boss is killed and everyone becomes a suspect, Lionel has to work entirely on his own to get his sense of the universe to connect with reality – and indeed to solve the crime. Lionel is also the narrator – “I’ve got Tourette’s,” he tells us on the first page and gives us a brief run-down on what the condition is. Lionel bends and repeats words, obsessively counts objects, and sometimes shouts an obscenity or two. He is a freak (as everyone calls him), but not a fool; his reactions are quick and his thinking is intelligent and straight. When told the reason his now-defunct boss regarded him as useful (“because you were crazy everyone thought you were stupid”), Lionel says, without any deviation from speech norms but with some irony, “I’m familiar with the theory.” He describes the agitated movements of his brain as “an invisible army on a peacekeeping mission, a peaceable horde” – except that when reality itself is too peaceful already, or imagines itself to be so, Lionel’s army has to rough it up a little.²⁷ He is in this sense the ideal detective, a classic if pathological version of Raymond Chandler’s good man on the mean streets, and so joins a number of other figures we have seen in this section, out on the edges of the real, it seems, but intimately part of it.

I grouped together the writers in this section – Sontag, Auster, Cantor, Price, Lethem – because they are Jewish American writers who do not advertise their Jewishness in any particular way – nor do they deny it, of course – and who seem to me to be producing fiction that is among the most interesting work of its time, by any standards. And I do not wish to rope them back into a thematic circle or limit: They are in many respects as different from each other as writers could be. Nevertheless I am struck by the recurring echoes, the interest in signature, self, detection, crime, other creatures, other worlds; in fiction as a form of inquiry; in apparent exceptions as illuminations of a rule. We could read these common elements as matters of time and place rather than of biography and culture, and if that is the only way to avoid a narrow determinism, a dogmatic sense of what has to be, then that is how we should read them. But when I think of the old trope so prevalent in discussions of Jewish American writing in the 1960s – Jews had experienced so much of modernity in its clarifying extremes of dispersal, persecution, exclusion that all representations of them became universal at once, offered “parables of the human condition,” as Dickstein says – I find it hard to resist the thought that our writers, without conspiring to do so, are repeating and refining this claim, showing us not the whole human condition, even in its modern mode, but a series of snapshots of one of its American modes, the one best seen by writers who are (still) trying to live one life in the language of another – and using their own otherness as a prompt for topic and style.

Coming Home

If getting away for many Jewish American writers retains an oblique or unasserted connection to a cultural home that is always already a little displaced, we can expect coming home to be more than a matter of arrival. And this is precisely the case with the writers I want to discuss in this last section, for whom Jewish memory is a preeminent topic but a complicated one. None of the younger members of the community in Allegra Goodman's *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998) understands that their elderly rabbi is grieving not only for the European dead but for the city of Frankfurt and his own vast library and his intimate acquaintance with Schiller, for a Germany that cancelled itself out. And not every reader of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* remembers that when she spoke so urgently of "the moral collapse the Nazis caused in respectable European society," she was talking of her own country.²⁸ America was an ancient home for many Jews, but a newer one for many also.

Cynthia Ozick returns again and again to this collapsed Europe, always with new questions and subtle answers. *The Shawl* (1980, 1983) is composed of two stories, the first very brief. A woman, Rosa Lublin, is in a camp with her fourteen-year-old niece Stella and her fifteen-month-old daughter, Magda. Magda is taken from Rosa by a guard and flung against an electrified fence. Rosa and Stella survive and start a new life in America but this last statement is only ostensibly, blandly, conventionally true. Rosa would – and in the text does – question the use of the words "survive" and "life." People use the word "survivor," Rosa thinks, because they are caught up in "an excitement over other people's suffering. . . . Survivor and survivor and survivor; always and always. Who made up these words, parasites on the throat of suffering." As for her having "a life," any kind of life, let alone a new one, Rosa has a single, repeating response: "Thieves took it." She is in Florida throughout the second story, having moved down from Brooklyn, and at one point she refines her idea of life. "We're less than cats, so we got three. The life before, the life during, the life after. . . . The life after is now. The life before is our real life, at home, where we was born." She defines the life during with one word: Hitler. And a little later she says, "Before is a dream. After is a joke. Only during stays. And to call it a life is a lie." Much of the sorrow in this story congregates in the thought that "real life" is a dream, while real life, in another, more ordinary sense, is a lie. Ozick's question is how to remember. And how to forget too, how to get the right dosage of each, an impossible task. Rosa is harsh in her anger and refusal to forget, and rather grand about her memories of Warsaw and "the house of her girlhood laden with a thousand books"; her father and

mother mocking the use of Yiddish, and her own confessed “contempt” for certain Jews. She almost becomes a cliché when she writes, in a letter to her dead daughter, about how “furious” her family was about being mixed up with lower-class Jews when the arrests began.²⁹ But the near-cliché is also part of Ozick’s unblinking inquiry. Prejudice likes to refuse distinctions, and Rosa represents so moving an instance of suffering because she too is capable of forgetting what she has in common with other human beings, and has had to learn, indeed perhaps hasn’t entirely learned, in the hardest possible way.

Ozick’s *The Messiah of Stockholm* (1987) is dedicated to Philip Roth and can be seen as a brilliant revision and transposition of *The Ghost Writer*, with its dream of a connection to a traumatic history. Lars Andemening, a forty-two-year-old book critic in Stockholm, believes himself to be “an arrested soul.” He thinks he is the relocated son of the writer Bruno Schulz, best known for his *Street of Crocodiles*, and murdered in Poland in 1942. The story of Lars’s escape as a newborn child, the narrator says, “hangs on suffering, chance, whim, stupidity in the right quarters, mercy and money” – a remarkable definition of what history felt like to so many people in the twentieth century. There is something underdeveloped about Lars, we learn, “something in his face that opened into unripeness – a tentative, unfinished tone.” Is his story about his father a fantasy? Is it the fantasy that makes him seem unfinished? These questions are not conclusively answered, but the novel does recount Lars’s moral coming of age – not through a confirmation or disconfirmation of his belief, but through his arrival at a new clarity about his own need for it, and through the intervention of a manifestly fraudulent couple claiming to possess the lost manuscript of Schulz’s last novel. “Even a child can become a scholar of loss,” we are told, and we leave Lars grieving not for the father he might have had, but for the idea of such a father, for the ghost who now so rarely reappears.³⁰ If Rosa can’t learn how to forget, Lars knows what it is to live too long on borrowed memories.

The community portrayed in *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998) is at first sight so Jewish it seems as if it can’t be American. “They are absorbed in their own religion,” we read. “Although they have no paintings, or stained glass, or sculpture, they array themselves with gorgeous words.” When someone expresses surprise that the rabbi should read German writers, the rabbi quietly says, “But I am German.” He tends to think of his followers as Americans, by definition a people without memory. The community is anti-Zionist because it believes Israel is a place that belongs to a theological future, not a present history; and it is very strict in its observances, getting stricter as the years go by. But then Goodman shows with a wonderful delicacy and a good deal of humor, how

much room there is for difference in such a world: for Elizabeth, an English woman for whom piety is a beautiful habit, not at all a constriction, but who finds romance in the mere existence of paintings and theater and even commerce, in what she thinks of as “the shimmering, spinning, secular world”; for her husband, not a brilliant scholar but a passionate lover of scholarship; for the nonobservant Andras, whose wife thinks he doesn’t put his survivor status (“As for Andras’s parents, his aunts and uncles, his grandparents, his childhood sweetheart, none he left behind survived”) to sufficient partisan use; for the rabbi’s rebellious, skeptical son; and of course for the rabbi himself, who has never made the New World his own, and who finally “cannot believe in the world any more.”³¹ This community not only exists in America; it is America, a miniature model of diversity within constraint. One of the great powers of the book is that it brings the apparently exotic into affectionate close range, and so makes it not familiar – rather the reverse – but as strange and yet knowable as any life of custom and exception is when we are fully alert to its movements.

I want to finish with a glance at Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, and for several reasons: because it relies so heavily on the histories and memories we have been looking at; because it turns them into a fabulous, broken American story; because it celebrates life without ignoring any of life’s many invitations to do the opposite; because it allows us to think of a continuity from the newspaper comic strip to the comic book, from Krazy Kat to Kavalier and Clay’s Escapist and other superheroes, and therefore to think once again about the human world from a stylized but also human distance. It was published in 2000, the same year as Bellow’s *Ravelstein*, and so helps mark the close of our period.

Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay are cousins, but very different: the first fleeing from a wrecked Europe in 1939, gifted, guilty, diffident; the second Brooklyn born and bred, inventive, confident, and as he gradually learns, gay when being gay wasn’t so easy. They are also similar, of course: eager to make their names and some money, interested in telling stories in graphic form, solidly atheistic and unpious, deeply interested in Jewish legend and mythology. The character of the Escapist is their great creation, but also a complex projection of what they think of as failure and what we may think of as a more than modest form of success. Both dream of escape without really believing in it. In Prague the young Joe took lessons in Houdini-style breakouts from chains, sacks, crates, and boxes and kept up the practice in the United States. But then he thinks, has always thought perhaps, that this activity “was the voicing of a vain wish, when you got down to it, to escape. To slip, like the Escapist, free

of the entangling chain of reality and the straitjacket of physical laws.” And even more, although Joe doesn’t say this, from the cruel history that killed his parents and his brother. Sammy has no such public tragedy in his life, but he does come to feel that normality itself, too readily embraced and too stoically put up with, represents “the walls of a prison, an airless, lightless keep from which there is no hope of escape.”³² Vain wish, no hope. In the sententious world of America’s supposed morality, the very thought of escape is a besetting sin, escapism itself an ugly, accusing word. In Chabon’s novel it is something like a smothered dream, a neglected right even, and permitting oneself the fantasy of freedom is a route, the only route maybe, to whatever freedom is to be had. In this perspective, to live a Jewish life in the American language is to remember difference and loss with especial intensity, but also to be alert to the chances of slipping free from at least some of the restrictive chains of the New World.

Notes

- 1 Ruth Wisse, “Jewish American Renaissance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Michael P. Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 202.
- 2 Morris Dickstein, *A Mirror in the Roadway: Literature and the Real World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 168.
- 3 Jeffrey Eugenides, “Introduction,” in *Humboldt’s Gift* (New York: Penguin, 2008), xiii.
- 4 Saul Bellow, *Humboldt’s Gift*, 21, 4, 47, 48, 352.
- 5 Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 94, 167, 1, 167, 169.
- 6 Stanley Elkin, *Searches and Seizures* (New York: Random House, 1973), 55, 218, 139, 256, 250.
- 7 Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1973), 219. My translation.
- 8 Stanley Elkin, *The Franchiser* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1980), 340.
- 9 Grace Paley, *The Collected Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), 208, 183, 185, 165, 234.
- 10 E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York: Random House, 1975), 3–4, 11–12, 5.
- 11 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 22, 24.
- 12 Doctorow, *Ragtime*, 96, 97, 99.
- 13 *Ibid.*, unnumbered page.
- 14 Dickstein, *A Mirror in the Roadway*, 178.
- 15 Philip Roth, *The Facts* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), 146. *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 3.
- 16 Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 103–104, 92. *The Anatomy Lesson* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), 40.
- 17 Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, 50, 171.

- 18 Philip Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 60. *The Plot against America* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 256.
- 19 Evelyne Bloch-Dano, *Madame Proust* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2004), 290. Translation by Alice Kaplan (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007).
- 20 Rebecca Goldstein, *The Mind-Body Problem* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 62, 13, 167, 114, 274.
- 21 Ted Solotaroff, *Best American Stories 1978* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), xx.
- 22 Susan Sontag, *I, etcetera* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), 93, 223, 130, 29, 240, 26, 39, 50, 246.
- 23 Paul Auster, *City of Glass*, in *New York Trilogy* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 12.
- 24 *Paris Review*, Fall 2003.
- 25 Jay Cantor, *The Death of Che Guevara* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 493.
- 26 Richard Price, *Clockers* (New York: Picador, 1992), 198–199.
- 27 Jonathan Lethem, *Motherless Brooklyn* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 300, 1.
- 28 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 125.
- 29 Cynthia Ozick, *The Shawl* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 36–37, 28, 32, 33, 58, 21, 52, 67.
- 30 Cynthia Ozick, *The Messiah of Stockholm* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 2, 26, 2, 54.
- 31 Allegra Goodman, *Kaaterskill Falls* (New York: Delta, 1998), 4, 106, 57, 46, 219.
- 32 Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (New York: Picador, 2001), 582, 620.

FICTION

Religious Selfhood 1870–1950

SHIRA WOLOSKY

The ideology of the separate spheres has long governed discussions of nineteenth-century women writers, both their own and those written about them. This ideology places women inside and men outside the home, in what was called “the world.” The American Jewish poets Penina Moise and Rebekah Hyneman have thus been interpreted, when at all, largely according to this paradigm, whereas Emma Lazarus has proved impossible to restrict so, given her overt political activism for the mass Jewish immigration of the 1880s and her emergence as the first American Zionist. But Lazarus, rather than being an anomaly, should serve as model. The paradigm of strict domesticity for Moise and Hyneman, as indeed for many other nineteenth-century women poets, obscures their work’s central energies and purposes. Women’s writing has mainly been assumed to derive in personal experience, with literature the public stage of private life; often seen as sentimental, which has rightly been reinterpreted as political and not merely personal feeling, but which remains focused through inner emotion. For Moise, Hyneman, Lazarus, and other women poets, however, neither domesticity nor sentimentality is their main literary mode. They instead wrote out of their commitment to their communities. Their writing in this sense was fundamentally public, that is, devoted to issues of community concern. Read outside the paradigm of domesticity, the work of Penina Moise, Rebekah Hyneman, and Emma Lazarus firmly engages public issues central to American Jewish cultural, religious, and historical experience in the nineteenth century and, strikingly, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as well. Their writing illuminates the place of Jewish and (with differences) of American women generally in the configuration of American culture, helping to configure American culture itself.

At issue are formations of selfhood that were increasingly contested through the nineteenth century. Especially the rise of what has been called possessive individualism pushed to the side earlier forms of selfhood constructed through religious and civic involvements, which had been, in the

original Puritan polity, closely tied to each other. The nineteenth century can be said to represent the steady compression and domination of religious and civic selfhoods by economic ones. This has a distinctive gendered aspect. Despite the ideology of the separate spheres that declared women's lives private as well as domestic, women can be seen as the inheritors of religious selfhood, and of civic selfhood in the sense of community investment. As much historical work has uncovered, the social services of the nineteenth century were essentially manned by women, largely through church associations. Such public service was prominent among Jewish as among other American women. Nevertheless, discussion and recognition of women's social involvements tend to continue to be framed in domestic terms, as extensions of the domestic sphere. Certainly the women themselves put it this way, retaining expressions of modesty in describing who they were and what they were doing. Religious/civic activism among women did not merely, however, extend domesticity. Instead, it marked direct entry into and participation in the public sphere as such. This is the case with regard to the three nineteenth-century women poets treated here: Penina Moise, Rebekah Hyneman, and Emma Lazarus.

I. Penina Moise: Mixed Hymnal Discourses

Penina Moise was born in 1797 in Charleston, South Carolina, at that time the city with the largest Jewish population in America. While some of her poems reflect contemporary women's culture, her main body of writing is not domestic but emphatically public: The book of hymns she contributed to became the founding liturgy for the first Jewish Reform movement in America. Her hymns not only actively shaped the community in which she lived and the ongoing project of Jewish identity in America. They register and reflect American discourses of her period, as they intersected and often collided in the contentious enactment of American identity itself in the emerging republic.

Moise was directly involved in the founding Reform movement in Charleston, to which her hymns were devoted. The initiative, which paralleled rather than derived from contemporary German Reform, was spearheaded by her brother, Abraham, and by their mentor, Isaac Harby, a leading Charleston intellectual. As with Reform in America in general, the movement combined a crosscurrent of motives, to preserve Jewish life precisely through acculturating to an America itself composed of countertrends and contradictions. These become the material out of which Penina Moise composed

her hymns. As Diane Ashton notes, *Moise* incorporates the contemporary religious discourses of southern evangelicals. These, however, reside alongside republican Enlightenment discourses inherited from the revolution, liberal theological discourses with which Isaac Harby identified and that tried to bridge Enlightenment and Christian ideologies, as well as Jewish ones, in ways that signal the emerging voice of ethnic identity in America, thus reshaping American identity itself. Finally, *Moise*'s is also a gendered project of a woman addressing such issues of public identity.

American acculturation was itself syncretist. In terms of gender, Jewish women writers are culturally linked to Christian American and generally Victorian women writers; Diane Lichtenstein and others have argued that the Jewish home has special status as a center of Jewish life and preservation of national identity. This difference, however, is relative. Every Victorian home was regarded as the haven of religious and moral guidance, and indeed resistance against the economic forces increasingly commanding America. Most *Moise* hymns in any case address public rituals and are intended as common prayers, not private or domestic ones (although of course some rituals take place in the home). They offer an almost collagelike mix of discourses drawn from the various scenes of American culture and religious life, and as such present a portrait of American Jewish identity as a contentious yet also resilient intersection of cultural strands.

Both the most and the least surprising discourse resource for *Moise* is evangelicalism. Language of sin and reprobation, of grace and salvation crops up in her work. Hymn 80 speaks of "sinners" and sees grace as "not my desert" but "from a source divine." In evangelical Christianity, man's essential state is one of sin, to be redeemed only through a divine act of free and unmerited grace. In like manner, *Moise* describes herself as "defiled by thoughts" and as sharing "the guilt of that transgressive race" (Hymn 21).¹ Judaism of course also teaches penitence for sin; and some of these confessions are set in penitential contexts of the Jewish New Year and Day of Atonement (Hymns 139, 168, 169, 171).

Still more inextricably, *Moise* shared with evangelicals biblical texts and visions, themselves having been derived from Judaic ones. *Moise*'s own biblical vision represents a kind of loop: from the Hebrew Bible to Protestant America to American Jewry. American readings of the Bible adopted but transformed traditional typological ones, in which Hebrew Scripture became Old Testament, prefiguring and predicting New Testament revelation of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ as history's central and eternal moment. The Old Testament is "literal-historical," referring to the New

Testament's "figural-allegorical" revelations for its meaning. This in turn becomes the pattern for the inner life of spirit ("tropological"), and ultimately, for the whole world's course, in a final "eschatological" meaning as death and rebirth of creation in apocalypse. The American venture was taken by those enacting it to reassert further an immediate historical embodiment of pattern. America itself becomes the enactment of the eternal moment typology represents. Yet this is also to say that history is inextricable not only from memory but from eschatology.

As Jewish American, Moise's Bible will overlap with but also contest a Christian one, along a border that is permeable and often blurred, while also enacting different interpretive paradigms. Like Christian Americans, she appeals to an elect nation living a sacred history. But election to American Christians refers to them: They are the new Israel, in the new Promised Land, America. Moise's Jewish hymns adopt something very close to Christian usage when she cites, in Hymn 51, Psalm 37's call to "follow the perfect man" to "salvation and peace. . . . And the branch of his root shall flourish long,"² a text of course read by Christians as a prefiguration of Christ. Yet Moise does not intend her biblical references typologically. When she says Israel she means the Jews, not as figures, but as a historical and present people. For her, Israel is not a type; it is her immediate community. The "chosen band" of Hymn 189 specifies the contemporary religious commitments of the "Hebrew, sanctified, His Unity to promulgate."³ When Moise's Hymn 183 commemorates Passover, the Israel that God with "outstretched hand" redeems is the "elect" as a continuous unfolding of Jewish history.⁴ Hymn 91 specifies the "modern Israelite," meaning her and her community in direct historical line and not as figural, typological transference.⁵

In this move away from typology, Moise parts company with evangelical models and discourses. For the evangelical community, what the Bible foretells is Protestant, evangelical America, prophesied as the elect nation. For Moise, as a member of a non-Christian American minority, this evangelical interpretation raises problems. The notion of an elect community essentially imagines the nation as a church, a covenanted people, whose course and values are then identified with Christian salvational history. But if the nation is a church, Jews could not easily be members. They could, however, take part in the nation through another set of foundational values: those of liberty and equality as the defining Enlightenment principles of the revolution. If, like evangelicals, American Jews identified with a biblical narrative as shaping communal history – it was not the same one. Enlightenment definitions of the nation through liberty and reason offered a teleology into which the Jews

could enter as equal Americans. What sets Moise apart from evangelicism is the concomitant language of Enlightenment, drawing on republican revolutionary discourses. Her attempt to combine these with religious discourses in turn connects her to nineteenth-century liberal theology, with which the Charleston Reform movement closely identified. Moise interweaves such liberal motifs into her verses. Hymn 91, which invokes “God’s blessings” on Israel, centers on equality of rank in justice, on the one hand recalling Jefferson’s “nature’s God” but also referring to Deuteronomy 1, with “Modern Israelites” called upon to be “arbiters” who “let equity stand unappalled.”⁶ Hymn 49 speaks of both the “first elected nation” and God’s gifts as “light, being, liberty, and joy.”⁷ Hymn 97, entitled “Brotherly Love,” opens announcing “How beautiful it is to see, / Brethren unite harmoniously” (Psalms 123).⁸

And yet, whom exactly do these “Brethren” include? Everyone, or those contained within a specific group’s own solidarity? If, as in Hymn 98, universal love is invoked to “strife remove” and “link in one harmonious whole / all human kind from pole to pole,” what then remains as distinctively ethnic?⁹ Evangelical Christian nationhood presented problems of Jewish exclusion; liberal American trends, however, raised other problems of erasure. As in today’s concerns with multiculturalism, is diversity something to be tolerated, assimilated, or asserted?

Moise’s hymns in effect already exhibit core tensions in American identity. In Jewish terms, is America an exile or a homecoming? A deferral of narrative destiny or its fulfillment? Are the Jews wandering or progressing? An ambiguity about the meanings and locations of Zion in Moise at once signals and also evades such American/Jewish distinctions. If Zion in Moise is not a typological site, it is very much a syncretist one. Zion emerges as sometimes a land of faith, not of concrete geography (Hymn 170); of heaven, not earth (Hymn 182). Redemptive consolation finds us

Blest . . . who, tho’ afar
From Zion’s sacred fold,
Have found a shrine ‘neath freedom’s star,
Where faith is uncontrolled.

(Hymn 151)¹⁰

The longed-for “shrine” here becomes not a literal Zion but freedom itself, located beneath the star of America as the ultimate religious value and fulfilled divine promise. No more strangers in a strange land, home itself has been relocated and redefined for all, including the Jews now free from oppression, but also from difference.

Penina Moise's hymns in many ways declare an American identity that is composite, multiple, intercrossing; mutually enforcing, but also unstable and mutually subverting. The hymnal form itself, while rendered by Moise as Jewish prayer, is an echo of Protestant call, quite explicit in many Protestant women writers. Such a call authorized their writing in ways they would not, in accordance with female social roles, feel able to claim for themselves out of their own independent, autonomous powers. Religious selfhood here is a mode of public selfhood, the individual called to and by commitments beyond herself. Moise, like many women contemporaries, understood her ventures, including her poetic one, as devoted to a purpose other than her own creative prowess. She wrote her hymns as part of her membership in a community that her writing helped to shape, both immediately and into the next century. Poetry itself becomes defined through such public and civic religious vision. The promised land of liberty is one "where every Muse has reared a shrine." Hymn 151 cites Psalm 137 in its lament by the waters of Babylon, but it is she who consoles, with her poetic/prophetic harp, the "captive band" that she also redefines. It is not quite equated with a particularist ethnic identity, distinct from both a Protestant mission and an Enlightenment universalism. Instead, all of these are present in her, in syncretist as well as contentious formations.

Moise's hymns construct and enact more than they mirror a pregiven identity. The multiplicity and pluralism of American formation ultimately not only situate but penetrate the individuals who compose and arise within its national polity, as conducted in the mixed discourses that Moise's hymns intensely perform. In some sense they make the claim that to be most American is to be most individual; and that to be individual is to be composite, in deeply historicized and shifting ways. That Moise as a woman emerges as one of the most active voices shaping her community, speaking both for and to it so that her words become its public discourse, is itself an American identity she gives to her ethnic life. And to include women among those in reason's image is itself a revolutionary gesture. Her texts assemble her own and her community's multiple identifications, texts that act as a public space in which selves both find and compose themselves, arising from their cultural contexts and responsible to them. Moise here, like many other nineteenth-century American women poets, finds her own voice and vocation through such appeal to and for public visions.

II. Rebekah Hyneman: Witnessing the Holy Land

Less even has been written about Rebekah Hyneman than Penina Moise.

As with Moise, the few comments on her work focus interpretation through the women's culture that Jewish women shared with other nineteenth-century women. Diane Lichtenstein generally places Hyneman, as Moise, within paradigms of the "Mother in Israel" as a Jewish form of Victorian "True Womanhood," with the poetry focused on gender roles and how the woman writer negotiates their constraints. Yet the writings of Hyneman, as of Moise and Lazarus, do not foreground motherhood. Neither Moise nor Lazarus married. Hyneman was married and had two sons but was widowed after five years. None makes gender her main focus, although certainly gender situates and frames their writing and self-representation.

Rebekah Hyneman did not write hymns, and while she did write some prayers, they are not her central genre or poetic address. This consists rather in another topic fundamental to American cultural and religious life: the Holy Land, which emerged anew in the nineteenth century as a core and looming obsession. More than five thousand items on the Holy Land were published in America between 1800 and 1878, as well as countless other visual representations, in the form of maps, dioramas, stereotypes, photographs, landscapes, and material realia transported from the Holy Land to America: stones, wood, shells, soil for burial, water for baptism. A variety of converging circumstances account for the emergence of the Holy Land as a cultural center in nineteenth-century America. What began as pilgrimage became inextricable with tourism, trade, and diplomacy, made possible by new technologies of transport and communication, by changes in political scenes, by emerging ideologies. Steam ship routes and railroads opened travel. The weakening of Ottoman control of Palestine by European incursions (inaugurated by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1799) and challenges by other regional forces fueled colonialist interests and presence in the region, both commercially and diplomatically. Sojourns in the Holy Land converged with emerging historicism in philosophy and science, which tested, confirmed, and challenged religious claims through archaeology, geography, geology, topography, ethnography, and biblical higher criticism, all brandished both to prove and to disprove biblical textual records.

Above all the impelling force of American Palestine was mission. The Palestine of pilgrimage, and then also of tourism, elevated the biblical land to much more than a contemporary reality. As such, it was above all an ideological terrain, visited to confirm and strengthen American self-interpretation. On one level, the Holy Land was incorporated as the origin of American history itself, confirming the sacred status of America's founding. Reaffirming this origin in turn confirmed America's current and future course. America, adopting

from its Puritan origins the biblical narrative as its own story, saw itself, like Israel of old, as the elected nation. In the nineteenth century, expansion westward was both image and extension of the errand America represented and was continuing to pursue toward fulfillment. The Israelite Holy Land of the past authorized the American Holy Land of the future. These sacral readings of American history, however, themselves required confirmation. The revolution had absorbed, but also displaced and transformed American religious ideologies, introducing Enlightenment values and views into the construction of the republic. The Second Great Awakening can then be seen as a way to re-Christianize America, to reclaim its terrain and its errand as sacral. Holy land narratives, mementos, maps, and models could confirm America's own sacral status, casting its political course as mission.

In this drama of American destiny, the Jew played a special role. American sacral histories unfold in time, but also as time's fulfillment, conforming to an eternal pattern. In it time both proceeds and ends. The Bible provides the schema for both; its typology is also an eschatology. The Puritans had seen themselves as the fulfillment of history, which is to say as drawing near its ending, as had Jonathan Edwards in the First Great Awakening. The Second Great Awakening, stretching through the first half of the nineteenth century, featured a renewed eschatology in an independent, republican, and industrializing America. Yet in it, as in other Christian eschatologies, Jews have a pivotal place, with final days typically marked by their ingathering and conversion. Jews were thus a primary object of mission, on the general premise of evangelizing, but also in their specific eschatological role. Missions to the Jews were established in both America and the Holy Land, supporting and sending many of the pilgrims, travelers, diplomats, and colonizers that knit America to Palestine.

Rebecca Hyneman's work stands within but also against this Americanized Holy Land. The daughter of a Jewish father and Christian mother, she converted to Judaism, running counter to the current of assimilation, almost as a kind of counteracculturation. The Holy Land she presents, despite certain common features, offers a different reading, according to different paradigms, from those surrounding her. Her verse can be seen as resisting mission. Two long narrative poems, both set in the Orient, recount tales of betrayal of one's people. In "Livia," the heroine ignobly commits betrayal. In "Zara," she heroically resists conversion unto martyrdom. A sense of threat to the Jewish people repeatedly surfaces. "The Hour of Death," a poem published a few weeks after Hyneman's conversion, imagines facing death "through scorn, and insult, and oppression's wrongs," calling to proclaim "שמע ישראל" – the Hebrew's prayer of faith" in resistance and solidarity.

The central protagonist of Hyneman's poems of the Holy Land is in many ways the landscape itself. The Holy Land is site in poem after poem. This is the case for the series of poems she wrote called "Female Scriptural Characters," which echoes the biblical heroines treated in Grace Aguilar's *Women of Israel* of 1847. Reimagining biblical women is something many nineteenth-century women poets undertook, often featuring, as in Hyneman, gendered topoi – modesty, frailty, humility, service – if also revising them. Here they take their place in Holy Land testimonies alongside poems on male biblical figures – Judah, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, Samuel, the Maccabees, placed all together in a long section called "Hebrew Melodies." More than half the poems in her published collection *The Leper and Other Poems* (1853) can be called Holy Land literature, including, very much, the title poem. Throughout, epigraphs and notes to the poems cite "Scripture Geography" ("Israel's Future"), Chateaubriand's Holy Land travel narrative ("The Valley of Jehosaphat"), Lamartine's Pilgrimage ("Lines"), with other references to the travel narratives pervasive in contemporary American letters, as well as myriad allusions to the Bible and to Jewish history.

Hyneman's portrayals of the Holy Land, like many others contemporary to her, feature desolation: a past grandeur compared to present desiccation. This was a satirical point in Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad*, but to pilgrim and missionary the Holy Land's desolation was seen to prove the curse and punishment for Jewish sin in denying Christ, but thereby also confirming the redemption to come when at last they are ingathered, converted, and saved. In Hyneman, current desolation emerges instead as witness to Jewish faithfulness to divine promise through history. What she reads in the present apparent abandonment is "Israel's Future," the title of a poem bidding the reader him-/herself to "gaze" on "that lone spot / Where, heaven-inspired, your prophets dwelt; / Still be their memories unforgot."¹¹ The present Holy Land bears witness to a past that, remembered, grounds the present and future in historical, providential trajectory. At the core is "Israel's Trust," another poem title, which declaims against "insulting foes." But the remnant, though "dishonored and oppressed," are "strong in God's own promise." The desolation is not punishment but test, calling Israel to be "true and firm and falter not."¹²

These and other poems stand as testimony to a continued covenant, despite threat, oppression, and desolation. Torah, Sinai, the desert guide of cloud and fire, are recurring motifs. "Israel's Trust" opens facing a "lightning flash" and thunder, which turn out to be at Sinai, followed by "the fire from heaven, the pillar cloud" that "attest how firm thy word hath stood."¹³ "The Sun of Israel" portrays the same sun in the same place as those who saw "cloud-pillar

by day, flame witness by night,” which still guide those now “in sorrow and exile.” “The Valley of Jehoshaphat” prays “that God who led their sires from the fierce oppressor’s sway / will be to them a fire by night, a pillar of cloud by day.”¹⁴ Barren landscape is a mark of suffering, but, far from being a sign of curse and abandonment as in Christian readings, it is also a sign of the promise that remains in force today and of Jewish faithfulness to the God of history. The original covenant stands against claims of the new one, into which it is not subsumed or resolved. The poems instead point to a Judaic vision of history’s fulfillment.

In contrast to Christian Holy Land literature, such fulfillment is not imagined as an end to time in apocalypse, nor of course as conversion of the Jews. It represents instead restoration within history itself. The long narrative title poem, “The Leper,” is an archive of Holy Land topoi. Reflecting new approaches to the Holy Land through study of flora, fauna, geology, geography, the poem constructs the land through an itinerary of place-names and images of rock, vines, olive, plain, desert, streamlets. Landscape is the central figure. But nature is never unhistorical. Landscape serves as memorial, in which “each scene recalls” the biblical past and its ever continued force as well as historical challenges and tests to the realization of its meanings. The setting, at first without historical specificity, turns out to be vividly historical. The poem is set at the moment of the Bar Kochba rebellion, when Jewish independence was attempted and failed. The leper emerges as a figure of the outcast Jew exiled from his homeland (joined by a feminine figure of “sister” representing innocence, sacrifice, and betrayal). Yet the poem concludes with a pledge that “the memory shall ne’er depart / of promises that still can bless / ‘Mid slavery and wretchedness.” The vision of time is one in which “Judah wakens from her dream of shame / once more the proud possessor of a name.”¹⁵

Little is known of Hyneman’s biography. Her conversion was attested and presumably conducted by Isaac Leeser, the rabbi of the Mikveh Israel Synagogue, close associate to the activist Rebecca Gratz, and a major figure in contemporary Jewish American life. Among Leeser’s many activisms was a strong concern with the question of Jewish restoration. Leeser at first held the Orthodox position that Restoration would only follow divine intervention. In the face of missionary pressures on Jews both in America and in the Holy Land, and reacting to the Damascus 1840 Blood Libel, which caused a worldwide outcry, Lesser evolved toward embracing Restoration as a human enterprise. He launched organizational efforts to raise funds and initiated projects of training toward settlement. His many articles describing a

historical restoration appeared in the *Occident*, where Hyneman's own poetry was published.

Mission, exile, persecution, the status of the Holy Land: These are the contexts of Hyneman's work. They are not private. To describe her writing as feminized and domestic is to assign religion itself to the feminine sphere. In America, a trend toward feminized religion can be seen from early on, as men became increasingly involved with economic pursuits. But this is not to equate feminization of religion with domesticity or privatization. Rather, it is to register the devaluation of religion along with other public, community, and civic activities in the face of economic priorities and interests. Nor can the economic sphere that men came to inhabit and that gained increasing priority be called "public" in any way except geographically, as taking place outside the home. In terms of interests and investments it is private. Describing religion as feminized is a mark of its displacement along with other civic and community values from the center of American pursuits. But religion remains a public sphere arena, the site of a community life with shared values that women came to represent and shape. It is women who were increasingly responsible for and to the public sphere as civic and communal, while men's lives were increasingly privatized, concerned with making wages or profit. This trend is visible in Hyneman's Philadelphia, where Rebecca Gratz, also a member of Mikveh Israel and close associate of Rabbi Isaac Leeser, founded the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society and the Hebrew Sunday School that became central to many Jewish communities, including that of Penina Moise, headmistress of the Sunday School in Charleston, and whose function was not least a way of resisting Christian missionizing of Jews.

As religious selves, these women cross dimensions and spheres. Hyneman very much defines her own vocation as poet in these terms. Song itself figures centrally in her verse, both lamenting and pledging and announcing a vision of history and peoplehood that has endured and will endure. "Lament of Judah" concludes foretelling "sounds of joy" when "again in glad telling heaven shall bid her agony depart."¹⁶ The covenant will attain its promised fruition, when "the hour of thralldom is past" and "the songs of thy triumph shall echo once more" ("The Olive Branch").¹⁷ Of these songs of covenant both remembered and prophesied, Hyneman is herself the singer. Though "no prophet-kind" and "no holy choir" inhabit the "Temple lain waste," she – beholding in her mind "The Cedars of Lebanon" of the Holy Land – will "recall the deeds which God made manifest."¹⁸ As in her poem "Miriam's Song," she too offers "praise to Israel's God," who "had brought deliv'rance nigh" and still does so though "ages have passed." This prophetic stance, authorizing woman,

though thought “weak and powerless,” to public voice and participation, Hyneman shares with other nineteenth-century American women poets, who defined their poetic selfhood not through personal genius but in relation to a community they addressed, speaking to and for them. Yet Hyneman’s public vision differs in its Judaic imagination as she understood this. The structure of prophecy itself can be said to differ. Prophecy to Hyneman does not exceed or transcend history in an apocalyptic end that dissolves time into an eternal moment revealed by and structured through the Crucifixion. The point is not only that she does not embrace Christ, but that eternity does not absorb history for her as it does in Christian prophetic vision. In her, the past is remembered in the present, toward commitment to a future as ongoing historical chain, not eternal synopsis. The Holy Land therefore is also a different site for her from the one circulating so obsessively around her. Its testimony and the hope of its restoration do not displace history but rather tie the present to the past and to a historical future.

III. Emma Lazarus: Multiple Memberships

Emma Lazarus is among the first writers self-consciously to regard not only herself but also America as fundamentally ethnic. Born in 1849, she emerged as a writer during a transformative moment of both American and Jewish identities. Prior to the Civil War, the grammar of American identity had been largely singular, as essentially English Protestant white, albeit in two forms: inclusive and exclusive. The possibility of becoming American through incorporation into this singularity was balanced by the denial of such possibility in a nativist politics. The post-Civil War period marked what might be called a moment of pluralization. The demise of sections and increased federalization opened new consciousness of identity in terms of region, city, gender, race, followed however at the century’s end with new kinds of consolidation: melting pot, on the one hand – which returned to an inclusive singularity very like the older English one; and Jim Crow, on the other, in renewed exclusionary forms, alongside nativist victories in restrictions on immigration. Lazarus represents and writes this moment of pluralization, in ways that prefigure multiple senses of identity to emerge again at the end of the twentieth century. In this Lazarus foreshadows questions of destabilization and constructionism that mark contemporary discourses on identity.

Far better known than either Moise or Hyneman (not least through her Statue of Liberty poem), Lazarus in a sense pursues major trends found in

both earlier poets. Like Moise, she envisions America in liberal terms of freedom and equality. But like Hyneman, she affirms a Jewish identity that has geographic, historicist particularity. Her insistence that the two can be combined is the mark of her pluralist identity, in which the American self, exactly as American, is imagined in multiples. To be American is also to be something else. The Statue of Liberty poem came to represent an ethnic America that Lazarus herself helped to invent and was among the first voice to project and construct. This, however, transformed Jewishness itself, from what had been fundamentally a religious identity to an ethnic one, with its own national implications that Lazarus is likewise among the first to explore.

Lazarus's Jewish identity was from the outset a composite of Sephardic and German antecedents, from her father's and mother's sides. Each of these shaped her work as she came to translate German translations of medieval hymns written by the Spanish Golden Age poets Judah Halevi, Moses Ibn Ezra, Alharizi. This, however, occurred later, and, anecdotes indicate, with some resistance: asked by her rabbi, Rabbi Gottheil, to contribute translations or texts to his Reform prayer book, she equivocally denied later having done so. Her early career – very early indeed, in her precocious teens – portrays a poetic self distinctly removed not only from Jewish, but from historical identity altogether. Here Lazarus is at her most gendered, at once identifying with yet also self-consciously frustrated by the restrictions gender imposed. The poem "Echoes" represents a gendered voice in opposition to male epic poetics but finally locates it in a "cave" removed from the world. In "City Visions," the poet invokes Milton and Beethoven, but only as blind and deaf; images for her own poetry are set in a "restricted sphere of sound and sight." "Life and Art" in fact opposes life against art, with the female muse serving a poet who is male, and who only is inspired by her when he retreats from the "day's illusion." "Influence" and "Mater Amabilis" likewise picture a "Mother" who watches, but is not herself a poet, separating gender from writing. When she does represent her own poetry writing, it comes into being in cemeteries, in "some dusky, twilight spot" of "Autumn Sadness," in "Saint Michael's Chapel" far from the "vexed hubbub of our world," or as "Restlessness" in longing for missed places and exclusion from them.

This removal also defines the spaces of "In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport," where Lazarus gestures to her Jewish identity before her encounter with the mass immigration of Russian Jewish refugees at Ward Island. The poem, a riposte to Longfellow's "In the Jewish Cemetery at Newport," still notably resembles it. Set far from the "noises of the busy town," Lazarus's poem mainly records absence, silence, death, things that are not: "No signs

of life are here: the very prayers / Inscribed around are in a language dead; / The light of the “perpetual lamp” is spent.” The poem recognizes America as a place of refuge for “weary ones, the sad, the suffering,” who have been “lone exiles of a thousand years.” Yet the American site remains ambiguous, a scene not of rescue but of disappearance. The poem’s concluding homage does declare that “Nathless the sacred shrine is holy yet,” but not for anything alive and present. The synagogue remains a cenotaph of “lone floors where reverent feet once trod.”¹⁹

Whatever the exact degree of continuity between Lazarus’s earlier Jewish selfhood and her later one, the change from this scene of echoing absences to the activist historical intervention that followed Lazarus’s visit with her rabbi to Ward Island can only be called dramatic. The “synagogue” does announce what will remain core concerns for Lazarus: the foreign as native and the sacred as bordering secular history. The poem is historical, moving from the patriarchs through Egypt and the Exodus to Solomon and the Babylonian exile, which opens into the millennia of exile leading, albeit ambivalently, to this American place of burial. What Lazarus discovered in her visit to Ward Island with her rabbi was contemporary history, the Jews as an ongoing venture in it, whose outcome requires activist attention. This is not religious selfhood in a traditional sense. Rather, it enacts the ambiguity that has always inhered in Jewish identity: Is it a people or a religion? Under modern conditions of nineteenth-century nationalism, this double identity had taken on new political meanings. Lazarus, who had never fully aligned with Jewish religion as such, responded to Ward Island with identification – something somewhat astonishing for an elite, privileged, wealthy Manhattanite facing impoverished, strangely dressed aliens pouring into her city. Here already there is a creative confluence between her American and Jewish identities. America’s women had throughout the century taken on the role of social care, as an expression of selfhood defined through and deeply inscribed in community, largely focused through religious affiliation. Lazarus embraces this selfhood, although she does so on a transformative border between religion and peoplehood that, in Jewish terms, launched Zionism, and in American terms, ethnicity.

Lazarus’s activism took several forms. She helped found the Hebrew Technical Institute for Vocational Training of immigrants to equip them for America. She tried to organize the Committee for the Colonization of Palestine as a Zionist venture, traveling to Europe partly in order to fund-raise for it. A more successful fund-raising venture was her contribution of “The New Colossus” (1883) to an auction to cover expenses for the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, which had been donated in the name of French/

American friendship. This sonnet takes its place within a transformation in Lazarus's writing, to fierce polemical essays written in defense of Jews against anti-Semitism. Lazarus had launched a public voice, in which expression becomes directed away from herself and toward a historical, national mission. In her poetry, too, a parallel transmutation is visible, from solitary singer in sequestered spaces as birthplace to personal genius, to a compromise between feminine modesty and a masculine, poetic genius such as Emerson, whom she took as her mentor. Lazarus's poetic voice becomes paradoxically both more assertively public and yet consistent with women's poetic voices in the century, which characteristically drew force, authority, and authorization from just such public commitments. In Lazarus's case, she shifts from poet as genius to poet as prophet; from self-expression, to historical vision and call. But the historical is not separable from the religious. Her Jewish selfhood is rooted in both domains, interwoven with her American identities as well.

"The New Year / Rosh Hashanah 5643" (i.e., 1882, the first year of mass immigration) returns to the synagogue as poetic scene. Strong and precise liturgical imagery is woven throughout, as if Lazarus were herself the cantor of the service. Indeed, she herself seems to blow the shofar that prophetically announces and summons the people through "ancestral blood," against Russian "priest and mob" and toward an "undreamed of morn:"

Blow, Israel, the sacred cornet! Call
 Back to thy courts whatever faint heart throbs
 With thine ancestral blood, thy need craves all.
 The red, dark year is dead, the year just born
 Leads on from anguish wrought by priest and mob,
 To what undreamed-of morn?

The prophetic act to "Call / Back" – recalling the *shuvu, shuvu* (Return, Return) of Hosea 14, read traditionally between the New Year and Yom Kippur – Lazarus adopts as her own. She is also calling forward, to a new sense of what Jewishness is.

Summoning her audience of the immediate present of history, out of the "ancestral" past and toward a coming "morn," she sets out the dimensions of peoplehood: to belong to a community whose identity is inherited and passed on, here inextricable from the traditional language of the liturgy. And yet, for all its trumpet call to Jewish renewal, the poem is strangely ambivalent about how to locate it. The voice of the prophet is Jewish, but the scene is American:

Even as the Prophet promised, so your tent
 Hath been enlarged unto earth's farthest rim.

To snow-capped Sierras from vast steppes ye went,
Through fire and blood and tempest-tossing wave,
For freedom to proclaim and worship Him,
Mighty to slay and save.

The call to return here is not to the ancient Holy Land, but to the new one in America, in the western “Sierras”; and the creed is “freedom” of worship. American pluralism permits, indeed sanctions what Lazarus goes on to name as “two divided streams” of exiles,

One rolling homeward to its ancient source,
One rushing sunward with fresh will, new heart.
By each the truth is spread, the law unfurled,
Each separate soul contains the nation’s force,
And both embrace the world.²⁰

Here is not one “truth” but two at least, ecstatically announced as mutually confirming, separate soul and nation, freedom and traditional commitment, past and future. But can “each separate soul” indeed contain the “nation’s force,” especially if more than one nation, more than one history and people are at issue? How does a self composed of multiple memberships balance among them? Can the various strands intertwine in the way Lazarus’s formal mastery and prophetic voice seem to bind them?

Lazarus’s “Statue of Liberty” poem remains her most impelling, but also among her most fissured. The sonnet rewrites American and Jewish, as well as gendered identities, pluralizing the self through identifications whose inter-relationship becomes not only complex but potentially conflictual. Lazarus, in transforming the statue from symbol of French friendship and liberty to “Mother of Exiles,” erects the single greatest monument to American women’s culture of public responsibility. Its oxymora register the paradox of female poetic voice, at once modest and yet publically committed: “silent lips,” “Mother of Exiles,” “imprisoned lightning,” “eyes command.” Equally palpable and equally oxymoronic are its Judaic/American, foreign/native inscriptions. The statue contrasts Greek Europe against an America thereby identified with Hebraism. Further Hebraic traces emerge in “imprisoned lightning,” which suggests Deborah, called *eshet lapidoth*, the wife or woman of lightning, as does “Mother of Exiles.” The “lamp” at the conclusion recalls many others in Lazarus from the Newport poem onward, where it first appears as the “perpetual lamp” of the synagogue, to repeated images of Hannukah menorahs as signs of Jewish awakening. America and Judaism become intermeshed. The foreign is welcomed as American, while America itself is redefined, in this

very performance, as land of immigrants. Ethnic diversity constitutes a new pluralist rather than singular identity. That a Jewish woman speaks through and for America affirms and demonstrates just this pluralized identity.

These multiple identities, however, are ultimately nonidentical. Lazarus speaks as an American woman whose public care the statue imposingly proclaims. She then also encodes Judaic traces in the text. Nonetheless, “Give me your tired, your poor” echoes Matthew 11:28, “Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden,” a Christic call that America, as Werner Sollors explores in *Beyond Ethnicity*, likewise embodies. Lazarus, like Moise, universalizes and secularizes American identity. To be Jewish, however, is not the same as to be universal. To return to Zion is not the same as to emigrate to America. Unlike Hyneman, Lazarus is unclear whether America or Palestine is the Holy Land. This very confusion, however, powerfully enacts multiple identities in ways that have since become ever more a norm. Lazarus points forward from religious selfhood as embedded in community, to memberships in multiple communities, variously and not necessarily consistently defined, residing in intersecting but also differentiating ethnic, national, cultural affiliations and participations. In Emma Lazarus this does not lead to weak identity. On the contrary, her American and Jewish selves address each other in an ongoing, forceful project. Their lack of complete alignment becomes characteristic of American ethnicity, not as its dissolution, but as its mode. For Lazarus, as for Moise and Hyneman, it is these affiliations that launch and give force to poetic voice, voice that is addressed to others in a community in which religious selfhood becomes conjoined or redefined through further gendered, ethnic, and national identities.

Notes

- 1 Penina Moise, *Secular and Religious Works* (Charleston, SC: Nicholas G. Duffy, 1911), 23.
- 2 Ibid., 49.
- 3 Ibid., 170.
- 4 Ibid., 164.
- 5 Ibid., 83.
- 6 Ibid., 83.
- 7 Ibid., 48.
- 8 Ibid., 89.
- 9 Ibid., 90.
- 10 Ibid., 133.
- 11 Rebekah Hyneman, *The Leper and Other Poems* (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1853), 140.
- 12 Ibid., 141.
- 13 Ibid., 142.

- 14 Ibid., 119.
- 15 Ibid., 41.
- 16 Ibid., 113.
- 17 Ibid., 110.
- 18 Ibid., 120.
- 19 Emma Lazarus, *Selected Poems and Other Writings*, ed. Gregory Eiselein (New York: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002), 49.
- 20 Ibid., 175.

Secularity, Sacredness, and Jewish American Poets 1950–2000

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The term “secularity” – the rejection of the supernatural in favor of the human and the material – has, post 9/11, garnered all kinds of academic attention. Books, articles, and blogs dedicated to ensuring individual autonomy and even-handed pluralism have become a constant feature on the scholarly landscape. As it turns out, some of us may be more invested in this development than others. As David Novak bluntly puts it in his essay for a special issue of the *Hedgehog Review* devoted to “Re-thinking Secularization”: “No group has benefited more from modern secularity than have the Jews.”¹ I suggest that we can go a bit further. If secularity licenses Jews to claim their unique / distinctive version of a nonreligious, emphatically culturally grounded identity, then it has been a real boon particularly to those who would identify as Jewish poets, especially those writing in English.

When I first began thinking about Jewish American poetry, nearly twenty years ago, I remember encountering blank stares from friends and colleagues otherwise well versed in all things literary. After tossing out the names of the usual suspects such as Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and Bernard Malamud, friends would hastily ask, “But they don’t write poetry – do they?” Sometimes someone would triumphantly suggest “Allen Ginsberg” – only to retract the name quickly, noting that he is really a Buddhist anyway, not much of a Jew. And then there were the poets themselves, who were habitually ambivalent about being confined, indeed ghettoized, by an identity category that they experienced as ideologically prescriptive and perhaps aesthetically limiting. The narrative underwriting this discomfort is rich and complex, well beyond the scope of this essay; nevertheless, it is important at least to acknowledge how the modern literary culture (dominated by the long shadow of T. S. Eliot), steeped in implicitly Christian ideology and culture, made it enormously difficult for “others” to find a toehold.² One of the most sorrowful examples of the poet suffering the effects of this cultural vise may be found in the unhappy poems of Karl Shapiro, who, at the end of his life, quips bitterly: “I once published

a book called *Poems of a Jew* / To get rid of my Jewish problem. / It only made it worse.”³ Arguably less damaged, but still feeling the constraints, the poet-critic John Hollander artfully danced around the subject when asked in 1988 to engage “The Question of American Jewish Poetry.” In the course of rehearsing a whole range of problems facing the poet who would seek such a mantle – including those of language, form and, content – Hollander warns, “If Jewishness is to be identified solely with normative rabbinic religion, then the poet’s path is the road to *kherem*, religious destruction.”⁴ With this striking injunction, Hollander takes us some way toward understanding why poets coming of age during the first part of the twentieth century may have found it particularly difficult to claim Jewishness as part of their vocational identity. To begin with, he presumes that good poetry is necessarily at odds with religious doctrine (liturgical verse does not figure into his account). Furthermore, since Judaism (at least in American/ Western experience) is a religion (as opposed to a culture), would-be Jewish poets seemed to be afforded little space to practice their art. But with the rise of Jewish secularism as a legitimate identity such obstacles seem to melt away and now there appears to be room for innovative engagements with the idea of Jewishness.

But of course there is more to it than that. While the dominant culture (i.e., Christian) may construe the relation between the secular and the sacred as an absolute binary, Judaism has never made such a sharp distinction. As has been frequently observed, there is really no word in either biblical or rabbinic Hebrew denoting the secular. In Hebrew the word for the sacred or the holy is *kadosh* – otherwise understood as to be set apart, or distinguished, from the ordinary (in Hebrew, *hol*). In his recent account of the genesis of Jewish secular thought, David Biale illustrates his understanding of the relation between the “secular/holy” and the “secular/ordinary” with a midrash (an interpretive narrative) from the biblical book of Leviticus. Biale writes: “a high priest tells a *hiloni* [an ordinary person] that he can only walk with the priest if he consents not to enter graveyards, which are forbidden to priests” since the dead are impure.⁵ That is, the “secular” or ordinary Jew is someone who occupies a liminal space between the sacred and the ritually impure. The secular is one stop along a continuum that includes and depends upon the idea of the sacred. It is not the sacred’s opposite, nor its negation; rather, secularism is part of a dynamic ontology that is generally important for making an account of Jewish identity, and specifically relevant to understanding the contemporary moment in Jewish American poetics. For, as I will show, this continuum is well suited to thinking through some of the dominant strains in this poetics.

While some poets may denounce the idea of sacred verse, they are not above occasionally reaching for religious terms or liturgical frames – and not only to ironic ends. Charles Bernstein, however, takes what is best described as a militant stance when it comes to secularity. Over the last fifteen years or so he has stood on the front line, staunchly refusing to cede ground to those who ask us to revisit the idea of poetry as “spilt religion” or to entertain such slippery notions as Emerson’s “poet-priest.” In 1999, as part of the keynote address “Poetry and the Sacred,” Bernstein begins by pointedly troubling the terms with his title, “Poetry and/or the Sacred.” Just in case there was any doubt as to his position, he opens the talk by quipping: “Every time I hear the word sacred I reach for my checkbook.”⁶ He then settles down to business, emphatically protesting “the priestly function of the poet,” preferring instead “the comic and bathetic, the awkward and the railing; to be grounded horizontally in the social and not vertically in the ethers.” Although somewhat vague about textual origins, he decidedly identifies his position as Jewish, linked to a “mystical tradition” that values language as a material presence and sees meaning in the detail and in the ordinary. These somewhat nebulous comments become considerably more substantial when, in an essay published that same year, Bernstein turns his attention to the Objectivist poet Charles Reznikoff, showing how Jewish aesthetics are as much a matter of form as of content. Glossing over Reznikoff’s more overtly “Jewish” poems such as those dedicated to “Sukkot” or “Channukah,” Bernstein focuses on Reznikoff’s art for terminating or cutting the line in such a way as to compel us to view a single, ordinary object or detail as marvelous, or that which Bernstein designates as “holy.”⁷ It is a gorgeous illustration of what Bernstein means when he calls for a thorough investigation of the roles that a distinctively “secular” approach plays in the making of a “radical Jewish culture” – radical in the sense of both deeply rooted (from Latin *radix*, root), as well as revolutionary and innovative. More provocative is Bernstein’s fierce advocacy for Gertrude Stein not merely as the “Mother” of radical poetics, but a “Jewish Mother” at that. Grounded in a strong analysis of Stein’s linguistic genius, Bernstein argues that Stein’s resistance to linguistic conventions stems from her antiassimilationist stance, which must be understood in light of her Jewishness as much as of her gender and sexual orientation. Wading deep into the roiling waters stirred up by the 2012 exhibit “The Steins Collect” (shown in San Francisco, Paris, and New York), Bernstein staunchly defends Stein against all charges of Nazi collaboration, reading her war years as “a survivor’s tale.”⁸ As he understands it, her refusal to claim a fixed notion of self or belonging should be understood as a radically “non-Jewish Jewish” move. Writing at a moment when identity

could well have lethal consequences (after all, she was not merely an elderly Jewish woman, but also gay), Stein strategically exploits the fundamental constructedness of Jewish identity in the name of survival. While I think the argument ultimately says much more about Stein's modernist sensibilities than about her Jewishness, it is a strong example of Bernstein's proclivity for outlier claims – many of which have been importantly generative.⁹ Following Bernstein's lead, all kinds of poets and critics have begun to think in new ways about Jewish poetics, as evidenced by a strong and expansive collection of essays, *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture* (2010).¹⁰ Not only does this volume include an interesting range of critics and poets, some of whom have never before felt inclined to participate in such a conversation, but it expands the list of poets who can be compellingly read under the sign of Jewishness.¹¹

Bernstein the critic is radical, original, and often purposefully oppositional. But Bernstein the poet takes no prisoners, aggressively eschewing virtually all of the commonplaces or familiar images that one so often finds – even among those poets who are especially wary of seeding their poems with flickering *shabbos* candles or shards of the kaddish. Bernstein has been “out” as a Jewish poet for a good long while, included in a range of anthologies, and the subject of all kinds of meditations on Jewishness and the poetic, where he is applauded for his humor and wit – as a descendant, if you will, of Henny Youngman, with an aptitude for linguistic innovation.¹² But it is only in his most recent volume, *Recalculating* (2013), that we see how Bernstein's brand of Jewish culture serves as something more than a bracing antidote to the usual pieties that so often afflict the poetic. Two poems demand particular attention, starting with “The Jew,” which is dedicated to Jerome Rothenberg – an important secular Jewish poet in his own right, best known perhaps for his sprawling anthology *A Big Jewish Book* (1978), containing “Poems and Other Visions of Jews from Tribal Times to the Present.” Indeed, many of the poems in *Recalculating* are dedicated to friends, some quite well known to readers of contemporary poetry. But there is more to the gesture than name dropping or insider nods; rather, it can be understood as a manifestation of Bernstein's commitment to a Jewish secular aesthetics whereby social engagement is not just an abstraction; rather, like Reznikoff, Bernstein is invested in a poetics that recognizes that particular, specific “others exist prior to oneself.”¹³ Composed of a series of vignettes featuring “The Jew” – a quasi-wisdom figure, a descendant of Chelm, who delivers his knowings in a deadpan fashion – much of the poem reads like an avant-garde variation on the Jewish joke: “A miller notices that the grain is too coarse to sell and is advised to consult a Jew. ‘Cohen still owes me 14 dollars.’”¹⁴ (To those who would say “huh?” – I say, as with

many Jewish jokes, it is all in the delivery.) Yet bathos is not the only note in Bernstein's repertoire; while unafraid of offering something that might register more conventionally as wisdom, his is of the decidedly unsentimental, avowedly secular, kind. Saving the best for last, "The Jew" concludes by swiftly dismissing that most sacrosanct principle of sacred textuality (in which every sign in the Torah is significant):

The scholar cannot understand an unusual diacritical mark over a word in the text he is studying and ponders on it for several days before asking a Jew. "It means nothing," says the Jew, blowing a speck of dust off the page.¹⁵

Compelling us to recognize closure as convenient artifice, Bernstein contests anyone who might be tempted to view secularism as an easy alternative to the demands of religiosity. This hard-earned knowledge becomes achingly pronounced in "Recalculating," the volume's centerpiece. After a short set of aphoristic meditations, one of Bernstein's signature modes, the undertow of loss that courses throughout the volume breaks through: "Language is an albatross, a sullen cross, a site of loss."¹⁶ Bernstein is absolutely fearless when it comes to exposing the pufferies of all sorts of institutions. This audacity, however, is fueled by absolute loyalty to language – as a meaningful system of sounds, codes, and structures, and like all true acolytes, Bernstein refuses to stray from his obligations. And so, no matter how loath he may be to name it, he must: "I think of Emma climbing the icy rocks of our imagined world, and taking a fatal misstep, . . . in my mind she is yet in free fall, but I know all too well she hit the ground hard."¹⁷ This is what poetic grief looks like for the secularist. Mourning the tragic death of his daughter, Emma, Bernstein is brutally simple and clear. But there is more, as he continues probing ruthlessly "how poems become sites for mourning – not in fixed ritual repetitions (prescribed liturgy) but as mobile and specific areas for reflection and projection, havens. Not words received for comfort but works actively discovered in the course of searching."¹⁸ This firm rejection of formal mourning rites would seem to put Bernstein well outside the province of anything like the *kaddish* – that ancient prayer that serves as a kind of cultural touchstone for even the most theophobic of poets and writers.¹⁹ Yet, his account of poetry as a meaning-bearing process resonates provocatively with a different sort of meditation on grief, mourning, and language, Leon Wieseltier's monumental 1998 study *Kaddish*. Writing in the wake of his father's death, Wieseltier begins with the blankest of admissions: "I don't know what to do. No, I know what to do. I will open a book."²⁰ In this instance, "the book" does not refer simply to the *siddur* (prayer book); for while Wieseltier opens that book thrice daily for a full year (more

precisely, eleven months), following the prescribed ritual of mourning, he opens many, many other books in the intervening hours, embarking upon a remarkable inquiry into the literary history of that prayer – not to resolve his loss, but to know it as fully as he is able. For early on he discovers, it seems with some relief, that “there is no commandment to be consoled.”²¹ What follows is nearly six hundred pages of text, lengthy scholarly explications of medieval scholarship, interspersed with personal reflections on a given moment during the year, moments that are in turn broken up by aphoristic fragments, and quotes – making for a compositional structure akin to Bernstein’s own “poetics of adjacency.” In this way, *Kaddish* speaks vividly to the scrap of psychic driftwood that Bernstein catches hold of in his own dark grief, declaring, “*The Jew is a textual construction.*”²² Indeed, philosopher and poet find themselves in oddly comparable places by the close of their respective texts. For Wieseltier, the end of the year of mourning and its ritual requirements is but a matter of artifice: “What is happening to me now is nothing like what Americans call ‘closure.’ . . . Closure is an ideal of forgetfulness.”²³ Speaking in kind, Bernstein upends the language of arrival and closure by countering bitterness (“Are we here yet?”) with sadness (“For now I go from hour to hour”), only to snatch away any suggestion of sentimental resolution with a signature, bathetic one-liner: “*If you aren’t part of the problem, you will be.*”²⁴ This is what passes for faith in the hands of the secularist: a resolute commitment to deploying language in ways that avoid the obvious and predictable, and instead demand and reward ongoing attentiveness.

Of course, when it comes to language, Yiddish occupies a special place in the Jewish secularist’s imagination. Not surprisingly, nearly a third of the essays to be found in the Miller and Morris volume *Radical Poetics* either explore the status of Yiddish poetics extensively or make some mention of its celebrated status as the language constitutive of a uniquely secular Jewish culture. But as Kathryn Hellerstein, a prolific translator and scholar of Yiddish modernism, is quick to point out, the presumed boundary between the secular and the sacred is largely specious, since much of Yiddish poetry is energized by engaging in an ongoing, subversive dialogue with religious tradition – giving us a strong example of just how thoroughly entwined these positions are in Jewish poetry in general, and Yiddish poetry in particular.²⁵ That said, Yiddish, as the locus of a distinctly secular form of Jewish identity, is precisely the ground staked out by Irena Klepfisz and her bilingual (Yiddish/English) experimental verse. I have written about Klepfisz on several other occasions, focusing on her innovative use of Yiddish as a frame for troubling all kinds of myths about Jewish identity, including the long-standing investment in the idea of

exile as one of its defining features.²⁶ But until now I have never thought much about her contributions to the discourse of Jewish secularity. Reading Klepfisz's memories of her childhood spent immersed in the *yidishe svive* (the Yiddish environment) within a historical context heightens one's appreciation for both the radical and the fragile nature of her enterprise. If we compare the nineteenth-century dogmatism of someone like Chaim Zhitlowsky, who envisioned a comprehensive Yiddish world complete with its own secular universities, to Klepfisz's modest dream of a secular Jewish culture grounded in *sotsyalistik* (socialist) values – we realize, once again, the magnitude of loss suffered in the wake of the Holocaust.²⁷ Yet one of the characteristics that sets Klepfisz apart from other poets who make Yiddish central to their aesthetic project is her steady refusal to turn the *mame loshn* (the mother tongue) into “a kind of *loshn-koydesh*, a holy tongue mak[ing] *yidishe kultur* a religion in which only *di groyse gerlente*, great scholars, can practice.”²⁸ Her position differs significantly from that of another contemporary poet, Jacqueline Osherow, who insists upon according Yiddish sacred status, for it is now largely a ghost language, inseparable from its history of ruinous destruction.²⁹ Consider, for example, how in “Ch’vil Schreiben a Poem auf Yiddish” (1999), she longs to write a “pure poem, pure Yiddish poem,” obviating the need to waste “my time / pouring out my heart in Goyish metaphors.”³⁰ While Osherow routinely grieves her linguistic ineptitude as if a fall from grace, Klepfisz takes a more forgiving stance, willing to bypass fluency or accuracy in the interest of preserving such ideals as a fierce commitment to political and social activism that are central to her experience of the Yiddish world.

Klepfisz's brand of secularity, an inextricable part of her Yiddish inheritance, is unique in another important respect. Unlike many other secularists whose sense of Jewishness is similarly grounded in Yiddishkayt or Yiddishness, Klepfisz is not expressly hostile toward matters of religious observance; nor does she occupy herself with subverting its traditions. Instead she asks that her readers take a more expansive view, recognizing that rituals and time-bound traditions are not the exclusive purview of the observant. A particularly lovely example of this nuanced position may be found in the poem “*Der mames shabosim / My Mother's Sabbath Days*” (1990). The title is from the Yiddish writer Chaim Grade's 1955 memoir of the same name. In a lengthy essay devoted to exploring what it means to be a secular Jew, Klepfisz identifies Grade as an important influence, especially his writings about his mother: “In one poem, Grade describes his mother's desperate effort to get everything done before sunset and ends with her blessing the candles while tears stream down her face because *zi hot farshpetikt dem shabes*, she was late for *shabes*.

The irony, poverty, anger at religion's rigidity and his own youthful callousness made a deep impression on me."³¹ Many years later, Klepfisz provides a strikingly different rendition of a similar familial moment, announcing at the outset, "*Bay undz is es geven andersh*" ("at our house it was different"). In a series of long lines broken into fragments with an expansive use of white space – a strategy designed to underscore her own tentative claim to Yiddish (as a nonnative speaker) – Klepfisz quickly portrays her mother, "Shoshana Roska Lozia Mamma Lo and more recently Rose," as a hardworking seamstress, with no interest in passing on the religious heritage of her own Polish youth. Nevertheless, although "*Erev Shabbes* [Sabbath Eve] was plain *fraytik* [Friday]," the end of the workweek was ritually marked. Bypassing the "Jewish deli / where we never ate (what was the point if you could make it at home?)," mother and daughter would walk to a local Chinese restaurant. The poet recalls, "Jade Gardens. / Perhaps I knew it was *treyf* [not kosher]. She certainly did / but was not concerned."³² Celebrating the holiest day of the week at a Chinese restaurant with "salty wonton soup"? Surely this is a Jewish joke in the making, or at least a splendid opportunity for irony? But Klepfisz resists the obvious, closing instead with a simple but moving set of lines: "It was Friday. The shop was closed. We'd eat dinner and like the rich / lean leisurely back in our booth. I didn't know it was *erev shabes* [the traditional name for Sabbath Eve, this time in lowercase]. / Still – she rested." In this way, Klepfisz redresses past injuries, demarking a space for secular ritual – while refraining from subversively appropriating religious tradition, the more commonplace move for the secular Jewish writer.

For all their collective ferocity in matters of divinity and transcendence, those who identify proudly as Jewish secular poets nevertheless make special allowance for Kabbalah (their generic term for Jewish mysticism) as a rich poetic resource. Bernstein is no exception, as he singles out that mysticism (by way of Gershom Scholem) for its distinctively optimistic view of human language as profoundly effective.³³ Among those who specifically devote themselves to exploring the poetic potential of kabbalistic material, Jerome Rothenberg is perhaps the most widely known – at least to readers of Jewish American verse. In his *Big Jewish Book* (later reshaped and reissued as *Exiled in the World*, 1989), Rothenberg assembles an idiosyncratic range of materials (from antiquity to the contemporary) chosen for their images, methodologies (he is particularly fond of *gematria* – numerology – as a procedural strategy), and anarchic sensibilities, understanding them as by-products of a Jewish mystical sensibility. Drawn to kabbalah's esoteric status, Rothenberg focuses on the tradition as the inspiration for a *secular* counterpoetics – an aggressively

politicized aesthetic posed in opposition to a dominant strain in Western modernist thought that he describes as “the lie of the church and state (I would include synagogues here. . .).”³⁴

While Rothenberg has done much to call attention to kabbalah as a poetic resource, this sense of potential was first named by one of the greatest scholars of kabbalistic thought in the twentieth century, Gershom Scholem, who upon receiving the Bialik Prize, declaimed:

The discovery of the tremendous poetic potential within the Kabbalah, in its own language no less than its poetry proper, which has also come down to us with great richness – all these constitute a realm which has hardly been examined and which holds the promise of great discoveries . . . the tools have not yet been created for understanding the lyric plane within the language of the Kabbalists.³⁵

Thirty-five years later, Peter Cole, a formidable translator, scholar of Hebrew verse culture, and (as we shall see) poet in his own right, takes up Scholem’s charge with the 2012 collection *The Poetry of Kabbalah: Mystical Verse from the Jewish Tradition*. In contrast to Rothenberg, who uses the *idea* of kabbalah (sometimes rather loosely) as a means of showcasing a certain anarchic poetic strain, Cole offers a comprehensive gathering of hymns, chants, and lyric cosmologies, making every effort to attend to the formal elements of the original – a choice that he frames as a pointed departure from previous renderings, which produce “homogenizing poems of empty abstractions . . . and reader’s fantasies of spiritual liberation.”³⁶ Indeed, with this last charge, Cole seems to cast his own recuperative project emphatically in opposition to that of Rothenberg – whose name is conspicuously absent even from the collection’s voluminous notes. Although he has no personal investment in promoting religion as such, Cole is exquisitely attuned to how these poems are directed toward plumbing a space where the divine and the human can intersect. This attentiveness informs his own poetic engagements with kabbalistic materials. For even as he devotes himself to the business of translating – a project that led him and his wife, Adina Hoffman, to cofound Ibis Editions, an innovative press that has been responsible for making a wide range of “Levantine” authors available to an English readership – Cole has written five books of poetry. His most recent collection, *The Invention of Influence* (2014), has been recognized as a breakthrough achievement, making a singular contribution to “new” Jewish poetry by drawing upon traditional materials to make something genuine and distinct. Like so many before him, Cole has long been wary of

the title “Jewish American poet” as a “badge of identity” – a suspicion colored perhaps by his long sojourn in Israel, where identity papers are a pernicious constant. Instead, he prefers the term “Jewish capacity” to describe his own efforts to explore what a range of distinctly Jewish forms of expression mean for his own verse. As a translator, Cole found himself especially drawn to the ways in which medieval Hebrew Andalusian poetry negotiates cultural, religious, ethnic, and formal boundaries. This penchant for aesthetic border crossing is palpable throughout his own work, too, in which he takes up traditional English forms to release, or at least bring the reader closer to, the mysterious power of kabbalistic tropes and cosmologies. In “The Reluctant Kabbalist’s Sonnet,” for example, Cole composes a loosely bound sonnet (fourteen metrically regular lines, with a completely irregular set of occasional rhymes), constructing a purposively awkward and beautiful container for a poem dedicated to the intensely charged erotic yearnings that saturate Jewish mysticism.³⁷ Prefaced by an epigraph attributed to Abulafia, a thirteenth-century kabbalist known for his understanding of ecstatic transformation as a linguistically mediated condition of being, Cole’s densely abstract poem affords the reader of English poetry a sense of the convoluted formulations and conundrums so central to kabbalistic thought: “It is hard to explain What was inside came / through what had been between, although it seems / that what had been within remained the same.”³⁸ These stuttering lines afford a striking instance of what might be understood as conceptual translation, taking us some way toward understanding what Scholem calls the “lyric plane” within kabbalah, as Cole patiently teases out both what kabbalah might mean for poetry and what poetry might mean for kabbalah. Navigating these rough linguistic waters is most certainly a demanding enterprise, and perhaps this is why the unspecified speaker self-identifies as “reluctant.” But there may be more to it, for engaging with kabbalistic material, even for resolutely aesthetic ends, means necessarily confronting the limits of a desacralized Judaism. Although Cole does not claim to be “religious” in any conventional sense of the word, he specifically uses traditional English poetic forms as a way of “releasing the religious experience” – an inherent feature of the material out of which his poems are made. The choice raises interesting questions about form and religion, compelling us to ask whether religious poetry can be open form, in that it doesn’t adhere to a formal rhyme scheme or metrical pattern. Indeed, Cole’s own aesthetic choices carry over from his translations of Jewish mystical poetry, where he makes a concerted effort not only to render meaning but also to engage the formal elements of the

verse.³⁹ And so, for better or worse, Cole finds himself dwelling on the boundary or “seam” (a term that appears throughout the poems) between humanness and something like divine otherness, the world that is known to us and the world that is not; that is, his poems thrive in “the shadow of the sacred.”⁴⁰

Indeed, “Song of the Shattering Vessels” is a particularly strong example of Cole’s capacity for illuminating that shadow space. Here Cole reaches for another traditional form typically used to relay matters of religious or mythic import in memorable fashion – that of the ballad – a deft choice ideally suited to his innovative take on what is probably the best known of kabbalistic myths, *Shevirat ha-keylim* (The Shattering of the Vessels). Central to the cosmology of the great sixteenth-century Jewish mystic Isaac Luria (the “Ari”), the myth relays how God created the world first by contracting himself. From that contraction darkness was created. Then God brought light into being to counter this primordial darkness; this light was then poured into vessels that were sent forth to convey the divine emanation. Had they arrived intact, the world would have been perfect. But the light was so powerful that some of the vessels shattered, leaving it to humanity to gather up the shards in an ongoing effort to repair the damage and thus to restore the world to its intended state of divine wholeness. It is a beautiful narrative that appeals especially to those seeking to understand the role of human existence; indeed it is almost too compelling, since through frequent retellings, its mysteries have been all but drained away, leaving a drily didactic linear fable focusing on the role humanity can play in healing the rupture – a process widely known as *tikkun olam*, or repairing the world.

But Cole gives us something wholly new. Writing in the introduction to his collection of kabbalistic verse, Cole describes how these “hymns . . . can conduct and preserve transformative knowledge, even for those who don’t quite know what they know.”⁴¹ This account extends to his own song – a series of rhyming quatrains each concluding with a varying refrain – which casts rupture and restoration in an ongoing relational dynamic, as the world is imagined to be at once “coming together” even as it is “falling apart.” Thus Cole makes vivid the lyric dimension of kabbalah, using formal constraints not to explain, but to intensify its mysteries. The mystery grows even deeper when Cole splices in bits from another cosmological narrative (this one from the thirteenth century), which, by way of numerology, links the making of the world to the Hebrew alphabet and to a kiss. So, for example, when in the fourth stanza an unspecified “he” queries: “Is that the world coming together? / Can they keep it from falling apart?”⁴² – we are hard pressed to say whether “they” refers to the singing vessels on their sacred journey or to the

lovers whose kiss is of ontological consequence. In either case, Cole keeps the focus on the corporeal and the human – a choice speaking perhaps to his own religious ambivalences.

Through the art of translation and of poesis, Cole suggests an alternative to the usual ways of thinking about the relation between the sacred and the secular. Instead of representing the dynamic as a matter of mutual hostility or rivalry – two separate factions competing for the same space – Cole imagines a more harmonious model, whereby poetry serves an important function in allowing us to draw closer to, and perhaps deepen our understanding of, the sacred – without eschewing its distinct value and place, or suggesting that poetry be accorded similar status. This model also trains our attention on the relation between poetry and prayer. I have written elsewhere about the prominent role these proximate genres play in Jewish poetics.⁴³ But on this occasion I want to look at George Oppen’s “Psalm” (1955), as an especially strong example of how a poem can deepen our understanding of the function of prayer – a sacred form of speech – without forgoing its own investment in the secular. Affiliated with the Objectivist movement, Oppen has long been read as a Jewish American poet.⁴⁴ Yet aside from his affinity for the Hebrew Bible, Oppen rarely refers to explicitly Jewish material. In this respect, he differs from other Objectivists, including Charles Reznikoff, Louis Zukofsky, and Carl Rakosi. Instead, Oppen crafts a different sort of relation to Jewishness, one that is often described as “antinomian” in the sense that he rereads and inverts all kinds of conventions that he understands to be associated with this “covenantal religion.”⁴⁵ This antinomian impulse is at work in one of his signature poems written in 1955, simply called “Psalm”:⁴⁶

PSALM

Veritas sequitur . . .

In the small beauty of the forest
The wild deer bedding down –
That they are there!

Their eyes
Effortless, the soft lips
Nuzzle and the alien small teeth
Tear at the grass

The roots of it
Dangle from their mouths
Scattering earth in the strange woods.
They who are there.

Their paths
 Nibbled thru the fields, the leaves that shade them
 Hang in the distances
 Of sun

The small nouns
 Crying faith
 In this in which the wild deer
 Startle, and stare out.

“Psalm” is largely understood as a praise poem devoted to material existence: “That they are there!”⁴⁷ The poem is thus viewed as fully in accord with the Objectivist commitment to specific, concrete realities. Most of these accounts, however, do not consider how Oppen’s celebration serves as an important response to those biblical poems (the Psalms) that praise the creation with abundant metaphors. That is, most readers of “Psalm” have little to say about its liturgical frame, concentrating instead on Oppen’s gift for the particular. This is an absolutely singular aspect of the poem, but one that garners even more appreciation when placed in a biblical context. For unlike those Hebrew doxologies that are packed with figurative language, this “Psalm” is economical, direct, and comparatively free of linguistic adornment or abstraction. Even more importantly, the poem attests to a sturdy “faith” in language: “The small nouns crying faith / In this in which.” This sort of confidence is markedly absent from the general tenor of the Psalms, where linguistic efficacy is a persistent source of anxiety. In this way, Oppen’s “Psalm” seems grounded in the same sort of investment in linguistic possibilities that is central to both Bernstein and Cole. Highly compact, the poem makes a space for intense presence, speaking perhaps to the kabbalistic notion of *tsimtsum*, or “originary contraction,” whereby the Creator contracts from the Creation to make space for others. This divine compression makes it possible to take in the material wonders of this earth, “the being of things” (or *esse rerum*, the elided portion of the line from Thomas Aquinas – *Veritas sequitur* – with which the poem begins). That is, although God is not the poet’s object of praise, the poem cannot be simply categorized as “secular” nor “religious,” thus diffusing the usual hostilities that characterize the relation between “religious” and “secular” culture, gently proposing a more nuanced perspective.

While Oppen gives a light touch to the question of the sacred, he opens the way to considering the work of one of the most radical and important contributors to a rigorous theory of Jewish poetics, Allen Grossman, who goes further than most in naming the constraints facing the would-be Jewish poet. To

begin, for Grossman the very idea of a *secular* Jewish poetics is unfathomable, simply because, as he understands it, Judaism is a “culture of holiness” – a culture bound by a calling to participate in God’s creation “by restoring it, fact by fact, to his nature.”⁴⁸ However, lest one think that this partnership is between equals, according human creators the same arena of expansive possibilities, Grossman carefully stresses that the “Jew’s word” (unlike those of others) does not “‘create’ [in the sense of making something new] for that would be redundant,” since everything already is.⁴⁹ It then falls to the Jewish poet to fulfill a “*theophoric*” (God-bearing) function, by constructing a place where God’s presence can be known. Grossman takes up this calling in the titular poem of his 2001 volume, *How To Do Things with Tears*:

In thy springs, O Zion, are the water wheels
Of my mind! The wheels beat the shining stream.
Whack. Dying. And then death. *Whack*. Learning. Learned.
Whack. Breathing. And breath. *Whack*. Gone with the wind.⁵⁰

So begins this variation on a petitionary psalm. With a jarring, awkward, indeed ugly word, “Whack,” a word that has no meaning other than pure sound, we discover from the outset that the Jewish poet must refrain from poetic niceties or rhetorical flourishes, for this kind of poet is dedicated fully to invoking the Presence, in all its holy difference, and must not risk deflecting attention through aesthetic trappings. This kind of keen focus on the business at hand extends to his use of allusions. Like many poems, this one bristles with intertextuality. Readers who work their way through its nine unrhymed quatrains will find themselves in a swirl of textual soundings – as Blake, William Cowper, Homer, and several biblical psalms all come into play. But, in this instance at least, the poet seems relatively unburdened by the usual “anxiety / anxieties of influence” that accompany such gestures. For writing under the sign of the “Jewish poet,” for whom “there is nothing new under the sun,” Grossman is released from the burden of originality.

Constructed as a phantasmagoric traveler, the poet-speaker first introduces himself as a solitary entity, “I am old. The direction of time is plain”; but after a wild journey that entails passing “under the gates of Erebus,” the individuated speaker gives way to a collective utterance:

What is left
To mind but remembrances of the world?
The people of the road, in tears, sit down
At the roadside, and tell stories of the world.
Then they rise in tears and go up.⁵¹

This shift, from the individual to the collective, may be a distinguishing marker of the Jewish theophoric project – one that raises compelling questions about the status of the *Jewish* lyric poem in the context of the larger history of Western verse, which tends to privilege the individual, separate self. But Grossman’s critique is not limited to the Western/gentile other. Earlier in the poem, the speaker finds himself wandering, in search of the “Zion of the mind!” – a mental/imaginative incarnation of “home” that complicates a wholesale investment in a geospecific locale as the site of sacred belonging. This alternative narrative gains momentum in the penultimate stanza (cited previously) as a diasporic gathering: “The people of the road,” are engaged in an ongoing journey toward Presence, without a clear destination in sight. With this move, Grossman’s speaker radically proposes that a perpetual state of homelessness and displacement is in keeping with the theophoric project – a proposal that runs counter to the more conventional Jewish narrative, which pits Exile, where God is a diminished presence, against the “Holy Land,” God’s true homeland.

With its turn toward the collective, “Tears” tests the limits of lyric (as the province of the individual sensibility), inviting us to think about the relation between poetry and prayer. Indeed, with its undercurrent of psalms (both 87 and 137 seem to reverberate), the poem may be best understood as a hybrid, drawing on elements of both kinds of utterance. However, with its last urgent petition, the boundary erodes and lyric gives way to liturgy, as the speaker(s) cry for release: “Deliver us, / Zion, from mist. Kill us in the light.” In a brilliant revisionary move, Grossman picks up that moment in the *Iliad* when Ajax asks Zeus to dispel the mist concealing the enemy so that the Greeks may suffer defeat in the full light of day as behooves true heroes, thereby acquiring the status of near-gods. But Homer’s focus is on mitigating sacred difference – an aspiration that has no place in Jewish poetics. So Grossman’s variation is lodged in the interest of illuminating the difference that sets God apart from the human. In this way, he makes a strong case for how the sacred takes us into the very heart of what sets Jewish poetry apart from other verse traditions. For the Jewish poet necessarily writes in the service of constructing a covenantal space where *kedusha* – holiness, the word for nonnegotiable difference between the Creator and the created – may dwell.⁵²

Much earlier in this essay, I discussed how the kaddish, the Jewish prayer linked to ritual mourning, becomes the target of radical secular poetics. It is thus fitting to conclude by returning to the kaddish as the site of yet another sort of poetic resistance. Yet this time the issue is not one of religious decorum

or belief; instead it is a matter of expanding the boundaries of ritual expression. For in “Lamentation” (2010), the opening poem in her most recent book, Rachel Tzvia Back poignantly demonstrates the profound emotional range to be accessed by recovering an active relation to an ancient genre, that of lament. Historically, the lament was ubiquitous throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Although there are several types of lament, the lament for the dead is probably the most widely known. Among other distinctive features, this kind of utterance has been often specifically marked as a women’s genre.⁵³ Back invokes this traditional linking when, in the middle of this long serial poem, she juxtaposes her brothers’ recitation of kaddish, where they stand “to praise / the Name,” to her and her sisters’ search for a comparable rite of mourning:

And where will we
my sisters and I
stand – how

will we grieve (she
sat alone
badad)⁵⁴

Badad – in English, alone. With this word, Back links familial loss to one of communal scope; for *badad* is used in the first verse of the book of Lamentations to describe an utterly ruined Jerusalem, abandoned by God. This biblical frame is first introduced with the poet’s query “how / will we grieve,” since Lamentations begins with a comparable cry, *eicha* (“How?!”). It is the first word of three of the book’s five chapters and gives the book its Hebrew title. “How?”: a rhetorical wail, as in “How could something like this happen?!” Back’s analogy is breathtaking. Arrogant? Perhaps. Effective? Absolutely. To compare a seismic catastrophe to an ordinary human loss may seem disproportional. But as the poem unfolds, the analogy is wholly earned, deepening our understanding of both this kind of individual loss and the full weight of the biblical poem.

Facing the impending death of her beloved father, the poet finds herself navigating unmapped terrain, sorting through the radical disparity between the man she knew, “Six feet tall broad and bearded, . . . professor scientist” with the small figure who lies “huddled under / the covers.” Clinicians might characterize this position as one of “ambiguous loss,” a loss whose contours are ill defined. For the poet, this is a transgressive space; she is a “Wayward daughter who imagines / the after before . . . writing / on imagined mourning morning prayers.” Yet the impulse to write her way through

this grief makes complete sense in light of the linguistic crises precipitated by his terminal leave taking. As he fades, the poet's world becomes radically unmoored, as evidenced by the stuttering lines and absence of narrative cohesion. After all, he was her "Aba" (Hebrew for "Father"), spelled out in the poem as "aleph, bet, aleph," which also evokes the beginning of the Hebrew alphabet (alef, bet). Any thoughts of easy sentimentality or gimmickry quickly dissipate when we recall how the poet of *Lamentations* routinely deploys alphabetical acrostics as a way of imaginatively envisioning order by which to counter the chaos.⁵⁵ In this way Back grounds her poetics, as do Bernstein and Cole, in the ancient mystical view of language as a world-building force – a perspective clearly at work in this long serial poem composed of twenty-two sections, one for each of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Like the biblical poem, Back's "Lamentation" does not provide anything in the way of comforting closure. All she can do is promise to "bury you / in the uncertain March," and to "hold what is lost." But with the *aleph bet* intact (twenty two sections, twenty two letters), meaning can be restored. With this poem, Back suggests yet another way that the Jewish poet crafts a relation to the sacred. While she certainly does not displace such sacred forms of prayer as the kaddish, nor propose a wholesale alternative to the standard liturgy (even on the grounds of gendered exclusivity), she does show us how poems can help us find our way to those sacred texts that may help us live.

Notes

- 1 David Novak, "Secularity without Secularism," *Hedgehog Review* 8:1/2 (Spring/Summer 2006): 107. Novak does not simply celebrate Jewish secularity; rather, he carefully sorts out the losses as well as the gains that have followed the shift away from religious-based doctrines of political authority.
- 2 Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Midrashic Sensibilities: Secular Judaism and Radical Poetics (A Personal Essay in Several Chapters)," in *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture*, ed. Stephen Paul Miller and Daniel Morris (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 202.
- 3 Karl Shapiro, "The Jewish Problem," in *Coda: Last Poems*, ed. Robert Phillips (Huntsville: Texas Review Press, 2008), 59.
- 4 John Hollander, "The Question of American Jewish Poetry," in *What Is Jewish Literature?* ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 36.
- 5 David Biale, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 5.
- 6 Charles Bernstein, "Poetry and/or the Sacred," *Jacket* 14 (July 2001): 1. <http://jacketmagazine.com/14/bernstein-sacred.html>.

- 7 Charles Bernstein, “Reznikoff’s Nearness,” in *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 197–228.
- 8 Charles Bernstein, “Gertrude Stein’s War Years: Setting the Record Straight.” *Jacket2* (2014). <https://jacket2.org/feature/gertrude-steins-war-years-setting-record-straight>.
- 9 Maria Damon and Amy Feinstein have both written about Stein as a Jewish poet.
- 10 *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture*.
- 11 Some of these new contributors include the Jewish/Buddhist spiritual leader and poet Norman Fischer – and the formidable critic Marjorie Perloff, whose essay on Paul Celan’s status as an “ordinary” modernist is an important effort to resist the hagiographic impulses that have limited our readings.
- 12 Hank Lazar, “Who or What Is a Jewish Poet, with Specific Reference to David Antin, Charles Bernstein, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Jerome Rothenberg,” in *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture*, 18–31.
- 13 Bernstein, “Reznikoff’s Nearness,” 217.
- 14 Charles Bernstein, “The Jew,” in *Recalculating* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 122.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., 172.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., 173.
- 19 Hana Wirth-Nesher demonstrates the centrality of this prayer in the Jewish American imagination in *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).
- 20 Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 6.
- 21 Ibid., 9.
- 22 Bernstein, *Recalculating*, 177.
- 23 Wieseltier, 576.
- 24 Bernstein, *Recalculating*, 177.
- 25 Kathryn Hellerstein, “On Yiddish Poetry and Translation of Yiddish Poetry” in *Radical Poetics and Jewish Culture*, 71.
- 26 See my essay “The End of Exile: Jewish Identity and Its Diasporic Poetics,” *PMLA* 113:2 (March 1998): 273–287.
- 27 Biale, *Not in the Heavens*, 163–169.
- 28 Irena Klepfisz, “Secular Jewish Identity: Yiddishkayt in America,” in *Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes* (Portland, OR: Eighth Mountain Press, 1990), 159.
- 29 For a fuller discussion of Osherow’s engagement with Yiddish, see Wirth-Nesher’s *Call It English* as well as my own discussion in “‘None Are Like You, Shulamite’: Linguistic Longings in Jewish American Verse,” *Prooftexts* 30:1 (2010): 35–60.
- 30 Jacqueline Osherow, *Dead Men’s Praise* (New York: Grove Press, 1999), 3. Osherow offers another poignant elegy for Yiddish in her sonnet sequence “A Crown for Yiddish,” which will appear in her forthcoming collection, *Ultimatum from Paradise* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).
- 31 Klepfisz, “Secular Jewish Identity,” 152.

- 32 Irena Klepfisz, "Der mames shabosim / My Mother's Sabbath Days," in *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New (1971–1990)* (Portland, OR: Eighth Mountain Press, 1990), 230–231.
- 33 Bernstein, "Reznikoff's Nearness," 213.
- 34 Jerome Rothenberg, "The House of Jews: Experimental Modernism and Traditional Judaism," in *Radical Poetics*, 32.
- 35 Gershom Scholem, "Understanding the Internal Process," in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time and Other Essays*, trans. Johnathan Chipman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 47–48.
- 36 Peter Cole, *The Poetry of Kabbalah: Mystical Verse From The Jewish Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), xxi.
- 37 Elliot Wolfson's *Language, Eros and Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) is devoted to this subject.
- 38 Peter Cole, "The Reluctant Kabbalist's Sonnet," in *The Invention of Influence* (New York: New Directions Press, 2014), 27.
- 39 Cole, *Poetry of the Kabbalah*, xxi.
- 40 Cole uses this phrase in the course of his interview with Ben Lerner in *Bomb*. <http://bombmagazine.org/article/3180/peter-cole>.
- 41 Cole, *Poetry of the Kabbalah*, xvi.
- 42 Cole, "Song of the Shattering Vessels," in *Invention of Influence*, 25.
- 43 Maeera Y. Shreiber, *Singing in a Strange Land: A Jewish American Poetics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 179–227.
- 44 The term "Objectivism" refers to a poetic movement that began in the 1930s. Its practitioners, many of whom were Jewish, eschewed the abstract and symbolic in favor of concrete objects and plain language.
- 45 Meg Schoerke, "Radical Relation: Jewish Identity and the Power of Contradictions in the Poetry of Muriel Rukeyser and George Oppen," in *Radical Poetics*, 245–273.
- 46 George Oppen, "Psalm," in *New Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2002), 99.
- 47 See, for example, Alan Golding's discussion in *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*, ed. Rachel Blau Duplessis and Peter Quartermain (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 84–106.
- 48 Allen Grossman, "Holiness," in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, eds. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (New York: Scribner, 1987), 390.
- 49 Allen Grossman, "Jewish Poetry Considered as a Theophoric Project," in *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 160.
- 50 Allen Grossman, "How to Do Things with Tears," in *How to Do Things with Tears* (New York: New Directions, 2001), 3.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 3–4.
- 52 Norman Finkelstein, in "Secular Jewish Culture and Radical Poetic Discontents," in *Radical Poetics*, 234–238, provides a wonderful account of Grossman's "theophoric project."
- 53 For a fuller account of this aspect of the genre, see my discussion in *Singing in a Strange Land*, 148–150.
- 54 Rachel Tzvia Back, "Lamentation," in *The Messenger Comes* (San Diego: Singing Horse Press, 2010), 35–57. The book's title and epigraph belong to Leon Wieseltier's *Kaddish*.

With this allusive move, Back names both the ambivalence and sense of obligation weighting her poems: “A messenger comes to the mourner’s house. Come, / says the messenger, you are needed. / I cannot come, says the mourner. My spirit is broken. / That is why you are needed, says the messenger” (Wieseltier, 166).

- 55 See Rachel Adler, “For These I Weep: A Theology of Lament,” *Chronicle*, 68 (2006): 16–21.

Yiddish American Poetry

AVRAHAM NOVERSHTERN

When Morris Rosenfeld published his first poem in a New York Yiddish weekly toward the end of 1886, little did he imagine that in doing so, he would be laying down the foundations of a literary enterprise that would span well over a century – one of the most impressive achievements of modern Jewish culture in general, and of American Jewish culture in particular. One is able to ascribe such symbolic importance to Rosenfeld's poem, especially in light of the fact that the first Yiddish book of poetry published in the United States, in 1877, was a bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish work that lacked aesthetic value and can be viewed at best, as a literary footnote, leaving no trace in its wake. Morris Rosenfeld, in contrast, launched a literary career in the late 1800s that would continue steadily for many decades. Continuity is indeed one of the fundamental terms in any discussion of the nature and development of Yiddish poetry in America. Throughout its life span, four to five generations of poets can be identified, all relying on their predecessors' artistic output, which some nurtured and cultivated, while others challenged and disavowed in the name of blazing a new literary trail. Whether it be the poets' own stature or the inner nature of change and renewal their works had championed, the fresh young voices in each generation helped elevate American Yiddish poetry from the founding generation's rhetorical offerings all the way to the third generation's refined, modernist aesthetics. The poetry of Morris Rosenfeld and that of his generational peers serve as a dialectical point of origin for the spirit of innovation and renewal that would define future generations of Yiddish poets.

The 1880s was the decade that also marked the birth of modern Yiddish poetry in Eastern Europe, hailed by Y. L. Peretz's poem, *Monish* (1888). This apparent chronological coincidence also illustrates the differences in how Yiddish literature developed on each side of the ocean, with regard to the centrality of prose versus poetry. Poetry has always been at the center of American Yiddish literature. The significant shifts brought about by Jewish mass immigration to the United States, the rapid changes sweeping through

individuals' personal and public lifestyles alike, the American ethos placing an emphasis on freedom and the individual, and, last, a missing sense of spiritual rootedness among the dynamic and vibrant Jewish immigrant community, all conspired to give poetry a primary role in American Yiddish literature. When comparing prose with poetry, what is perhaps most striking is the secondary role played by prose in the development of American Yiddish literature, notwithstanding the fact that through the years it has been associated with first-rate authors such as Isaac Bashevis Singer. American Yiddish fiction was by nature more conservative and, for the most part, steered clear of any kind of bold, formal innovation. In this context, one must also consider the specific conditions of literary production in America. Yiddish prose, particularly the novel, found a comfortable niche in daily newspapers, and, therefore, its authors felt compelled to appeal to a wide cultural common denominator for maximum readership. Unlike prose, Yiddish poetry chiefly relied on the literary journal or the book as its primary means of publication and therefore, by default, found itself appealing from the outset to a more elitist readership.

It is by no means coincidental that Rosenfeld's first poem appeared in a New York weekly with socialist leanings. Socialism and anarchism were by far the most prevalent spiritual and ideological frameworks for the first generation of American Yiddish poets, otherwise known as the "Proletarian Poets" or "Sweatshop Poets." Their poems appeared mainly in journals and magazines published by those movements and would also be sung, read out, and recited in rallies organized by their supporters. Those poets became the cultural heroes of social groups that felt a deep, pressing need to flesh out quickly a gallery of exemplary figures who were distinctive not only for their literary output but also for their tragic fate. David Edelstadt was essentially the anarchists' poet laureate and would be remembered for his declamatory poetry, his unyielding devotion and sacrifice during his tenure as editor of the movement's weekly publication, and, of course, his untimely death at the age of twenty-six, having fallen victim to the "proletarian disease," that is, tuberculosis. Another anarchist poet, Joseph Bovshover, had a short-lived literary career because of a debilitating mental illness that claimed him in the very prime of his life.

The memory of these poets was therefore sealed with the stamp of tragedy. Indeed, over the years, American Yiddish poetry has made a point of highlighting its elegiac and often tragic character, a stark contrast to the language's reputation for its humorous flavoring. The tragic aura hovering over Yiddish poetry was the product of several concurrent elements at play: the grueling individual struggle to make a living that was the lot of some of the most

prominent poets, their overall feeling that they lacked a worthy audience, and the unsettling realization that their cultural oeuvre would be left without any heirs, as the very future of their linguistic medium was being called into question. Later on, the Holocaust would only deepen these painful feelings among the last generation of American Yiddish poets, with the discovery that the cultural world from which they had emerged had been destroyed.

An air of tragedy also hung over Morris Rosenfeld's long literary career, which, for the most part, did not follow his peers' biographical path. As luck had it, Leo Wiener, who had been a lecturer on Slavic literatures at Harvard, discovered Rosenfeld's poetry and took it upon himself to publish and carry it beyond the boundaries of the Yiddish speaking and reading community. In 1898, he spearheaded the publication of a book with the telling title *Songs from the Ghetto*, which showcased Rosenfeld's poetry in a way that illuminates Wiener's treatment of the Yiddish language itself. The Yiddish texts were transcribed using gothic fonts, making them that much closer to German, while the facing page offered a prosaic translation of the poems into English. Later on, an impressive edition of Rosenfeld's work appeared in German, this time including poetic translations and the illustrations of E. M. Lilien, who went on to become extremely successful. Thus, Morris Rosenfeld became the first American Yiddish poet to earn acclaim and recognition beyond the boundaries of his own language and community.

Rosenfeld had always been a poet who appealed to his readers both orally and in writing during reading events for his own poetry, which he would recite with pathos and sentimentality. When his poetry made its way beyond the realms of the Yiddish speaking community, both his intended and actual audiences grew considerably and now also included the rather established Jewish circles in America who spoke either English or German. Rosenfeld consequently fancied himself a sort of cultural "ambassador" for his people and the environment in which he grew up – that of the struggling Yiddish speaking immigrants huddled together on New York City's Lower East Side. Rosenfeld was by no means a staunch proponent of any ideology; nor was his poetry the harbinger of those socialist or anarchist ideas that were of great importance to his generation. His was a rhetorical, populist poetry in approach, emphasizing a nationalistic and pro-Zionist stance. He also wrote prose, dedicating popular monographs to two poets, Heinrich Heine and Judah Halevi. This choice of dedications is not without its symbolic meaning, as it embodies the dual roots of Rosenfeld's poetry, which incorporated formal features of world poetry while also relying on both traditional Jewish elements and contemporary topics.

Morris Rosenfeld's "flash-in-the-pan" success outside the Yiddish speaking community led the poet to overestimate somewhat his own creative prowess; that in turn resulted in a failed attempt at writing English poetry, an experiment doomed from the outset, and it was not long before his fame and poetry both hit an impasse. At the turn of the twentieth century, Rosenfeld was already considered a poet who was well past his heyday. In his final, materially and spiritually destitute days, he became the living embodiment of the fate that awaited even the most prominent of first generation American Yiddish poets. The heightened rhetoric, the highbrow language with its penchant for Germanized vocabulary, along with the didactic tone that was so characteristic of these poets' oeuvres, quickly became a thing of the past.

As the presence of the "Proletarian Poets" gradually faded during the first decade of the twentieth century, new, emergent poetic trends started featuring prominently in the works of authors of that same generation. Yehoash, for one, wrote neoromantic poetry that glorified nature and was ripe with reflexive, pensive overtones. Abraham Liessin devoted a great deal of creative energy in his poetry to significant figures from Jewish history, around whom he had created an aura of martyrdom, on par with the then-prevalent notions among his generation. The thematic scope of Yiddish poetry thus gradually grew wider, becoming increasingly more diverse and multifaceted.

It was against this very backdrop that American Yiddish culture experienced its first ever poetic revolution, owing to a handful of young authors whose earliest works could not have prepared anyone for the sheer poetic impact they would have only a few years later. These young poets proudly took on the name *Di yunge* (The Young Ones), a name seen as rather ironic by those who opposed them and all that they stood for. Unlike the "Proletarian Poets," who were for all intents and purposes a generational phenomenon with very loose interpersonal ties among members of the group, *Di yunge* were first and foremost a literary group, fraught with intense, intimate intrarelationships. In their early days, members of the group made ends meet through manual labor; however, by no means did that stop them from becoming part of Yiddish culture's first ever bohemian cohort. *Di yunge* would hold endless meetings at cheap cafes in New York's Lower East Side in the vicinity of the Jewish newspaper desks. These meetings became the birthplace of several initiatives that from 1907 onward would yield the first American Yiddish publications exclusively devoted to literature. Members of *Di yunge* included poets and prose fiction authors alike, but most critics would agree that the group members who made the most significant artistic impact were in fact the poets, and two in particular, Moyshe Leyb Halpern and Mani Leyb.

Moyshe Leyb Halpern's roots go back to Galicia, the geocultural region that was once Polish territory and at the time was under the sovereignty of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Before immigrating to the United States in 1908, Halpern spent some of his most formative years in Vienna, where he was profoundly influenced by German poetry. He would eventually become one of Heine's translators into Yiddish, and the tone of sarcastic irony that Heine took so much pleasure in weaving into his poetry left a significant imprint on Halpern's own body of work. Mani Leyb, his peer, brought with him to America an altogether different cultural heritage and set of influences. Being a native of a Jewish shtetl in the Ukraine, Mani Leyb had soaked up the influences of classic Russian poetry as well as the rhythms of multilingual, coteritorial Ukrainian and Russian folk songs.

Although there may have been key fundamental differences in the literary upbringings of these two contemporaneous prominent poets, this did not stop them from sharing several common traits that also marked their peers, from a vehement rebuking of the kinship between Yiddish poetry and contemporary ideologies, to the very act of turning to the Yiddish folk song in particular and Jewish folklore in general for inspiration. After a decade of intensive creativity, Zishe Landau, one of *Di yunge's* most prominent poet figures, edited an anthology of American Yiddish poetry in 1919. In Landau's rather sarcastic foreword, he took it upon himself to characterize early American Yiddish poetry with a dismissive, sweeping statement, describing it as no more than a "rhyme department" within the current national and social movements. The poetry of *Di yunge*, particularly the work of Mani Leyb, indeed emerges as the dialectical opposite of the works of its predecessors, the Proletarian Poets. Taking the place of heightened rhetoric was the glorification of silence. From rallying the masses to take to the streets, the poet was now withdrawing into his own intimate world, drawn by ennui and allured by decadence-fueled passivity. The poetic text reflected a sophisticated linguistic consciousness, not to mention a deep aversion to the usage of Germanized vocabulary, which in the eyes of these poets was the epitome of artificiality, vapidness, and cultural inauthenticity. The delusory linguistic wealth of their predecessors now made way for a far more stripped-down vocabulary within which it was now up to the poet to uncover a wide array of subtle meanings. However, these trends did not apply to the works of Moyshe Leyb Halpern, whose expansive poetry steadfastly refused to adhere to these stringent rules.

The poet's inward withdrawal, along with the linguistic and thematic minimalism that became synonymous with the creative output of *Di yunge* and particularly Mani Leyb's poetry, inspired staunch opposition among an even

newer group of young poets, out of which the second revolution in American Yiddish poetry was to be born. Nearing the end of 1919, a little more than a decade after the emergence of *Di yunge*, the *Inzikh* group began forming. Unlike its predecessors, the group was solely made up of poets and included no prose fiction authors at all. Heading *Inzikh* was A. Leyeles, the poet who had started the group and formulated its principles. At his side was Jacob Glatstein, who soon became the group's most prominent figure alongside Leyeles himself. They published an anthology of their poems in 1920, prefaced with a literary manifesto that was unique in Yiddish literature in its elaborate argumentation.

The many diverse arguments in the *Inzikh* manifesto all strove to promote one primary goal – to expand the scope of Yiddish poetry in all its aspects. Regarding prosody, *Inzikh* poets expressed their preference for free verse, though still acknowledging the aesthetic value and merits of regular metrical forms. According to their manifesto:

We demand individual rhythm because only thus can the truth that we seek and want to express be revealed. . . . Free verse is not imperative for introspective poets. It is possible to have introspective poems in regular meter . . . only for the real poet is free verse a new, powerful means of expression, a new, wide world full of unexplored territories.¹

The characterization of free verse as a “wide world” is the formal equivalent of their thematic claim to expand the scope of Yiddish poetry so that it covers all topics commanding the attention of the writer as both a Jew and a human being living in modern times. The *inzikhists* therefore rejected thematic and linguistic minimalism, a trademark of the poetry of *Di yunge*, championing instead a far more inclusive and broader outlook:

For us, then, the senseless and unproductive question of whether a poet “should” write on national or social topics or merely on personal ones does not arise. For us, everything is “personal.” Wars and revolutions, Jewish pogroms and the workers’ movement, Protestantism and Buddha, the Yiddish school and the Cross, the mayoral elections and a ban on our language – all these may concern us or not, just as a blond woman and our own unrest may or may not concern us.²

That they consciously chose to lay out these topics and address them in their manifesto reflects to a great extent the intellectual horizons of the group members. Moreover, the preceding passage allows one a much closer examination of the gap between these various topics and the actual thematic scope of the *inzikhists*’ poetry in the group’s early days. Their words convey a

passion for Eastern cultures that was very much consistent with the zeitgeist both in Europe and in America and that inevitably influenced Yiddish poets as well. Despite the seemingly haphazard order in which the topics are listed, the attraction to the world of Christianity, an extremely charged topic for any Jew, stands out in this manifesto. Also evident is a deep emotional connection to the violent events taking place at the time, beginning with the pogroms that ravaged Eastern Europe toward the end of World War I, particularly in the Ukraine, claiming the lives of tens of thousands of Jews. Indeed, these contemporary events did serve as inspiration for the poetry of the *inzikhists*. Simultaneously, the altogether bland and casual manner in which the speaker refers to the “mayoral elections” conveys just how uninspired by domestic American events, modernist American Yiddish poets were. The opening of one of Jacob Glatstein’s early poems, “1919,” published that same year, offers a prime example of the major transition from Di yunge’s modern poetry to the modernist poetry of the *inzikhists*:

Di letste tsayt iz keyn shpur nit mer geblibn
 fun Yankl bereb Yitskhok,
 nor a kleyntshik pintele a kaylekhdihs,
 vos kayklt zikh tseulterheyt iber gasn,
 mit arufgetshepete, umgelumperte glider.

[No trace left these last days
 of Yankl, Reb Isaac’s son:
 only a tiny round particle
 wheeling annoyingly through the streets,
 thrashing clumsy stumps.]³

The opening words are heavy with negative overtones as they disavow the speaker’s previous cultural heritage, rooted in Jewish Eastern Europe. The speaker now finds himself a drifter, wandering about aimlessly through a faceless urban landscape, threatening his very being. With that, young Glatstein joins that modernist trend which eyed modernity in all its facets with an air of suspicion verging on hostility. And while the poem’s title, “1919,” points to a tangible and concrete time frame, it still does not concretize it altogether. That is to say, while it is a time of violence, its palpable manifestations are ultimately left for the reader to imagine. In keeping with a particular strain of modernism, the poem exhibits extremely heightened self-awareness in the way it addresses the tension between the wholesomeness of the poet’s past identity, now completely destroyed, and the sense of fragmentation that from now on shall define him. When it comes to prosody, Glatstein does not

shy away from using free verse here, specific to American Yiddish modernism, unlike the poetry of Di yunge, which remained loyal to regular metrics. Both vocabulary and rhythm in this poem convey an affinity to the cadences of spoken language, while the overall image created by the poem and its extreme self-ironic tone not only challenges but outright negates the notion of “beauty” that had been so important to Di yunge.

The history of the poem’s publication is an additional element that provides insight into the sheer magnitude of the changes affecting American Yiddish poetry at the time. The poem “1919” appeared in the short-lived magazine *Poezye*, a name undoubtedly inspired by *Poetry*, the well-established American literary journal of the same title. Indeed, the publication’s chosen name illustrates the kinship between Yiddish modernism and the “little magazines” – publications that appealed to an elitist readership and, in the case of Yiddish, could never have enjoyed a lengthy life span. All of these elements together mark the clear and distinct divide between the modern poetry of Di yunge and the modernism of the *inzikhists*.

The struggle between the two groups carried over well into the early 1920s as the aesthetic ideals of Di yunge were not compatible with the direction in which the *inzikhists* wished to steer Yiddish poetry. However, several prominent figures in American Yiddish poetry were not about to accept the clear-cut division between these two groups. This certainly was the case with Moyshe Leyb Halpern and H. Leivick. The latter in particular, despite taking his first steps in American Yiddish poetry in 1913, went on explicitly to denounce certain literary values cherished by Di yunge. Over the years, differences between the two groups steadily blurred. *Inzikh*, a publication that appeared sporadically throughout the 1920s at long intervals, became a regular fixture again in 1934 as a monthly. In its newer, 1930s incarnation, the publication featured a mixed content of poetry and journalistic pieces that mainly addressed the challenges faced by the modern Jewish intellectual in the years after the Nazis’ ascent to power and the consolidation of the Stalinist dictatorship in the Soviet Union. The year 1940 saw the journal’s demise – a date also marking the end of modernism as a distinctive trend within the American Yiddish literary scene.

From the second half of the 1930s onward, American Yiddish poetry in general, and its specific modernist strain in particular, began explicitly to emphasize a renewed sense of spiritual closeness to the traditional Jewish world and the life of Eastern European Jewry, a trend that would only grow during the years of the Holocaust and in its aftermath. Jacob Glatstein’s declarative poem, “A gute nakht, velt” (“Good Night, World”), published in 1938, marked the dramatic change in the worldview of American Yiddish modernists. It was

in this poem that Glatstein proclaimed his willingness to “repent,” albeit without any actual reembracing of a religious lifestyle.

This cultural or religious “repentance” trend among Yiddish American poets only grew stronger in the wake of the arrival of several prominent writers on American shores, authors who, in spite of mounting difficulties, were able to leave Poland and immigrate to the United States in the 1930s. Kadya Molodowsky was the first to arrive in 1935, with Aaron Zeitlin following in 1939, on the very cusp of World War II and the Holocaust. The post-Holocaust wave of Jewish immigrants to America included the poets Chaim Grade and Rajzel Żychliński. Itzik Manger too settled in New York City in 1951; however, the extremely limited scope of his poetic output during his American years is a telling example of the hardships these writers faced. With a spiritual world and consciousness forged in Eastern Europe, they now had to resume their work after the Holocaust under far less auspicious cultural conditions.

By the end of the decade of the 1940s, American Yiddish poets were faced with a cultural reality they could never have envisioned. In between the two world wars they had all found themselves creating and becoming one of the primary centers for Yiddish poetry and literature, acting as key members in a kind of triad known as “New York–Warsaw–Moscow.” However, when Jewish Warsaw was wiped out, and the Stalinist regime shut down what few Yiddish cultural institutions had remained in 1948, the sense of loneliness that already prevailed among American Yiddish writers burned deeper than ever before. They took some comfort in the fact that in the newly established state of Israel an impressive number of Yiddish authors were actively working, while additional Yiddish poets were also making their voices heard in other countries. Nevertheless, this dramatic historical shift in the wake of the Holocaust left a distinct mark on the nature of American Yiddish poetry in its final years. At its height, this poetry celebrated, among other things, the local color of the environment out of which it grew, that is to say, New York City’s condensed urban spaces, as well as vast American landscapes. Yet in the postwar period this fondness for American topics was relegated to the sidelines, with the Yiddish poet regarding himself first and foremost as someone whose writing must epitomize the multilayered spectrum of Jewish experience – both past and present.

A Collective Biography

At its height, in the years between the two world wars, the roster of American Yiddish poets grew impressively. For instance, the anthology *Amerikaner yidishe*

poezye, edited by M. Bassin (1940), featured the works of more than thirty poets. And while one would naturally find it impossible to weave a collective, cultural biography of a group so wide and diverse, the majority of these writers did share several fundamental traits, despite their many intergenerational differences. Nearly all of them were born in Jewish Eastern Europe, where they had received their early education and where their cultural identity came into being. Both their general and Jewish traditional education ended prematurely and did not include many years of yeshiva or formal high school studies. Those Yiddish poets who had arrived in America with a rich traditional and cultural Hebrew heritage were the exception to the rule. And so, with several notable exceptions, the phenomenon of bilingual Hebrew and Yiddish poets ultimately became rather rare.

The literary careers of American Yiddish poets for the most part were launched in the “New World,” and while some did arrive with manuscripts indicating previous, early attempts at writing, only a handful could boast of the fact they had had their literary debut in Eastern Europe or had already made a name for themselves at the time of their immigration. One such man was Avrom Reisen, a popular, acclaimed poet and short-story author who had taken up residence in New York in the period before World War I.

Yiddish poetry in the United States is therefore, at its root, an American phenomenon, and as such served as a bridge between the two worlds, the cultural heritage of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, on the one hand, and the American, modern, urban world, on the other, which offered these poets the prospect of nurturing their literary aspirations and letting them grow in an atmosphere of complete freedom.

The literary ramifications of these facts were more far-reaching than one might initially have realized. Throughout its entire course, American Yiddish poetry developed a profound spiritual bond with the very essence of the “New World” and particularly, New York City urban life. However, their passion for American motifs and themes notwithstanding, the fact remains that Yiddish poets only became subject to the creative influences of Anglo-American poetry rather late, during the mid-1920s. And while most Yiddish poets did immigrate to America at a relatively young age, for the majority it was ultimately at a time in their lives that proved too late for them to form a truly creative bond with the English language. Their knowledge of world poetry therefore had many diverse influences, but was chiefly the product of the languages they had taken with them from Eastern Europe, that is, Russian and German. For only a handful, American poetry offered genuine inspiration. The poet who was perhaps most popular

among American Yiddish poets was Walt Whitman. The fact that several generations of American Yiddish authors had referenced him in their works, even dedicating some of their poetry to him, illustrates how their knowledge of Anglo-American poetry was in reality more closely related to the figure of one of its founding fathers than to that of any of their contemporary poet peers.

The first two generations of American Yiddish poets shared the same fate that awaited scores of other immigrants arriving on American soil – grueling physical labor under extreme duress. Only gradually did the scope of American Yiddish culture begin to expand, and especially with regard to its print media. The immense popularity of Yiddish newspapers and their growing financial independence allowed some of the poets actually to take up full-time work as professional writers and journalists, giving them some semblance of financial security, albeit a meager one at best. The American Yiddish daily press enjoyed wide circulation from the turn of the twentieth century onward, although its “lowbrow” appeal, combined with its editors’ virtual omnipotence, left many a poet initially apprehensive at the prospect of joining its ranks. Even those who finally did relent remained vocal about their reluctance to do so. Di yunge poets were far from shy in their early years about their refusal to work in daily newspapers. However, the next generation, the *inzikhists*, viewed the cultural landscape they were part of in an altogether different light, feeling far less apprehensive of the prospect of steady journalistic work and even seeing its intellectual merits. Jacob Glatstein aptly described the relationship between poetry and press in rather surprising terms; “Every genuine poet,” he said, “should have a lot of opportunity to write journalism so that he can write it out of his system, steam it out of himself, so that when he comes to write a spoken poem, he is already shouted out.”⁴

Glatstein’s opinion, voiced in an in-memoriam piece he wrote for Moyshe Leyb Halpern, ought to be viewed in a far wider historical-cultural context. The 1920s was the period that saw American Yiddish poetry and print media being the closest they had ever been, although this relationship was fated to be short-lived. When the communist movement decided in 1922 that it would launch a daily newspaper named *Frayhayt* that would offer a viable alternative to the watered-down socialism of the *Forverts*, the most successful Yiddish newspaper at the time, its editors set their sights on recruiting the most prominent American Yiddish poets. Thus for a period, the paper was publishing the works of Moyshe Leyb Halpern, Jacob Glatstein, and H. Leivick, to name but a few. That being said, this unwritten pact between the greatest of Yiddish poets and this overtly communist publication was fragile from the outset and

ultimately did not last, coming to a dramatic end in 1929, when the newspaper (by then, named *Morgn frayhayt*) rallied behind the communist movement's position on the riots in Palestine, officially siding with the Arabs. The vast majority of Yiddish authors who were still involved with the publication promptly left, seething. The communist movement did in fact try to initiate and promote literary activities as part of its cultural agenda and founded the "Proletpen" group of writers; however, their ideological allegiances would not allow their imagination to take flight and soar beyond the overt, combative themes that dominated their writing.

Yiddish poets did find various ways of coping with their decision to join the ranks of daily publications. Mani Leyb and H. Leivick, for instance, published their poetry in the daily press on a weekly basis for many years. This "steady job" did not at all help their poetic writing, which now, as a product of the medium they were writing in, had to appeal to a wide enough common denominator among its potential readership. Other poets, however, were able to maintain a clear divide between the two media. A. Leyeles, for example, was a regular contributor to the daily *Der tog* as a journalist, writing articles about literature, theater, culture, and current affairs. Yet he reserved his poetry solely for literary journals.

During these years, the monthly *Di tsukunft* was the main platform for publishing Yiddish fiction and poetry, and its cultural profile became considerably higher when Abraham Leissin was named editor in 1912. Although it appeared under the same publishing house in charge of the socialist *Forverts*, *Di tsukunft* should nonetheless be considered a prime example of a "highbrow" journal. Leissin's own conservative literary taste ultimately erected a great divide between modernist poetry and the magazine that provided the main platform for American Yiddish culture. Indeed, until the 1940s hardly any *inzikhist* was featured on the pages of *Di tsukunft*.

The ongoing existence of literary periodicals was of utmost importance to Yiddish poets, given that so many obstacles stood in the way of achieving their aim – seeing their poetry in print. For one, the poetry appealed to a very limited readership, predominantly made up of literary colleagues and peers. More often than not, the books they had written only saw the light of day as the result of either the poets' own initiative or some action taken by their circle of friends. The fact that American Yiddish culture was unable to sustain a publishing house that would persist in publishing poetry and prose is one of the main indications of its inherent weaknesses. The written Yiddish word at the time drew hundreds of thousands of readers in the daily newspaper arena, but only a handful when it came to poetry books.

Very few Yiddish authors limited their writings to the genre of poetry. H. Leivick's literary oeuvre, for instance, was equally based on his poetry *and* dramaturgy. Some of it took the form of realistic prose plays, whereas other works were dramatic poems, like his major play *Der goylem* (1921). As for Jacob Glatstein, his fame rested mainly on his poetry, although it was but one aspect of his manifold literary activity. From the 1920s onward, Glatstein also became known as a journalist, and during the 1930s he penned two fiction books based on a trip he had taken to Europe, books that to this day remain a genuine tour de force of modernist Yiddish writing. Later he would also dedicate himself to criticism and literary reviews. The mixing of various genres took on a different form in the writing of each poet; however, at the end of the day, one might argue that turning to multiple genres was common among American Yiddish writers. Often it was the bare necessity of simply having to make ends meet (particularly in the case of writing for newspapers); however, this propensity toward different genres also embodies a profound expression of the Yiddish author's self-image, believing that his true calling was not to limit himself to one means of literary expression but rather to become a kind of spiritual mentor for his entire generation.

Such was the role H. Leivick took upon himself throughout his literary career, while other prominent American Yiddish authors rejected this notion outright, believing poetry to be their one true calling. Mani Leyb was outspoken in expressing this view, while Moyshe Leyb Halpern set out to develop a somewhat more elaborate model of writing, creating the figure of the "poet of protest" who would chastise and preach from his soapbox while confessing his frustration over his limited ability to have a measurable impact on his audience.

As of the 1920s, these views were still very much at odds with one another – the one, championing a poet's commitment, whether social or national, and the other, urging that he staunchly protect his own spiritual, autonomous space. However, the voices of those aligned with the latter view grew increasingly silent in the thirties and certainly in the 1940s, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and its horrors, when Yiddish poets began viewing their writing as but one component in a far greater cultural enterprise – giving expression to the entire body of Jewish spiritual heritage throughout the generations.

The Golden Age and Beyond

The interim years between the two world wars ought to be considered the golden era of Yiddish poetry in the United States, a period heavy with

beginnings and endings. At the start of the era, the years 1918–1920 saw two major developments: Di yunge collected a selection of their poetry in several books, at the same time the *inzikhists* exploded onto the literary scene. The year 1920 was also the year Anna Margolin, the most prominent female voice in American Yiddish poetry, made her literary debut. Margolin's writing was a refined synthesis of the various strands of American Yiddish poetry, but, unfortunately, her voice was silent after a mere decade. Less than twenty years later, the period was already coming to its final, definitive curtain call in the years 1937–1940.

The collected works of Mani Leyb, compiled into three volumes – *Lider*, *Baladn*, and *Yidishe un slavishe motivn* (1918), are a clear embodiment of the poet's intent to develop modern Yiddish poetry from the ground up, from the refined stylizations of the folk song to intimate lyrical poetry. The critic Y. Dobrushin, based in faraway Moscow, attested in awe that this was in fact quite an exceptional feat, considering the fact that Yiddish was a relatively young literature. "We have a literature that is about to meet all of the stages previously skipped over, a literature that does not leave any stage of artistic development unexplored,"⁵ said Dobrushin. The three volumes of Mani Leyb's poetry indeed chronicle the road taken by Yiddish poetry from those forms deeply rooted in folk to the modern, lyric verse. Meanwhile, Moyshe Leyb Halpren's debut book, *In New York*, published in 1919, marks an altogether different aspect of the rapid development of American Yiddish poetry – the subtle transition from the modern lyric into modernism.

The title of the book itself announces the centrality of the urban landscape, a theme that indeed leaves its mark on several of the poems that offer a blend of the lyrical, tinged with razor sharp irony. In *In New York* Halpern essentially crafted a book whose very structure is of great significance, and whose ending finds it miles away from its starting point. The book concludes with the apocalyptic poem "A nakht" ("Night"), a complex polyphonic piece drawing together the most heterogeneous materials to create multiple layers of meaning – the memories of the horrors of the pogrom, the harrowing visions of the speaker's own impending death, the story of the Exodus from Egypt and entering the Promised Land, the Messiah and Jesus – all join in multiple textual meeting points that ultimately shape one central thread in which the hope for redemption gives way to the existential terror of one's own death. The polyphonic structure of "A nakht" gives the poem its unique status as the first modernist work in American Yiddish poetry. It is noteworthy that although one is discussing the concluding poem of a book titled *In New York*, the urban landscape ultimately does not play a significant role in the

book's major, concluding poem. "A nakht" draws its materials from the well of Jewish cultural associations, from the poet's own memories of Jewish Eastern Europe, and from a personal grappling with Christological motifs. Ironically, the modernism embodied in Moyshe Leyb Halpern's apocalyptic poem ends up disregarding almost any and all overt displays of modernity and references to modern times.

In New York indeed represents Halpern's dual thematic move. On the one hand, modern metropolitan and cosmopolitan life is given a central place. On the other hand, however, one cannot help but notice how Halpern's choice to turn to modernism is intimately bound to the return to Jewish Eastern Europe as a profoundly personal source of inspiration. The title of Halpern's second book of poetry, *Di goldene pave* ("The Golden Peacock") (1924), clearly conveys the full extent to which the world of Jewish Eastern Europe had since become the essence of the poet's inner world. In this book, the last one to appear in his lifetime, Halpern shapes his cultural landscape using a variety of artistic means, chiefly myth, fantasy, and the grotesque. The poet's language suggests a move toward a "lower-brow" narrative in a bid to capture a more spoken, colloquial tongue. Therefore, one might say that the common thread running between Halpern's two books is in more ways than one an epitome of the journey Yiddish American poetry itself had taken – from *Di yunge* to the *inzikhists*, a journey that is also embodied in the significant change regarding prosody: While Halpern's first book is written in regular meter, the second one is ruled by free verse, to which the poet remained true until his untimely death in 1932.

"A nakht" marks yet another milestone in Yiddish American poetry – a turn from the lyrical verse toward the long poem. Its expansive, far-reaching textual scope captures the emotional intricacy of the generation, and in particular its apocalyptic anxiety, which finds expression mainly in the form of the tense encounter between one's yearning for redemption and the fear of personal, national, and cosmic annihilation. This very encounter is at the heart of H. Leivick's previously mentioned dramatic poem, "Der goylem" (1921), which the poet had based on very diverse traditions related to this popular motif in a bid to anchor it in a new conceptual framework. The piece turns the character of the Golem into an earlier incarnation of modern man's character. The Golem's roots may indeed be traced back to primordial or even primitive impulses; however, in Leivick's dramatic poem, the Golem develops a rich inner world, thus rendering him a being misunderstood by those around him. In one of his visions, Leivick's Golem beholds the appearance of those "envoys" who epitomize various avenues of salvation, from Elijah

the Prophet through to the Messiah, as well as “He who had borne the cross.” Their appearance creates emotional turmoil in the Golem, which turns it into a simultaneously grotesque, absurd, and terrifying creature, a being whose behavior does not adhere to any rules. In Leivick’s view, the Golem’s anarchic urges are the ones that lead it to turn on its maker and thus seal its own fate. However, the dramatic poem does not conclude with the triumph of these urges, but rather with the Golem’s annihilation and the reconstitution of “normalcy.” The ending of Leivick’s “Der goylem” reveals the true power of those tangible forces in the real world, forces that curtail the primordial urges that drive the inner world of an extraordinary character.

Alongside Moyshe Leyb Halpern, A. Leyeles, H. Leivick, and Jacob Glatstein, during the 1920s and 1930s, additional modernist authors emerged, giving Yiddish poetry a stylistic and thematic diversity that would not conform to any template or formula. Reuven Ludwig’s poetry, included in a book after his untimely death (1927), went far beyond the limits of the metropolis, embracing America’s vast natural landscapes, while B. Weinstein’s first book of poetry, *Bruckhvarg* (“Wreckage”) (1936), depicted a world of urban alienation, where the poet was celebrating those living on the very fringes of society. Judd Teller was perhaps the most prominent figure among his Yiddish writing peers. Teller had creatively mastered Anglo-American poetry and his first two poetry books highlight his strong affinity toward imagism. Gabriel Preil, Teller’s close friend, published his first Yiddish poems in 1935, but opted to devote most of his own creative prowess to Hebrew poetry, into which, in time, he would incorporate the many achievements of Yiddish modernism. Finally, Aba Shtoltzenberg’s poetry, featured in his only book, *Lider* (1941), is the single-most prominent expression of the impulse to merge the impressionism of Di yunge and the modernism of the *inzikhists*.

One of American Yiddish poetry’s most significant milestones was the publishing of Y. Y. Schwartz’s book of poems, *Kentucky* (1926), whose central piece is the poem “Nayerd” (“New Earth”) – an all-encompassing epos detailing the story of how three generations of a Jewish family that had opted to move out of the big city gradually begin putting down roots in their new environment. Recognized as he was for his deep, intimate bond with the Jewish traditional world, it was Y. Y. Schwartz out of all his peers who ended up giving Yiddish poetry the most American poem conceivable, in form, content, and spirit. In “Nayerd,” Schwartz showcases the emotional acceptance of the gradual decline of Jewish tradition within the family, which he then carefully balances by also portraying a far more complex, bigger picture when a third generation family member unexpectedly reembraces Jewish life and tradition, a

rediscovery juxtaposed with the nuanced chronicling of the gradual process of building a Jewish community in a southern American town. The integration among immigrants of various cultural backgrounds – German speaking Jews alongside Eastern European Jews – allowed the poet truly to demonstrate his formidable descriptive skills, as well as his brilliant ability to weave an undertone of forgiving humor into the text. The other poems featured in *Kentucky* are centered on the fate of African Americans and their painful, difficult status in the South. As one might expect, the Yiddish poet shows profound empathy toward them and their plight, thus presenting a point of view that nowadays may read as condescending, but at the time arose from complete identification with their fate.

In the ever-diversifying landscape of American Yiddish poetry in the 1920s, the presence of female poets, too, became noteworthy. Chronologically, the rise of the female poets paralleled the emergence of modernism, only in addition to the many hardships already shared with their male peers, those up-and-coming female poets also had to contend with the preconceived notions of editors, critics, and readers alike, as to what “female poetry” is or is not. In the works of Anna Margolin and Celia Dropkin the tensions arising from having to deal with these expectations were a major source of poetic strength. Margolin, whose only book of poetry appeared in 1929, sought to create an overtly compressed and terse poetic language, removed from any and all traces of gushing sentimentality and loss of self-control, creating a pendulumlike movement between the intimate poem and the embracing of multiple masks as a means of preventing the speaker from exposing her inner world. Female presence in American Yiddish poetry remained prominent all the way through to its final generation. One might even identify a link between some of the female poets’ sense of marginality shared by countless women and the construction of a fragmented and often alienating lyrical world. Malka Heifetz Tussman, whose first book appeared only in 1949 (late in her life), incorporated into her poetry a passion for the classic poetic forms such as the triolet and the sonnet, while tinging her short lyrical poems with irony and proud self-awareness.

Two poetry books that appeared in 1937 perhaps best epitomize modernism’s footprint and tremendous impact on Yiddish literature when the latter was at its height. A. Leyeles’s *Fabyus Lind* was named after the main protagonist, whose “diary” is presented at the start of the book in the form of a series of loosely tied poems that together make up a “stream of consciousness” whole, portraying the inner world of a modernist Jewish poet living in New York. The fact that not one of these poems has a title and that only the

date on which they were written (daily, throughout the course of a month) is offered shows the poet coming to terms with time's automatic and blind forward thrust. The poet fancies himself an inseparable part of the physical, political, and cultural sphere of which he is a part, staking his claim to the urban landscapes of New York City and contemporary American reality in the aftermath of the Depression. It is not long, however, before his associative world drifts off to faraway lands, well beyond the "here" and "now." In the course of these poems, the character of Fabyus Lind is portrayed as a pensive Yiddish poet and a Jewish intellectual, pondering his cultural enterprise and the fate that awaits him. The book concludes with the long poem "Tsu dir – tsu mir" ("To You – to Me"), a text that is the epitome of heterogeneity – free verse coexisting with formal meter and virtuosic rhyming "highbrow" language blending with colloquialisms, intimate confessional poems mixed together with references to contemporary political events. One should therefore consider this long poem the ultimate embodiment of the very poetic principles embraced by the *inzikhists* in their earliest days.

As for Jacob Glatstein, while the title of his book, *Yidishtaytshn*, is in fact based on one of Yiddish's actual names as a language, Glatstein opts to use the plural form in the title in order to celebrate the inexhaustible multiplicity of meanings hidden within Yiddish. The book commences with a series of short fragmented poems, expressing the primordial and direct language of a little boy, and concludes with a refined hymn to the emotional, intellectual, and complex world of the modernist Yiddish poet who kneads the words and their multiple meanings so as to hide from himself his own existential terrors of losing strength and of course, of his ultimate, imminent demise. This book essentially brought the initial goal of modernist Yiddish poetry, which was to tackle the linguistic medium itself and the manner in which the poet grappled with it, to its fullest fruition. Its success in that respect is perhaps best illustrated by the many poetic coinages in the text, highlighting the distance in any culture between the poetic and the spoken language, as well as the recurrent references to metapoetic ruminations that ultimately create the image of a reflexive poet, extremely conscious of his creative powers.

Only one year separates these poetry books and the vocal forsaking of all things modernist. In 1938, Jacob Glatstein published his poem "A gute nakht, velt" ("Good Night, World") essentially announcing the severing of ties with modern life and the return to a form of traditional Judaism. The poem's explicit style is every bit as important as its content. The break from modernist Yiddish poetry is evident on all levels of the text, and indeed, the poem went on to become highly acclaimed, receiving far more attention than any

of Glatstein's earlier works. As far as the poet was concerned, this text marked his debut as a prominent public persona, a role he could not have been further away from in his earliest poetic days. From there on, the poetry of the *inzikhists* started paralleling the same path American Yiddish poetry in general was taking, turning to the immediate reactions to the Holocaust and adopting the style of public elegiac poems whose meanings were intended to be shared by a broad audience. During the Holocaust years and in their aftermath, the complexity of the modernist poem suddenly became perceived as a cultural luxury, which now, in light of the horrific events in Europe, seemed to be void of all value or relevance.

Yet another element embraced by American Yiddish poetry as a means of capturing and conveying what now seemed to be the most authentic and original depiction of Jewish essence is present in Menakhem Boreisho's long narrative poem "Der geyer" ("The Walker," 1943). The poem chronicles the life story of an individual and his constant quest to forge his own path against the backdrop of the diverse, multifaceted world of late nineteenth century Jewish Eastern Europe. Boreisho's poem features long descriptive stanzas, vital and dramatic, along with philosophical musings echoing the inner ponderings of the main protagonist, who embodies the traits and aspirations of a humanist intellectual. The poem's polyphonic structure is also evident in its blending of free verse and fixed, strophic forms, mixing full rhymes together with a virtuoso use of assonance. In terms of its subject matter, while the poem is anchored in concrete, historical Jewish reality, it is the protagonist's existential woes that best demonstrate how Boreisho in fact uses a refined, modern sensibility to depict the past that serves as the poem's backdrop.

The steadily declining numbers of Yiddish readers compelled poets in the forties and fifties to lower or altogether remove the divides separating the elitist author from the audience. Only with this shift in mind can one truly realize the achievements of those few select American Yiddish poets who were successful against all odds, in creating the composite figure of a writer who is conscious of both his period's atrocities and his own culture's imminent demise, but at the same time is still able to write in a quiet and intimate tone and portray life as a source of grace. This very position lies at the heart of two fundamentally different texts: the series of sonnets written by Mani Leyb during the last period of his life in the late forties and early fifties, and A. Leyeles's poem "Woodfern Farm" (1954). Both works feature a return to more classic forms that, to an extent, limit and curtail the freedom the poet might allow himself. Both pieces also feature a paralleling of the strict

poetic form and the emotional positioning evident in these texts, ultimately reaching a level of profound understanding of both man's abilities and his inevitable limits.

The motifs and topics Mani Leyb tackled in his sonnets join to shape a world that transcends time itself. However, the series as a whole does acknowledge the memory of the Holocaust as well as the cultural reality in which the Yiddish poet was living at the time. These themes play a subtle role in the sonnets as reminders of the fact that while there is an overall air of self-acceptance in the speaker's words, this self-acceptance is not gained at the expense of turning a blind eye to the horrors of the period. It is rather the product of the poet's ability to grapple with these very traumas and, subsequently, to reemerge with a newfound, restored sense of mental equilibrium.

A. Leyeles's poem "Woodfern Farm" shares a deep structure with that of Mani Leyb. During a night of revelation and terror in equal measure, the poet finds himself up against the blind forces of nature, which underneath their idyllic exterior reveal a virtually infinite range of archaic urges in the forms of sexual desire and violence, alongside a yearning for heavenly grace. The poet then finds himself wondering just how much those urges can be seen as expressions of some cosmic order whose inner workings he must decipher. In their earlier days, the *inzikhists* declared their preference for free verse as the favored rhythmic element for modernist Yiddish poetry, though never denouncing fixed, formal meters and classic strophic forms. The presence of those forms in "Woodfern Farm" serves as further proof of Leyeles's own wide poetic range throughout his career.

The later works of Mani Leyb and A. Leyeles, celebrated for their refined merging of neoromantic tenets with meditative poetry, stand as outstanding examples of the desire shared by Yiddish poets to further their cultural enterprise against all odds. The beginnings of American Yiddish poetry are rooted in a concrete historical and social reality that saw scores of immigrants seeking to blaze their own path in the "New World." In its final stages, however, Yiddish poetry found itself in an altogether different cultural setting – lacking any substantial audience willing to hear it. As a result of historical conditions and circumstances that presented obstacles in its path, Yiddish poetry could not help but ultimately become the persistent expression of a creative force that was able to protect both its vitality and its ability to reinvent and reinvigorate itself, enduring whatever turbulence it had to face, be it cultural, ideological, linguistic, or genocidal, and emerging at the other end, forever altered but ever-resilient.

Notes

Translated from Hebrew by Eran Edry.

- 1 *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, ed. and trans. Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 777.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 779.
- 3 *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, ed. Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse and Khone Shmeruk, trans. Cynthia Ozick (New York: Viking, 1987), 426.
- 4 J. Glatstein, *In tokh genumen: Eseyen 1947–1945* (New York: Matones, 1947), 131.
- 5 Y. Dobrushin, “Mani Leyb,” *Shtrom*, No. 3 (1922), 50.

POETRY

Yiddish Theater in America

NAHMA SANDROW

Yiddish theater arrived in New York harbor at the start of the mass migration, in 1881, a mere six years after its debut in Romania, and many immigrants of this early period saw it for the first time in America. By the end of the century, Yiddish theater, while expanding in Eastern Europe, had been carried by immigrants to five continents. Thus it was essentially international, and Yiddish theater in America always shared plays and personnel with Yiddish theaters elsewhere. Still it was always livelier, more varied, more vigorous, and more prosperous than Yiddish theater anywhere else and had much in common with the American English-language theater that surrounded it.

A folk tradition of Yiddish theater has existed since the Middle Ages, associated with celebrations of the Purim holiday, which usually falls in March. Performances are usually based on Bible stories, especially the Book of Esther, which is read in synagogue on that holiday, and are rowdy amateur events. Purim plays and masquerades, sometimes in the reduced form of costume parties, continued in the United States alongside professional theater and are common to this day, both in the remaining Yiddish-speaking communities and in English performances. However, this is separate from professional secular theater. Most members of the religious communities that constitute the majority of Yiddish speakers today generally follow the rabbinic proscription of theater, with Purim celebrations the sole exception.

It is useful to divide the history of professional secular Yiddish theater chronologically into four periods, keeping in mind that in so short a span, the most creative years for individual playwrights and even actors necessarily overlapped.

1882–1890

Because Yiddish theater had been an instant success in Eastern Europe, by 1882 Yiddish theater songs were already known among the new immigrants,

and there existed an American public waiting to see a performance. That year, several professional actors arrived and produced *Di kishuf-makherin* (*The Sorceress/The Witch*) by Avrom Goldfajn, who had written and presented the very first professional Yiddish play only six years earlier. It took place at Turn Hall on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and was sold out. Within months, theater companies proliferated in New York, especially on the Lower East Side. As immigrants streamed across the continent, actors followed, organizing local companies and crisscrossing tours, scrambling to concoct new plays to satisfy the constant demand.

Despite the public's appetite for theater, the cost of a theater ticket might leave an immigrant no money for dinner, and ticket sales were not always enough to support the actors. However, American Yiddish theater was free of old country impediments: arbitrary censorship and shifting legal bans on Yiddish theater, local wars and mass dislocations, and periods of abject poverty. By the time Goldfajn himself arrived in 1887, his operettas were already familiar in America. Favorites included comedies set in contemporary (though non-realistic) Eastern Europe – such as *The Sorceress* (1877), *Der fanatik, oder di beyde Kuni-Lemls* (*The Fanatic; or, The Two Kuni-Lemls*, 1887), and *Shmendrik* (1879), all three of which aimed to enlighten audiences against ignorant superstition – as well as romances set in biblical Palestine – such as *Shulamis, oder bas Yerusholayim* (*Shulamis; or, Daughter of Jerusalem*, 1891) and *Bar-Kokhba, der zun fun dem shtern oder di letste teg fun Yerusholayim* (*Bar-Kokhba, Son of the Star; or, The Last Days of Jerusalem*, 1887). Songs from his scores became “folk” music, and some of his plays remained repertory staples, appearing in some form into the twenty-first century.

Other playwrights, all of whom began their careers before immigrating, dominated the earliest American stage. The major rivalry was between Joseph Lateiner and “Professor” Moyshe Ha-Levi Ish Hurwitz. The former turned out about a hundred plays, and the latter, at least eighty. Moyshe Zeifert, Nokhem Meir Schomer-Shaikevitch (Schomer), and a cadre of others, including actors, kept busy generating plays to satisfy their public's insatiable demand.

These plays offered escape, spectacle, music, laughter, and tears. Historical costume operettas, in particular, a genre also popular on contemporaneous American stages, appealed to an unsophisticated immigrant population, many of whom had never before seen a play in any language. The settings were often, though not exclusively, glorious periods of Jewish history, such as ancient Palestine or fifteenth century Spain. For example, Hurwitz's *Yona hanovi, oder di rayze durkh vaser un fayer* (*The Prophet Jonah; or, The Journey*

through *Water and Fire*, 1895) and Lateiner's *Aleksander, oder der kroynprints fun Yerusholayim* (*Alexander; or, The Crown Prince of Jerusalem*, 1892) told long, fantastical pseudohistorical stories; comic characters interrupted swashbuckling heroics and scenes of high romance, and songs interrupted action. The noble heroes declaimed thundering tirades in *daytshmersh*, a heavily Germanized Yiddish that created the overblown effect of high-flown English, while comic characters spoke colloquial Yiddish. Other operettas depicted darker events, such as the Dreyfus trial, the 1903 Kishinev pogrom, and the Tisa Esler blood libel case in Hungary. The hero of Goldfadn's last play, *Ben-Ami* (1908), is an aristocrat who becomes a Zionist.

The other major subject was immigrant life. Lateiner's *Di grinhorns, oder Mishke un Moshke* (*The Greenhorns; or, Mishke and Moshke*, 1889) starts with ship-board scenes and moves to a Lower East Side tenement. Characters suffer homesickness and the familiar difficulties in adjustment. Such affirmations of the common experience, parallel to other American immigrant communities' theaters of the period, offered healing opportunities for spectators to laugh and cry side by side in their own ethnic haven. As Yiddish drama developed in skill and sensitivity, so did this genre. Eventually the majority of new plays written in America, whatever the subject, were set in America. Onstage music was ubiquitous. The composers Joseph Rumshinsky, Alexander Olshanetsky, Sholem Perlmutter, Sholem Secunda, and many others poured out tunes, which were also sold as piano sheet music and recorded for wind-up phonographs.

Stars emerged who were to dominate for decades: a treasure of powerful performers. All were European born and some had actually debuted before emigrating, but all remained based in the United States. Boris Thomashevsky billed himself as America's Darling; women swooned as he sang lush costume roles. Jacob was mesmerizing in thrilling emotional scenes. David Kessler produced sensitive characterizations. Sigmund Mogulesko was comedian, character actor, and musician. Bina Abramovitch, one of the first Yiddish actresses, played the "mama" roles that earned her the nickname of "Mother of Yiddish Theater." Sophie Goldstein-Karp, who had been Goldfadn's first actress; Bessie Thomashefsky, one of whose specialties was the "trousers" roles considered piquant in American theater of the period; Sara Adler, who gave audiences high moments of drama; Dina Stettin Adler Feinman, a soubrette – all these were strong talents in their own right. They also illustrate the smallness of the professional Yiddish theater world, in that they married Yiddish actors (sometimes more than one), so that many artists were related, and family troupes and even dynasties formed.

Some companies formed for a single production but more common were repertory companies for a season or tour. Stars often served as producer. In most contractual engagements, an actor had the privilege of “benefits”: a performance for which he chose and cast the play, taking whichever role would show him to greatest advantage; sold the tickets; and kept the receipts. No Yiddish company yet owned a building; spaces large or small were rented. Revues and cabaret entertainments were presented in cafes and roof gardens. Amateur groups formed, too, especially in cities like Baltimore, too small to support professional theater for more than an occasional touring company. Two enterprises suggest the audience’s wholehearted response to the new institution. Goldfaden opened the first Yiddish acting school in the world in New York in 1888. And in the same year, Professor Hurwitz set up an ambitious enterprise called Order of David’s Harp, which offered packages of ticket subscriptions plus insurance. A growing array of American Yiddish periodicals published advertisements, reviews, and news of shows.

1891–1909

In 1891, Jacob Gordin’s drama *Siberye* (*Siberia*) opened the Gordin era, the first golden age of literary Yiddish theater in America. A man of enormous personal charisma, Gordin influenced Yiddish culture in general and Yiddish theater in particular. A revolutionary who escaped Russia for New York, he had as a standard for theater the work of Tolstoy and Ibsen. Scorning Yiddish theater as folksy and vulgar, he set out “as a scribe copies a torah scroll” to elevate a popular institution to the level of art. *Siberia*, the story of a man who escapes czarist captivity for many years but at last must return to prison, was over the heads of the unsophisticated opening night audience, but as the performance continued, they paid increased attention, and by the sad final curtain, they were enthusiastic. Word spread, attracting intellectuals who had heretofore avoided Yiddish theater: a new audience, with new expectations.

In structure, plot, and characterizations, Gordin’s plays were intelligent and subtle melodramas. Melodrama’s moral concerns, pitting virtue against evil – as well as its amplitude, intense emotional pitch, and integration of music – made the form particularly congenial to Yiddish audiences. Gordin’s dramaturgical innovations included strict respect for text rather than ad-libbing, ensemble playing rather than domination by a star, and verisimilitude, which meant that since his public demanded music, the music must be justified by plot and occur only when the character might believably sit down at the piano or sing. Also Gordin insisted on pure Yiddish, rather than *daytshmersh*. He was

determined that Yiddish drama become not a parochial folk institution but a “European” drama, as respected as other national repertoires.

In Gordin’s *Got, mentsh, un tayvl* (*God, Man, and Devil*, 1900), Satan bets God he can corrupt the pious scribe Hershele Dubrovner as he has dealt with Job and Dr. Faustus. Hershele, who at first is a bit smug about his own rectitude, is morally destroyed through money, though Satan’s victory is not complete. In *Mirele Efros / Di yidishe Kenign Lir* (*Mirele Efros / The Jewish Queen Lear*, 1898), the eponymous imperious matriarch battles her daughter-in-law for domination of her household and family business and gains a deeper understanding of her own character flaws. These two plays, often revived into the twenty-first century, were also filmed. In *Kraytser sonate* (*Kreutzer Sonata*, 1902), a fragile woman, who secretly identifies herself with the heroine of Tolstoy’s story by the same name, suffers love and jealousy. In *Safo* (*Sappho*, 1907), a modern career woman bears an illegitimate child, defying society for the sake of love and honor. In *On a heyim* (*Without a Home*, 1907), a simple woman from a peasant village joins her Americanized husband in New York, a big alien place bereft of tradition and humanity, and their strength is cruelly tested. In *Elishe ben Avuye* (1906), the historic rabbi collaborates with the Romans because he believes that intellectual harmony transcends nationalism.

Gordin aimed to educate the Jewish masses. His primary mission was political. In particular, many of his plays illustrate the evils of capitalism and the need for women’s rights, which were also themes in his lectures and other writings. Furthermore, to help the Jewish masses integrate into the larger Western culture, he slipped into his plays bits of information about European and classical literature. It was recognition of Gordin’s vision of modern Yiddish identity, as well as his artistic achievements, that led many earnest amateur groups to name themselves after him.

The new respect for fine theater led to many translations into Yiddish. Some plays were faithfully translated, some served as bases for new plays, and some were radically adapted, even transposed to a Jewish setting. Plays by Gorki and Ibsen reached New York in Yiddish before they played in English. Among the European classics seen in some form and under varying titles on American Yiddish stages were Schiller’s *Maria Stuart*, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Ibsen’s *Doll’s House*, Dumas’s *Camille*, Maeterlinck’s *Mona Vanna*, Hauptmann’s *The Weavers*, Goethe’s *Faust*, and Tolstoy’s *Power of Darkness*. Among the American hits translated for the Yiddish stage – sometimes while their originals were still selling tickets uptown – were *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and a vivid recreation of the Johnstown Flood of 1889.

Meanwhile most of the writers from the earlier period continued composing musical comedies and melodramas of lesser quality. Lateiner's *Dos yidishe harts* (*The Jewish Heart*, 1908) was typical. In Romania, a gifted young Jewish art student discovers that an aristocratic lady is actually his mother, who abandoned him in the cradle. He faces the fierce rivalry of another art student, who is now revealed to be his half brother. When the brother aims a pistol at Victor and by accident is himself shot, the guilty mother sacrifices her life to protect Victor from jail. Although the play is far from subtle, it does have emotional power and an amusing comic subplot. Musicals and vaudeville revues continued, as did café entertainments.

A permanent feature of Yiddish theater criticism now appeared. The distinction between low or popular (in Yiddish: *shund*) and high or literary theater appears in most cultures. But in Yiddish this distinction was particularly laden because the Yiddish language had only recently emerged as a modern literary language, heart of a modern national culture. Thus modern secular Yiddish literature in general and theater in particular were felt to represent the culture's highest aspirations, which trashy *shund* betrayed.

Actors adored Gordin although he intimidated them. He dignified their profession and created great roles, sometimes with specific local actors in mind: Keni Liptzin as the matriarch Mirele Efros, Bertha Kalish as the romantic heroine of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Jacob Adler as the Jewish King Lear, David Kessler as the scribe Hershele. He created many smaller but juicy roles as well: comic, grotesque, or touching. Even in his last years, when his plays seemed corny, actors often revived one or another for a benefit because it provided a chance to expand into a role and show what they could do. As part of the wholehearted responsiveness for which the Yiddish public was already a byword, devoted fans felt passionate connections with specific stars. Some went so far as to run errands, hang around the theater, even wear armbands with the names of their idols. Occasionally, in the American tradition of the Astor Place riot of 1849, actual brawls broke out between rival groups of these *patriotn*.

By now all business aspects of the Yiddish theater system were solidly in place. As in other American theaters, the star system dominated, and companies constantly toured the continent. *Landsmanshaftn* (fraternal organizations of immigrants from the same place) commonly bought blocks of tickets as a way to raise money for charities. Such benefits not only helped finance the theater; they also contributed to community cohesion.

Influence flowed back and forth between Yiddish- and English-language theaters. Yiddish theater picked up hit plays and play styles, as well as American

flash and hustle. American theater folk went downtown to see an adventurous range of plays, not always available in English. They also went to see marvelous performers; later, the Yiddish theater served as conduit for American actors to experience Stanislavski techniques. Furthermore, American Yiddish theater reinforced the bond among far-flung Jewish communities. European Yiddish artists toured in and around the United States, while American-based artists played Canada, South America, and Europe. Plays set in the old country intensified homesickness and guilt in American audiences, while plays set in the United States influenced the images of America held by Jews back home. Plays written in America were printed and exported to readers and amateur groups in Europe, with glossaries explaining English language borrowings. American organizations bought blocks of seats to raise money for survivors of pogroms or other emergencies back home. There was even a rivalry between the American Yiddish Keni Liptzin and the Polish Ester Rokhl Kaminska in the role of Mirele Efros.

1909–1945

Goldfadn died in 1908, Gordin in 1909. By then both were considered old-fashioned. New artists were maturing – as was Yiddish theater as an institution and indeed the Yiddish language itself – and were branching out in a variety of directions.

The United States was now home to many or most of the fine playwrights and glamorous stars in the Yiddish world. Except for a limited period in the USSR and a few productions in Eastern Europe, it also continued to boast the most polished and expensive productions. In the course of the next three decades, Yiddish theater, like American Yiddish-language culture as a whole, was to reach its peak.

In the first third of the twentieth century, as Yiddish approached its century mark as a modern secular literary language, it had matured sufficiently to establish a vibrant theater, with serious dramatists and actors famous for their energy and presence. Plays covered the normal Western subjects: romance and family relationships, conflicts of conscience and honor. However, settings and major characters were usually Jewish, and certain specific themes still resonated: Jewish history and issues of identity, and Americanization with its price in homesickness and alienation. Many plays had political implications and might even be built around specific political events and issues. Serious plays tended to themes of morality, often in a universalist mode. Even popular plays might touch on subjects such as birth control, divorce, immigration,

and Christian-Jewish relations. Theatergoers valued the didactic impulse. “Truthful” was highest praise for play or performance. In theater districts, cafes stayed open long after the final curtain for intense discussions of the show’s qualities and its ideas.

Every season offered realistic domestic dramas and problem plays, popular comedies, lighthearted operettas, and revues. Contemporary avant-garde styles such as symbolism and expressionism appeared in Yiddish theater simultaneously with – sometimes before – their appearance on American stages. Meanwhile nineteenth century styles in performance and text, especially melodrama, were still represented. Indeed, popular melodrama and intellectual expressionism – both of them didactic structures within which to consider how a character should behave in society – were particularly congenial. Allegory – an older form of expressionism – was a familiar way to present sweeping perspectives on Jewish history. Additionally, Yiddish theater had evolved sufficiently to allow for revisiting classics such as Goldfaden operettas, often imposing on the original a new directorial concept, at times political. And Purim folk plays continued. Thus Yiddish theater in the first half of the twentieth century telescoped all genres of Western theater; they all coexisted, and for a time they flourished.

Even though Goldfaden and Gordin were initiators and emblems of two separate though overlapping eras, and even though their plays were so different, their professional lives had much in common. In many respects they set the basic pattern for most major Yiddish dramatists who followed. Typically, playwrights were born in the old country and died in America (a few in Israel); had thorough religious educations though they eventually abandoned most ritual observance; knew other languages and often began by writing in Hebrew or Russian rather than Yiddish – indeed, felt a particular affinity with Russian literature and culture; wrote in other genres in addition to plays and wrote plays in a range of styles; and saw their works translated and even staged in a range of languages. The following are capsule descriptions of some of the most respected American-based playwrights. Some of their plays had long lives and continue to be revived; others were presented primarily by art theaters or amateurs or simply were read.

The plays of Sholem Aleichem never left the American repertory. In *Der blutiger shpas/Shver tsu zayn a yid* (*The Bloody Joke/Hard to Be a Jew*, 1914), adapted from his own novel, a young Russian aristocrat and his Jewish friend trade identities, with painful legal and romantic repercussions. In the playful *Dos groysge gevin/200,000* (*The Jackpot/200,000*, 1915), a perennial favorite that he worked on with his son-in-law, a simple shoemaker wins the lottery – but

now his apprentices seem too poor to woo his pretty daughter. *Tevye der milkhiker* (*Tevye the Dairyman*, 1919), dramatized from his own stories (which were later freshly reworked into the original American musical *Fiddler on the Roof*), is a family drama about a father and the difficult fates of his beloved daughters.

David Pinski's *Di familye Tsvi/ Der letster yid* (*The Tsvi Family/The Last Jew*, 1905) explored the varying reactions of family members under threat of a pogrom. In the dark comedy *Der oytser* (*The Treasure*, 1911) – later performed in English by the Theatre Guild – coins are found in a graveyard, spurring villagers to hunt for treasure. *Yankl der shmid* (*Yankl the Blacksmith*, 1906), later filmed as a musical, is a psychological drama of a womanizer who matures in time to save his marriage. Pinski was one of the few serious Yiddish playwrights to deal with overtly sexual relationships.

Peretz Hirschbein's earliest dramas were naturalistic (such as *Di neveyle* [*The Carcass*, 1907], portraying the brutal lives of the impoverished underclass) and symbolist (such as the dreamy *Af yener zayt taykh* [*On the Other Side of the River*, 1906]). His most popular, however, were bucolic romances, such as *Di puste kretshme* (*The Idle/Haunted Inn*, 1911), later seen on Broadway. *Grine felder* (*Green Fields*, 1916) (for which he wrote two sequels) has been a great favorite ever since, onstage and in its film version. A wandering young scholar tutoring the sons of two farmers is too naïve to realize that both want him for a son-in-law. Hirschbein founded the first Yiddish experimental art theater in Odessa in 1908 and later was active in Yiddish art experimentation in the United States.

H. Leivick remained a lifelong revolutionary, whose plays trace his growing concern about Stalin's regime. In the poetic *Der Golem* (*The Golem*, 1921) and several related plays, he used the traditional legend to explore human cruelty and suffering and the possibility of redemption. *Shap* (*Shop*, 1926) shows the anatomy of a sweatshop strike and its aftermath – a poet's rendering of a slice of life. *Di hasene in Fernvald* (*A Wedding in Fernwald*, 1949) was one of the few Yiddish plays attempting to show the effects of the Holocaust.

In Sholem Asch's *Got fun nekome* (*God of Vengeance*, 1907), the owner of a brothel deludes himself that he can keep his daughter innocent and thereby remain a virtuous man. The play caused a scandal on the Yiddish stage, and in 1922, in translation on Broadway, got its cast arrested for indecency. *Motke ganev* (*Motke the Thief*) was dramatized from his 1916 novel about passion among underworld characters. Both *Kidush hashem* (*Sanctification of the Name*, 1919) (i.e., martyrdom), about the Chmielnicki pogrom, and *Moshiakhs tsaytn* (*The Era of the Messiah*, 1906), about contemporary Jews, attempted to dramatize Jews' position in the world.

Osip Dymow's (Yosef Perelman's) bittersweet comedy *Yoshke musikant / Der zinger fun zayn troyer / Der gedungene khosn* (*Yoshke the Musician / The Singer of His Sorrow / The Hired Bridegroom*, 1914), especially in the final version of 1925, was a smash in Europe and America. A musician sacrifices his hopes so that the serving maid whom he loves can marry the cad whom she loves. *Der eybiker vanderer* (*The Eternal Wanderer* 1913) is an allegory of diaspora wanderings. *Bronks ekspres* (*Bronx Express*, 1919) is a comical fantasy about making it in America. Dymow wrote most of his plays for the Yiddish theater but in the Russian language, which he or a colleague then translated.

Although *Yankl Boyle* (Yankl Boyle, 1913) portrays a simple fisherman crushed by family expectations, Leon Kobrin's best known plays were about New York Jewish experience. *Mina, oder di tseshterte familye fun down-town* (*Mina; or, The Ruined Downtown Family*, 1899) was the first realistic attempt to dramatize immigrant life. In *Riversayd Drayv* (*Riverside Drive*, 1933), a pious elderly couple returns to Europe because in the United States they cannot live a traditional life. Serious dramas by other competent playwrights, such as Zalmen Libin, Morris Vinchevsky, Max Gabel, and Nokhem Rakov, drew audiences to the commercial theater. At the same time, frankly popular and even low entertainments were filling theaters. Zeifert's *Dos pinteke yid* (*The Little Bit of Jewishness*, 1909) was a huge hit. Other such entertainments, whose titles suggest their tone, were written by Isadore Zolatarevsky (*Ven a meyd libt* [*When a Girl Falls in Love*]), Lateiner (*Di falshe tsvue* [*The False Vow*]), and Thomashevsky (*Dos tsebrokhene fidele* [*The Broken Fiddle*], 1916). Music halls and vaudeville flourished.

Professional enterprises organized in the usual ways. Star managers gathered a cast for a single show, which would then run for some months or would tour, offering new or recycled material and sometimes casting minor roles when they arrived in each place. Repertory companies formed for a season. Family dynasties played together or in competition. Some producers acquired handsome theater buildings like the Second Avenue Theatre, People's Theater, and National Theater. Music halls and cabaret roof gardens did business. Vacation resorts in the Catskill Mountains expanded, offering shows in Yiddish or a combination of languages. The Hebrew Actors Union, at its formation in 1899 the first actors' union in the nation, now comprised several locals.

Essential to the development of serious repertory were small companies, part of the American "little theater" movement, dedicated to art above commercial success. In 1916, Jacob Ben-Ami, who had already participated in Hirschbein's Yiddish art theater in Odessa, directed an evening of one-acts by Isaac Leib Peretz at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York. The best

known – and only long-lasting – American Yiddish art theater was the Yiddish Art Theater, which formed in 1918 and survived some thirty years. Ben-Ami pushed it into offering “literary Wednesdays,” when new plays were premiered. But its soul was Maurice Schwartz, a flamboyant actor and driving manager. Among its biggest hits were *Yoshe Kalb* (1933), dramatized from I. J. Singer’s novel, and *Shaylok un zayn tokhter* (*Shylock’s Daughter*, 1947), Zahav’s take on Shakespeare’s characters. Schwartz had his own building on 12th Street and 2nd Avenue for some years and toured America, Europe, and Africa.

New York had other professional art theaters too. In 1926 Ben-Ami organized the New Yiddish Art Theater. An intellectual, he established a studio and championed Stanislavskian psychological truthfulness and ensemble playing rather than “star-ism.” In 1924, the Yiddish Theater Society opened *Unzer Teater*. Supported by more than 250 members, it also published a journal of theater and drama and established a studio. A portion of the original Vilna Troupe organized a theater in New York. The Schildkraut Theater appeared in 1926, the Yiddish Ensemble Art Theatre in 1931, the New York Dramatic Troupe in 1934, the Yiddish Dramatic Players in 1938. Other cities too had small groups as well as commercial resident and visiting companies.

During the Depression, the Federal Theatre Project operated Yiddish branches in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and a Massachusetts touring circuit. Their repertory included Hirschbein’s *Idle Inn* in English, Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* in Yiddish, and *kleynkunst* programs (revues of a literary tone, including folk and art songs, comic and dramatic scenes, even poetry). Furthermore, dedicated amateur groups faithfully supported the fine repertory that was not commercially viable. In 1917 a Cleveland group hosted a national convention and formed the Organization of Literary-Dramatic Clubs, including clubs in New Orleans, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and elsewhere. Adult summer camps such as Nitgedayget also presented shows. Most of these clubs were gone by World War II.

The important amateur ARTEF (Yiddish acronym for Arbeter teater farband – Workers’ Theater Group) played to Yiddish and American audiences, had a brief revival in the 1950s, and employed professional directors and coaches. Established under the auspices of the Communist Yiddish daily *Frayhayt*, its plays were dedicated to political ideology with a Soviet orientation, as were its emphasis on the group as a collective and its expressionist style. They performed Leivick’s play *Hirsh Lekert* (1931) about a young revolutionary martyr in Vilna, as well as translations of Gorki’s *Lower Depths* and Hallie Flanagan’s *Drought* and adapted Sholem Aleichem’s *Jackpot* as an illustration of the evils of capitalism. The best known amateur group was the Folksbiene

People's Stage, connected with the Arbeter-Ring Workmen's Circle. The Folksbiene emphasized artistic accomplishment over political position. Its repertory aimed high, with works by the Yiddish writers Isaac Leib Peretz and Chaim Grade, as well as by Ibsen, Dostoevsky, Upton Sinclair, and Eugene O'Neill. Professional directors such as Joseph Buloff, David Herman, Leib Kadison, David Licht, and Yankev Rotboym guided the devoted membership.

By the Second World War, hundreds of playscripts had been printed in books and periodicals. Many writers and actors had published memoirs. Books and articles by critics and scholars – and sometimes by uneducated but passionate theatergoers – analyzed the history and theory of theater in general and Yiddish theater in particular. The English press too covered artistically adventurous or spectacular productions, and American professionals attended to watch admired actors.

Yiddish film began in America in 1931 when Joseph Green dubbed the Italian silent *Joseph in Egypt* in Yiddish. Joseph Seiden produced films in the 1930s and 1940s. These were shown alone or as part of a vaudeville bill. Some movies were filmed versions of familiar plays, such as *Mirele Efros*, *Green Fields*, *Tevye*, and *Uncle Moses*. Some were weepers like *Where Is My Child?* (1937) and *Motl the Operator* (1940). *Catskill Honeymoon* (1950) was an example of a revue held together by a lightweight plot. Generally, Yiddish films were made without cinematic sophistication or technique. In the 1930s, American Yiddish film companies traveled to make successful films in Poland. There were also Yiddish radio shows in many cities, mostly notably on New York's WEVD, broadcasting not only news and music but also many short plays, individually and in series.

By the 1930s, however, it was clear that ticket buyers were slipping away, especially popular audiences, who, unlike intellectuals, felt no ideological commitment to support Yiddish secular cultural institutions. Assimilation weakened community cohesion; audiences started moving away from urban centers; a distinctly Americanized Yiddish emerged. Younger audiences spoke only English; they preferred American shows and movies. Certain practices made matters worse. First, for organizational benefits, theaters sold blocks of seats so deeply discounted that profit was impossible. Repeating hit shows at benefit buyers' demand produced diminishing returns, since there was a limited potential audience and therefore a limit to how many times any one show could attract an audience. Repeating hits weakened the theater artistically because it reduced playwrights' opportunities to develop new works and weakened actors' traditional flexibility in switching roles. Meanwhile the pool of actors grew older. Yiddish theater's decline had begun.

Yiddish actors appeared in English on the American stage. Jacob Adler had played Shylock on Broadway in 1903, speaking his lines in Yiddish while all the other characters spoke Shakespeare's English. In 1904, Bertha Kalish stepped onto the American stage in a translation of Gordin's *Kreutzer Sonata* and then starred in American plays as well. Decades later, Jacob Ben-Ami acted and directed for the Theatre Guild, not only in plays translated from Yiddish but also in a Swedish play that the guild discovered only because Ben-Ami had performed it in Yiddish. Furthermore, in this period, so many performers and songwriters who were to succeed on Broadway were growing up in Yiddish-speaking homes and attending Yiddish theater that one can reasonably suggest that Yiddish theater was training American theater personnel. For example, Muni Weisenfreund, a Yiddish child star, became a Hollywood star. And because the same population were to become a huge proportion of the American theatergoing public, Yiddish theater was training audiences as well.

The decline in Yiddish speaking directly affected repertory. Yiddish plays had always mixed languages for certain purposes; characters realistically might switch to English, Russian, or Polish, just as their audiences did, depending on the situation. However, whereas literary dramatists made a conscious effort to keep dialogue free of random English borrowings, more popular shows did not care about linguistic purity, so more and more English words and phrases corrupted Yiddish texts. Before she became a star, American-born Molly Picon needed her European-born husband and manager, Jacob Kalich, to polish her Yiddish. The theater company ARTEF required apprentice actors to take classes in Yiddish as well as in makeup and movement. Playbills routinely provided English synopses. Yiddish schools and daily newspapers still flourished, but starting in the 1920s, their number was falling. This decline was camouflaged by immigration. Actors arrived independently or were brought over by talent scouts who actively recruited in the old country. Immigrants replenished the number of ticket buyers. In 1921–1922, when immigration laws cut off the steady supply of Yiddish speakers, American Jews were aware of effects on their own families but not of how inexorably this would choke off Yiddish theater.

1946–Present

As soon as the war ended, Molly Picon and Herman Yablokoff and other American Yiddish actors went off to entertain in DP camps. Yiddish actors in America sent what help they could to their surviving colleagues in Europe,

including a huge box of stage makeup. At home, Yiddish shows continued without interruption.

The base of Yiddish speakers was destroyed by the Nazis and then the Communists. Meanwhile American Yiddish speakers were growing older, and the Yiddish they spoke was further from that of Goldfadn and Gordin. The number of Yiddish periodicals fell steadily, as did the number of Yiddish books published per year and of Yiddish schools to educate potential readers. The language was liveliest among the Orthodox, who normally avoided theater. That other, theatrical, language of religion and ritual, the thick cultural treasure of visual images and aural references – the stuff of theater, once familiar even to artists and audiences who had themselves drifted away from all observance – was becoming unavailable to young playwrights. The Lower East Side of New York and other immigrant neighborhoods across the country became home largely to old people; few locations were truly convenient for theater-going. Groups were bused in to matinees. By the 1970s, in addition to plays in theaters, Yiddish entertainers performed at Jewish centers and synagogues, hospitals and old age homes. There were periods of resurgence. In 1976, when the American Bicentennial raised national consciousness of ethnic heritage, Yiddish culture shared the moment. However, the 1990s began several years when the Folksbiene offered the only full productions of Yiddish drama in the country.

Goldfadn's *Shulamis*, Sholem Aleichem's *The Jackpot*, Gordin's *Mirele Efros*, and Ansky's *Dybbuk* (1914) – these were repertory perennials through the twentieth century and beyond. However, since the war, few original substantial pieces have been written in Yiddish in America, and not many plays written elsewhere have been produced here. Chaim Sloves' *Borukh fun Amsterdam* (*Boruch of Amsterdam*, 1956), about Spinoza, produced in the 1950s, and Eleanor Reissa's *Zise khaloymes* (*Sweet Dreams*, 1998), written almost half a century later, in which an assimilated young woman discusses her identity with the ghost of her grandmother, are among the exceptions. Miriam Hoffman wrote *Di moyd fun Ludmir* (*The Maid of Ludmir*) about a nineteenth century woman rabbi, *Manger randeyvu* (*Reflections of a Lost Poet*) about the sad life of Itsik Manger, and, with Rena Borow, *Di lider fun gan eyden* (*Songs of Paradise*, 2001), a musical romp with Adam and Eve, drawing on Manger's poems. Into the twenty-first century there were new adaptations of theater classics, such as Rafael Goldwaser's of Sholem Aleichem's *Agentn*, and many dramatizations of Yiddish fiction such as Moshe Yassur's of I. B. Singer's *Gimpel Tam*.

Very few plays dealt with the Holocaust, though Moyshe Dluzhnovsky's *Di aynzame shif* (*The Lonesome Ship*) depicts efforts to escape the Nazis, and Zvi

Kolitz's *Yosl Rakover redt tsu got* (*Yosl Rakover Speaks to God*, 1954) takes place as the Warsaw Ghetto burns. After mass destruction, there was less appetite for dark or critical dramas about Jewish characters. By the 1970s, as the old country, and indeed all traditional life, seemed increasingly distant to aging theatergoers, many craved nostalgia, making it increasingly risky for the box office to give them anything but sentimental, folkloric montages of favorite songs and scenes. Through the second half of the twentieth century, musical comedies kept trouping in New York, Miami, and other cities. *The Rebbitzen from Israel* and *Here Comes the Groom* were typical: Boy and girl end up happily together after some serious and some jokey references to Zionism, assimilation, and generational conflict. For several seasons, Ben Bonus and Mina Bern filled American theaters with *kleynkunst*. Catskills resorts provided entertainment.

Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre continued in various forms till 1950, and he produced and performed till 1961. In the 1950s, ARTEF returned as the Yiddish Ensemble Theater. Ida Kaminska and Meir Melman of the Warsaw Yiddish State Theatre tried to establish a stable company. A Yiddish National Theater was almost born in the 1990s. The Fishl Bimko Yiddish Theaterworks appeared briefly in 1996. In 2013, the New Yiddish Rep, which had been offering familiar and new material as well as readings, dramatized Yiddish theater's integration in the modern Western repertory – and won mainstream attention – by presenting *Vartn af Godo*, Shane Baker's new translation into Yiddish of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), which they then toured to Ireland's annual Beckett Festival and elsewhere.

The Bucharest and Warsaw State Yiddish Theaters produced classics and *kleynkunst*, and veteran troupers based in Western Europe, South America, and Israel staged lighter entertainments, such as Mary Soreanu in *The Jewish Gypsy*. In 2008 and 2011, international conferences of Yiddish theater in Montreal showcased performers from France and even as far as Australia. Rafael Goldwasser from Strasbourg performed one-man re-creations of Sholem Aleichem and Peretz stories. A young Frenchwoman led an improvisatory “laboratory project” in Yiddish performance.

The Folksbiene, now called the National Yiddish Theatre-Folksbiene, began the postwar period still amateur. Its dedicated members Tsipora Spayzman, Ben Schechter, and Morris Adler were leading figures; the younger Eleanor Reissa and Zalmen Mlotek took over in 2000. Its repertory reflected the effort to capture both intellectuals committed to Yiddish literary ideals and popular audiences who wanted nostalgia and entertainment: Gordin's tragedy *God, Man, and Devil*; affectionate musical evocations of the old country, such as *Hershele Ostropolyer* and *The Megile of Itsik Manger*; Abe Cahan's

English-language novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), in which the price of Americanization is soullessness; Neil Simon's Broadway comedy *Sunshine Boys* (1972) in Hoffman's translation; and Efraim Kishon's domestic comedy *The Wedding Contract* (2008), translated from an Israeli hit. The Folksbiene, now professional under Zalmen Mlotek and Bryna Wasserman, still offers readings and sponsors both *Mames lukshen kugl* (Mama's Noodle Pudding), a touring troupe of lively young entertainers, and Kids and Yiddish, a show meant to teach children about the language. In 2013–2014, the Folksbiene revived Manger's *Megile*, but its main production was in English.

New amateur clubs popped up occasionally as reading groups. The semi-professional Los Angeles Yiddish Folksbeine presented two plays a year from the 1930s to the 1960s. Los Angeles also had a Yiddish Children's Theater, some of whose yearly productions were written for them by well-known playwrights such as Itzik Manger. Milwaukee's Perhif Players celebrated their fiftieth anniversary in 1971 and kept operating a while longer. The Yiddish Light Opera Company of Long Island, formed in 1954, performed Gilbert and Sullivan operettas in Yiddish translation into the twenty-first century. KlezKamp, KlezKanada, and Circle Lodge still give vacationers a chance to see shows, occasionally perform, and explore Yiddish theater history.

American Yiddish theater was so bound up in the community's cultural identity that well into the 1980s there were American-born Jews who knew virtually no Yiddish words except the names of their parents' beloved stars. Thomashevsky, Adler, and Kessler retained a glamorous aura, and it was still handed down as part of many family stories that a relative had performed on the Yiddish stage. Bruce Adler and Mike Burstyn, who grew up performing in Yiddish theater, belonged to the younger generation, most of whom were American-born and almost all of whom also had careers on the American stage and sometimes film. Of this cohort, some know the language, while others needed coaching or learned by rote.

By the 1970s, Yiddish performances generally provided English subtitles or earphones, and later Russian as well. Literary efforts and classic plays set in the old country tended to retain the original texts, with some device for narration or synopsis interpolated into the action. Lighter shows incorporated more and more English into the dialogue. Creators devised ingenious ways to give the illusion that shows were in Yiddish while using English to make them comprehensible. Moishe Rosenfeld and Zalmen Mlotek wrote and produced bilingual Broadway productions of old material paying homage to the past: *Golden Land* (2012), *Those Were the Days* (1991), and *On Second Avenue* (2004). Audiences were mostly Jews with a sentimental connection, but they also drew the larger

American public. Other shows aimed to create a Yiddish experience by keeping the Yiddish song lyrics, though the rest was English. An ambitious production of Goldfadn's operetta *Shulamis* by a group of Harvard students and faculty in 2009 followed this pattern. Music itself has taken over as a kind of accessible Yiddish "language." Michael Tilson Thomas's biographical piece about his grandparents, Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky; Fyvush Finkel's Broadway evocation of his acting career; the off-Broadway revue *Vagabond Stars* (1982) – all in English – used music in this way. In fact, many stage presentations that define themselves as Yiddish are not plays but programs of Yiddish musical numbers with only a rudimentary connection knitting them together into a coherent whole.

English translations of Yiddish plays have been published and produced. For example, the New Worlds Theatre Project presents symbolist and naturalistic plays by Hirschbein and Leivick; NYU's HOTink festival performed *God, Man, and Devil*; the Payomet Performing Arts Center on Cape Cod offered two miniseasons of staged readings of classic plays, with related lectures. *Kuni-Leml*, *Mirele Efros*, and *Bronx Express* have been produced in new musical adaptations. *The Golem* has appeared as puppet theater and an opera. S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, probably the most performed of any Yiddish play, has surfaced not only in Paddy Chayevsky's Broadway adaptation *The Tenth Man* (1959) but also as a two-person play, an opera, and a ballet. An original play entitled *The People vs. The God of Vengeance* (2000) depicted the scandal caused by Asch's play almost a century earlier. Between 2012 and 2014, the innovative Target Margin Theater, serving diverse, hip young theatergoers, created pieces based on Yiddish repertory and poetry. On WEVD radio, Miriam Kressyn and Seymour Rexite performed theater material into the 1980s. Art Raymond offered a popular radio program of Yiddish music, especially show tunes, and served as master of ceremonies for staged revues of music, dance, and sketches. Other cities also broadcast Yiddish radio programming almost till the end of the century.

University departments of Germanic, Near Eastern, or Jewish Studies offer courses in Yiddish theater, as do YIVO, the National Yiddish Book Center, and Jewish centers and synagogues around the country. National conferences of the Modern Language Association, the American Society for Theatre Research, and the American Jewish Studies Association may include lectures or entire sessions on related subjects. Public programs are offered under the auspices of such organizations as the Smithsonian Institution, Humana Festival of the Actors Theatre in Louisville, Museum of the City of New York, New York's Jewish Museum, and the Center for Jewish History. Scholars research history and explore theoretical issues such as the nature of Yiddish gesture.

America is the world's source for Yiddish theater material. The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research holds books of plays and history, as well as artifacts such as handwritten scripts, or typed scripts with handwritten rehearsal notes, playbills, accounts, and posters. The Museum of the City of New York has artifacts. The National Yiddish Book Center and Harvard and Brown Universities have published texts of plays and books about theater. Florida Atlantic University has an archive of music scores and recordings.

It is common for major Yiddish and bilingual shows to be reviewed in the English-language press. The Drama Desk has given several awards to Yiddish shows, as well as one to the Folksbiene for "preserving the cultural legacy of Yiddish-speaking theater in America," and CityLore too honored the Folksbiene. Mayor Beame proclaimed December 5, 1976, Yiddish Theater Day in New York City. He was claiming Yiddish theater as a municipal and national institution.

Till the end of the twentieth century, in memory and later in imagination, stars and theatergoing were emblematic of a rich Yiddish communal life. By the twenty-first century, a generational shift moved the theater too far away for simple nostalgia. Still it endures – and continues to hold a mystique for the community. It serves as connection to Jewish cultural and religious roots and to America's past. Yiddish theater contributed to the American theater and is normally noted in the mainstream New York press. Its songs are still sung; its plays have entered the Western repertory; and the Yiddish-speaking community gave America artists and audiences with passion for theater.

Jewish American Drama

EDNA NAHSHON

Jewish American drama is a rubric with elastic parameters. Directed at the general public, it is not linguistically distinguished from the overall body of American drama. Though some of the plays included in it have a tendency to invoke Jewish concepts and phrases or underlying Yiddish syntactical structures, playwrights have used such ethnic authentication judiciously, with the full awareness that a comprehensive knowledge of things Jewish cannot be taken for granted. Overall, Jewish American drama is defined by content, not style, and quite often combines ethnic characteristics with universal concerns, thus overlapping with such rubrics as “immigration drama,” “family drama,” “gay drama,” “memory plays,” and “business plays.”

It must be emphasized that unlike other literary genres, dramatic scripts are not freestanding literary works, and like music scores they serve as blueprint for performance. Consequently, various interpretive elements of a staged work – acting, sets, props and costumes, music, and dance – can highlight or minimize the Jewishness of the script. Include a menorah in the décor and a neutral space is transformed into a Jewish one. Exaggerate the accent of a Jewish character, and the play becomes a mockery or a critique that may not have been intended by the author.¹

Though the story of American Jewish drama begins in the early years of the twentieth century, its development up until World War II must be considered against the parallel existence of the Yiddish theater, which treated topics from a decidedly Jewish perspective and for several decades catered also to a bicultural clientele looking for a “Jewish show.” One can hypothesize that the impressive volume of American Jewish plays created over the past half-century needs also to be seen – albeit not exclusively so – as filling a vacuum created by the disappearance of the Yiddish theatrical scene. Comedies and musicals such as *Borscht Capades* (1951), *Uncle Willie* (1956), *The 49th Cousin* (1960), *How to Be a Jewish Mother* (1967), and *Paris Is Out!* (1970) were clearly intended for the Jewish market, featuring beloved stars of the Yiddish stage.

America never suffered from a dearth of Jewish dramatists. Mordechai M. Noah, Isaac Harby, Jonas M. Phillips, and Samuel B. H. Jonah were active in the early decades of the nineteenth century, yet they did not include Jewish characters in their work. The reluctance of Jewish dramatists to tackle Jewish themes persisted well into the mid-twentieth century, so much so that in 1952 Henry Popkin argued that “de-Semitization” in America’s popular arts had become commonplace.² Until the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s that undermined homogeneity, some Jewish dramatists, wishing to be part of mainstream American culture, toned down or avoided Jewish themes in their work. The phenomenal success of *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) marked the end of such timidity and the legitimization of ethnic self-representation on the mainstream stage.³

Israel Zangwill, author of *The Melting Pot* (1908), a milestone drama about an East European immigrant family whose artist son offers a grand vision of America, one cited and debated to this day, was the first important Jewish writer to break the practice of Jewish self-effacement and present an authentic representation of Jewish life on the English-language stage, an act of self-exposure not altogether favored by “uptown” Americanized Jews. An Englishman, Zangwill wrote two major Jewish plays, *Children of the Ghetto* (1899) and *The Melting Pot*, which were pioneering works in terms of Jewish drama. As they were commissioned by an American producer and written for the American market, they belong in our category as foundational works.⁴

Zangwill’s innovation lay in the seriousness of his dramas and the essential Jewishness of their themes and conflicts: the heartbreak of submitting to the rigid rabbinic law that prohibits the marriage of a divorced woman and a male Cohen (*Children of the Ghetto*), the immigrant’s distress when unable to celebrate the Sabbath because of the need to go out to work, and the shattering inner turmoil preceding marriage with a non-Jew, the offspring of the family’s anti-Semitic persecutors (*The Melting Pot*). Such dilemmas were far removed from the stereotypical “stage Hebrew” of vaudeville and even from the more genial comicality of such phenomenally popular offerings as *The Auctioneer* (1901) and Montague Glass’s *Potash and Perlmutter* (1913). *Potash and Perlmutter*, which depicts the exploits of two Jewish garment merchants, was so successful that it inspired a long series of sequels and imitations. While they are considered as light fare, it has been suggested that these comedic farces paved the way for the introduction of more substantial Jewish materials. The critic John Corbin of the *New York Times* noted in passing that the *Potash and Perlmutter* plays, which he acknowledged as fluff, nevertheless offered gentiles

like himself “a new insight into Yiddish character, a wholly fresh appreciation of Yiddish amenities and virtues.”⁵

Although it is generally assumed that plays dealing with modern Jewish American life are written by Jewish playwrights, this has not always been the case. Stephen Bloore noted that until 1908 only one of the published American plays that included Jewish characters had (partial) Jewish authorship, and that between 1908 and 1930 the number rose to more than a third.⁶ Examples of serious Jewish theme drama written by non-Jews include *As A Man Thinks* (1911), a play by the eminent playwright Augustus Thomas, about an upper-class Jewish family and the problem of intermarriage; *The Hand of the Potter* (1917; produced 1921), a tragedy by Theodore Dreiser depicting a humble immigrant Jewish family and the sex crime committed by their son; and Anne Nichols’s megahit *Abie’s Irish Rose* (1922), a comedy/farce dealing with the marriage of a Jew and an Irish Catholic.

The theme of intermarriage introduced to the stage by Zangwill’s *The Melting Pot* characterized numerous American plays. While most interfaith marriages ended well, signaling the integration of the Jew into American society, the insurmountable difficulties of such unions was the subject of *The Gentile Wife* (1918) by Rita Wellman, a serious drama in which the combined issues of feminism and bigotry lead to the disintegration of the marriage of a gentile aspiring opera singer and a Jewish biologist who suffers from anti-Semitism in the workplace. The wife breaks up the marriage and the husband returns to his Jewish family. The problem of the offspring of mixed marriages was discussed in Edward E. Rose’s *Rosa Machree* (1922), where uppity English grandparents will accept their half-Jewish granddaughter on condition she severs ties with her Jewish mother. The theme of shattered intermarriage appears also in one of Elmer Rice’s plays. In *Counsellor at Law* (1931), Rice portrayed the collapse of the marriage of his protagonist, George Simon, an ambitious unaffiliated Jew and the upper crust WASP wife whom he worships. When Simon’s law career is on the brink of destruction as a result of an old, well-meaning, indiscretion, his elegant wife, her lover, and her two snobbish children by a previous marriage desert him. On the verge of killing himself, he is saved by his office girl and is soon lured back to being his old workaholic self. The play’s central theme is not intermarriage, and Rice’s depiction of George Simon was largely propelled by his interest in overreaching individuals, yet it was, wrote Rabbi Louis Newman, “a vital American-Jewish portrait.”⁷

In the 1920s, as a new generation of American Jewish playwrights began to present their work, the number of gentiles writing on Jewish topics dwindled considerably. Only the rise of Nazism in the 1930s and the Holocaust, the latter

a topic Jewish playwrights were slow to address, rekindled the engagement of non-Jewish writers. Notable examples from the postwar era are *Skipper Next to God* (1948) by Jan de Hartog; *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1955), a dramatization by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett of the original diary; *The Wall* (1960) by Millard Lampell, a dramatization of John Hersey's 1950 saga of the Warsaw Ghetto; and *The Man in the Glass Booth* (1968) by the Englishman Robert Shaw, the story of a wealthy German-born American Jewish survivor who poses as an Eichmann-like figure and deliberately allows himself to be kidnapped to Israel so he can stand trial and through his own vilification enable survivors to exorcise and thus alleviate their pain.⁸

The playwright's personal identity has at times been a source of fretfulness among Jews, who as a minority group were acutely sensitive to their representation. This concern was voiced as early as 1908 by Martha Morton, the first American woman to have a major playwriting career.⁹ Morton did not portray Jews in her own plays, yet she emphasized the importance of bona fide roots when she critiqued the work of Myra Kelly, a gentile who wrote on Jewish life in the immigrant quarter of New York. Morton claimed that Kelly missed the mark because she was not "of the race" and insisted that "it is only a Jewish woman with the tragedy of the race in her blood and in her bones who can truly express the spirit of the people."¹⁰ When Augustus Thomas's *As a Man Thinks* was produced, the well-intentioned play was likewise criticized by Louis Lipsky, who wrote, "Thomas has certainly missed writing the American-Jewish drama. He is unfamiliar with the details of Jewish life, and does not understand the many shades of difference that exist among Jews."¹¹ Similar sentiments were voiced regarding the aforementioned dramatization of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, though paradoxically the pressure to "universalize" the play arose not from the gentile playwrights but from Frank's father and the Jewish producer and director of the play. In response to accusations of de-Judaization, a new revised and "Judaized" version of the original play was prepared by Wendy Kesselman for its 1997 Broadway revival.¹²

Authorial identity has most famously proven a problematic criterion in the case of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949).¹³ Though the play is devoid of Jewish signifiers it has been regarded by some American Jewish critics as "Jewish" largely because of the "ghosting" effect of the playwright's Jewish origins. In 1951 after George Ross, writing for *Commentary*, saw the Yiddish production of the play, he argued that "this Yiddish play is really the original and the Broadway production was merely – Arthur Miller's translation into English."¹⁴ The recasting of *Salesman* as a "Jewish" play was enhanced by an excellent 1951 Yiddish production (which inserted some textual changes),

by Miller's admission that some of the play was inspired by his own family members, and, years later, by Miller's later work, notably *Broken Glass* (1994), a play about the devastating psychological effect of Kristallnacht on a Jewish New York housewife. Despite accusations by such critics as Mary McCarthy and Leslie Fiedler that Miller created "a hollow, reverberant universality," and that he diminished his work by creating "crypto-Jewish characters," both Miller and his prominent biographer, Christopher Bigsby, insisted that its characters were not Jewish.

In the 1920s, a growing number of Americanized Jews began to patronize the English-language stage.¹⁵ The theater responded to this new audience with an increase of Jewish plays, including translations from the original Yiddish (David Pinski's *The Treasure* [1920]; Peretz Hirschbein's *The Idle Inn* [1921]; Ossip Dymow's *Bronx Express* [1922]; Sholem Asch's *God of Vengeance* [1922]; S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk* [1925]). This and the enthusiasm garnered by the English, Yiddish, and Hebrew productions of *The Dybbuk* possibly inspired William Perlman to write *The Broken Chain* (1929), whose central figure is a rabbi of a Hasidic community. The play presents the ever-popular theme of intergenerational conflict. The rabbi is devout and rigid, but his outcast playboy son has chosen the prizefighting ring, and his married daughter, who is having an affair, is branded by her father an adulteress and is mourned as dead to him. After a series of misfortunes the rabbi realizes his own hubris and learns to understand and forgive, and the family reconciles. Critics noted that the stage was filled with synagogue chants, prayers, blessings, candle lighting, and other Jewish fare that struck the audience as religious exotica. Jewish American playwrights continued occasionally to dialogue with *The Dybbuk*, most notably Paddy Chayefsky in *The Tenth Man* (1959), a modern American *dybbuk* play, and Tony Kushner in *A Dybbuk* (1997), an adaptation of the Ansky original.

Life in New York's Jewish immigrant quarter attracted Jewish and gentile playwrights. Some emphasized its oppressing social conditions; others were drawn to sensational stories. Emjo Basshe, a native of Vilna who arrived in New York in his early teens, focused in *The Centuries* (1927) on one of the city's Jewish tenements. He chronicled the journey of a small group of immigrants from their hope-filled arrival at Ellis Island through their settlement in the squalor of the Lower East Side, where a respectable Orthodox father becomes a fence for stolen goods and his store-owning wife has to pay protection money to the local gang. The play exposed the seedier aspects of the immigrant experience, showing a world of religious disintegration, sweatshops, strikes, criminality, and prostitution. *Four Walls* (1928) by Dana Burnett

and George Abbott picked up on the topic of Lower East Side criminality, centering on Benny Horowitz, a gang leader just released from Sing Sing, who, unable to escape his wicked milieu, kills a thug competitor and voluntarily returns to prison. A much more amusing take is *Poppa* (1928) by Bella and Samuel Spewack, a comedy about the vicissitudes of Pincus Schwitzky, a man with political ambitions who, framed by opponents, finds himself in a Lower East Side prison, with his good-for-nothing son becoming the instrument of his delivery. *The Kibitzer* (1929), by the actor Edward G. Robinson, is an amusing farce about an East Side Jewish cigar-store owner who dispenses with entrepreneurial advice to others. Yet, when awarded a fortune after having saved the life of a gentile millionaire, he utterly fails on Wall Street and is happy to resume his former life.

The Lower East Side continued to be the emotional center for Jews well after they moved out to other parts of the city. In 1940, Sylvia Regan's *Morning Star*, a three-generation tragicomedy spanning 1920 to 1931 with a particular Yiddish flavor, appeared on Broadway. It includes death in the Shirtwaist Triangle Fire, a son killed in the First World War, several weddings and bar mitzvahs, and a simple mother – the devoted immigrant Jewish mother was a beloved figure in Jewish American drama – who navigates her family's life with innate wisdom and grace. In his full and one-act plays – *An Old Jew* (1964), *Dr. Fish* (1970), *The Rabbi and the Toyota Dealer* (1984), *Old Wine in a New Bottle* (1985), and others – Murray Schisgal maintained the tradition of zany and often absurdist takes on intrinsically American Jewish life depicting old time immigrants, ambitious wannabes, and self-made millionaires.¹⁶ *The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N* (1968), by Oscar Brand and Paul Nassau, is a musical based on the stories of Leo Rosten and situated in the Lower East Side of 1919–1920. It depicted the humorous adventures of its title hero at the American Night Preparatory School for Adults and his personal war with the English language, providing good-natured entertainment for the Americanized children and grandchildren of immigrants.

Other related themes that appear in the so-called ghetto plays are the Jewish involvement in the clothing business that is evoked in Sylvia Reagan's comedy *The Fifth Season* (1953) and the musical *Rags* (1986); the Irish-Jewish connection first depicted in *Abie's Irish Rose*, a play whose immense popularity encouraged more plays on Catholic-Jewish romance such as *Steadfast* (1923) by Alfred Koblitz and Samuel Warshawsky and *Triplets* (1932) by Mark Linder. *Kosher Kitty Kelly* (1925) by Leon De Costa is unique for its uncharacteristic ending: The Jew and Catholic give up their romance, marrying their own kind. Additionally, the play's surprise ending, which revealed that the Jewish

Rosie Feinbaum is in fact half-Irish, introduced the theme of the instability and interchangeability of identity and hence the shallowness of stereotypes. This was also the major theme of the first English-language production of Sholem Aleichem's comedy *If I Were You* (1931), based on his 1914 Yiddish play *Hard to Be a Jew*, in which Jew and Russian trade places.¹⁷

The Jewish involvement in show business has been another popular theme. Artistic talent and its innate link to traditional Judaism stood at the heart of Samson Raphaelson's megahit *The Jazz Singer* (1925), a play inspired by the meteoric career of Al Jolson. Its protagonist is the singer Jack Robin, born Jackie Rabinowitz, scion of a long line of Old World cantors, who declines to follow in the footsteps of his cantor father and gives up the synagogue for the American vaudeville stage. While the message of the play is the inevitable victory of the New World epitomized by jazz, it also offers a tender depiction of tradition, its personal significance, and the emotional price the individual Jew pays for its abandonment. The world of Jewish entertainment intrigued several generations of playwrights: in the humorous *Café Crown* (1942), a thinly veiled take on the mythological Café Royal, the nerve center of the downtown Yiddish theater scene; in *Funny Girl* (1964), based on the life of Fanny Brice; in *Lenny* (1971), the life story of Lenny Bruce; and in the immensely successful musical *The Producers* (first as a film in 1968, then on Broadway in 2001), as well as many other plays and musicals.

Jewish dramatic activity during the 1920s and particularly in the 1930s must be seen within the context of the period's nativism. Already in 1917, the critic Louis Lipsky commented: "It is a dogma among American managers that the public will not go to see a play in which Jewish life as such is depicted, that there is a dislike for the play in which the details of characteristic Jewish life are shown."¹⁸ Arthur Miller recounted that as a novice playwright in the 1930s, when he approached three Broadway producers with a revised version of his Jewish-themed college play, they all responded with ambivalence: "All of them wanted to do it," Miller writes, "and all finally gave up for the stated reason that it was not a time to come forward with a play about Jews." This anxiety explains the pathetic statement made in a 1925 article in the *Jewish Exponent* in which the author tried hard to counter the "myth of Jewish domination of the American theatre" by emphasizing that of the 151 playwrights whose dramas were produced in 1923, "but twenty are Jews."¹⁹

Some Jewish playwrights declined ethnic erasure. Aaron Hoffman and David Shipman, while treading lightly, dealt with the thorny subject of American anti-Semitism. In *Welcome Stranger* (1920), an amusing comedy, Hoffman depicted the exploits of the lovable Isadore Solomon, who arrives in

a small New England town, where the bigoted inhabitants mistreat him. The Jew overcomes prejudice, becomes a millionaire by sheer luck, and turns into the town's leading citizen. As in philo-Semitic plays of the old school, the Jew who wins over the Christians is an exemplary individual with weak affiliation to the larger Jewish community. In 1918 Hoffman and Shipman collaborated on the immensely successful *Friendly Enemies*, a "war play" about two friends who are successful German immigrants. The Jew fully supports America's involvement in the war, while the gentile secretly contributes to the German war effort. After various complications the gentile realizes his error, and the two friends reunite in their devotion to America. Two years later Shipman capitalized on the participation of Jews in the American military during World War I and introduced the figure of the patriotic Jew.²⁰ In *The Unwritten Chapter* (with Victor Victor, 1920), Frank Solomon is invited by an army buddy to an upper-crust party in his WASP family's Manhattan home. The buddy's father is aghast at the presence of the Jew and is about to throw him out when it is revealed that the latter is a descendant of Haym Solomon, a Jewish patriot who played a pivotal role in America's Revolutionary War. The play, which includes flashback scenes to 1776, concludes with the gentile father's apology and warm acceptance of the Jewish guest. According to one critic some of the audience regarded the play as "propaganda for the Hebrew race" while others saw it as a flag-waving creation with excessive patriotism motivated by box-office concerns.²¹ Regardless, the play managed to remind audiences of the Jews' military service and commitment to their homeland while asserting that even by virtue of ancestry and historical precedence they had a stake in America, just as the descendants of the founding fathers had.

With some exceptions, American anti-Semitism remained a relatively mute topic on stage. It would emerge in full force in the aftermath of World War II in Arthur Laurents's *Home of the Brave* (1945), the first serious drama to explore the nexus of Jews, the military, and the psychologically debilitating effects of anti-Semitism. The ordeal of Coney, its Jewish character, is revealed in a series of flashbacks in which the disabled Jewish soldier goes through therapy, reliving his traumatic experience eventually to face and overcome the psychological roots of his condition.²² Don Appell's *This, Too, Shall Pass* (1946) also addressed anti-Semitism and its damaging effect in conjunction with military service. It is the story of two army buddies, one gentile, the second Jewish, who return from the Pacific to the gentile soldier's midwestern town. When the Jew and his comrade's sister fall in love, her mother refuses to have a Jewish son-in-law. The disenchanted Jew drives away and his buddy is killed trying to stop him. Forty years after the war ended, the playwright Neil Simon

revisited in his semiautobiographical play *Biloxi Blues* (1985) his basic training days in 1943 Alabama, which included exposure to anti-Semitism within the U.S. Army.

The Depression and the theater of social consciousness gave rise to Clifford Odets, who in 1935 created quite a sensation, first with his strike play *Waiting for Lefty*, and then with *Awake and Sing!* (1935), the quintessential Jewish American drama of the pre-World War II era. In it Odets put across what has been seen as the archetypal Jewish American family of the period. He presented three generations of the lower-middle-class Berger household: the grandfather, Jacob, the socialist-idealistic immigrant; his daughter, Bessie; her husband, Myron; and her successful brother, Morty. Bessie, the materfamilias, is eager for respectability and material security. Her children, Hennie and Ralph, wish for a better life they cannot attain in their socioeconomic matrix, and Ralph, influenced by his grandfather, begins to question the petit-bourgeois aspirations of his parents. The play ends with old Jacob killing himself, leaving his life insurance money to Ralph so he can realize his socialist dreams. For Jewish audiences the play was a revelation. The critic Alfred Kazin recalled "sitting in the Belasco, watching my mother and father and uncles and aunts, occupying the stage . . . by as much right as if they were Hamlet or Lear."²³

The ascent of fascism and Nazism in Europe and the fear of rising racist movements in the United States stirred America's best dramatists, including Sinclair Lewis, Elmer Rice, Clare Booth, Lillian Hellman, Maxwell Anderson, Jack Levin, Norman Krasna, to write antifascist plays. Mostly, though, they did not focus exclusively on the Jewish aspect of National Socialism. Yet the specific predicament of German Jews generated several so-called anti-Hitler plays by mostly Jewish playwrights. A striking feature of many of these dramas and comedies – perhaps in an effort to enlist gentile sympathy – is their focus on mixed couples and *mischling* cases, namely, people whose lives were devastated because they were quarter or eighth Jewish. *Blood on the Moon* (1933) by Claire Sifton and Paul Sifton presented the tragedy of the family of a distinguished Berlin brain specialist who is discovered to be one-quarter Jewish. In 1935 Clifford Odets staged *Till the Day I Die*, a one-act play that showed Nazi cruelty to communists and featured a Nazi officer who kills himself for fear that his partial Jewish ancestry will be revealed. *Waltz in Goose-Step* (1938) by Oliver H. P. Garrett dealt with the insider conflicts of Nazi insurgents fleeing Europe, including a homosexual complication. *Birthright* (1933) by Richard Maibaum was an exception insofar as it dealt with the ordeal of a fully German Jewish family.

As refugees trying to flee Europe became a significant issue, Elmer Rice wrote *Flight to the West* (1940). In the play he assembled on a transatlantic

clipper flight from Lisbon to New York a cross section of people of various nationalities, backgrounds, and ideologies – Americans and Germans, Jews and gentiles. By the end of the two-day journey the Nazis on board are held back, prohibited from entering the United States. *Jacobowsky and the Colonel* (1944), a comedy by S. N. Behrman based on Franz Werfel's work, showed the bond established between a Polish colonel and a Jewish refugee who motor across Europe to escape the German forces and manage to get to England.²⁴ Leo Birinski's *The Day Will Come* (1944) depicts a mysterious old Jew, the only resident left in a Russian village captured by the Nazis, and recalls the time he met with Napoleon when he invaded Russia. Hitler is eager to meet the old Jew and tells him he is anti-Semitic because Jews gave birth to Christianity. The Jew is executed but returns to haunt Hitler, driving him mad.

Edward Chodorov's *Common Ground* (1945) depicted a troupe of USO entertainers captured by the Nazis in Italy. The most accomplished member of the troupe is an American Jewish comedian, who is told he will be sent to a death camp. The gentile members of the troupe are offered survival in exchange for entertaining the German and Italian military and defaming the United States. They decide to decline the offer and be shot instead. The ideal of "one for all and all for one" was maintained in *Stalag 17* (1951), defined by its authors, Donald Bevan and Edmund Trzcinski, as a "comedy melodrama" that depicted the antics of American POWs – some of them Jews – in a German prisoner of war camp. While based on the personal experience of the authors, the play portrayed the captured Americans as a bonded group, though letters by American Jews who had been prisoners in the camp made it clear that the Jewish soldiers were held separately by the Germans.

From a Jewish perspective, the three most rousing theatrical events of the decade, all organized by Jewish-Zionist bodies, were the spectacular pageants, *The Eternal Road* (1937), *We Will Never Die* (1943), and *A Flag Is Born* (1946). The first, written by Franz Werfel with music by Kurt Weill, was directed by Max Reinhardt, all refugees from Nazi Europe. A formidable spectacle with a cast of 245, it was set in a synagogue filled with hiding Jews, and, as the rabbi read from the Torah, the audience was presented with a series of dramatized biblical events. *We Will Never Die*, by Ben Hecht with music by Kurt Weill, was intended to shatter the silence regarding the ongoing mass murder of European Jewry and move the Roosevelt administration to take measures to save the Jews who could still be saved. Seen by 100,000 people, it failed to affect U.S. policy. *A Flag Is Born*, also by Ben Hecht, presented two old Holocaust survivors who demand justice from the world, receiving none. The young hero, David, marches off to fight for the creation of a Jewish

homeland in Palestine, turning the old Jew's prayer shawl into the flag of the future state of Israel.

In the 1950s and the early 1960s the number of Jewish themed dramas declined. Some of the dramatists of the 1930s had migrated to Hollywood, while others were discouraged by the unwelcoming ambience of the cold war and McCarthyism. In addition to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the period was punctuated by S. N. Behrman's moving *The Cold Wind and the Warm* (1958), based on his memoirs of his Worcester, Massachusetts, lower-middle-class youth; Paddy Chayefsky's *The Tenth Man* and the biblical *Gideon* (1961); the musical comedy *A Family Affair* (1962) by James and William Goldman; *Enter Laughing* (1963) by Joseph Stein; *Dear Me the Sky Is Falling* (1963) by Leonard Spigelgass, an intergenerational comedy involving moving from New Rochelle to Florida, a shrink, and a daughter who prefers a beatnik lover to her Ivy League lawyer fiancé.

Spigelgass's comedy *The Wrong Way Light Bulb* (1969) introduced the new theme of the Americanized Jew who returns to the ancestral home after the death of parents or grandparents to confront issues of bittersweet memories, family dynamics, and personal identity by encountering the old neighborhood and physical detritus of a life that is no more. This theme appears in Arthur Miller's *The Price* (1968), in Herb Gardner's autobiographical play *Conversations with My Father* (1994), and in David Mamet's *The Old Neighborhood* (1998). Mamet, a prolific writer who has strongly asserted his Jewish identity, deals with issues of the disappearing past, memory, and identity, in such Jewish theme plays as *The Disappearance of the Jews*, *Goldberg Street*, and *The Luftmensch*, published jointly in 1987 under the title *Three Jewish Plays*.²⁵

Neil Simon, the author of some thirty plays, nearly all situated in New York, was America's most popular playwright from the 1970s to the 1990s. For the most part, his middle-class characters have no acknowledged ethnicity, yet often display characteristics, habits, and speech patterns that are commonly associated with urban Jews. Ethnic specificity is fully present, though, in Simon's autobiographical plays *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1983), *Biloxi Blues* (1985), and *Broadway Bound* (1986), which trace key periods in the journey of Eugene Morris Jerome, Simon's stand-in, from his 1930s preadolescence to his World War II military training experience, to his postwar newly achieved independence as a young aspiring writer in New York. Simon won a Pulitzer Prize for *Lost in Yonkers* (1991), a play with some autobiographical elements about two orphaned Jewish brothers who are sent to live with their stern German Jewish refugee grandmother, who had been crippled psychologically and physically by the Nazis. Simon's show-business plays, too, have strong

Jewish references: *The Sunshine Boys* (1972) was inspired by the Jewish vaudeville duo Smith and Dale, *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* (1994) is based on the mostly Jewish bunch writing material for Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*, and *Forty Five Seconds from Broadway* (2002) is a tribute to the modest deli that served its heavily Jewish theatrical clientele.

The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of a new generation of Jewish playwrights. Mostly, they had little personal memory of anti-Semitism, were well educated and fully entrenched in American society, and problematized their Jewishness by coalescing it with the major issues of the day: feminism, racism, and the AIDS epidemic. The most successful female dramatist of this group was Wendy Wasserstein, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for *The Heidi Chronicles* (1989). Wasserstein, reared in a well-to-do Jewish family, wrote comedies that often deal with women looking for love, feeling squashed by their overbearing mother, and constantly negotiating Jewishness and assimilation. Her play *The Sisters Rosensweig* (1993), based on her own family, presents three sisters who expound these questions and manage to transmit their poignancy to a new generation, symbolized by the college-bound daughter of the most conflicted sister.

Jewish-black interaction made its first postwar appearance in the musical comedy *The Zulu and the Zaida* (1965), about the friendship of an old Johannesburg Jew and his young black companion, who in due course learns some Yiddish. With the emergence of a new generation of African American dramatists, Jewish dramatists, with few exceptions, tended no longer to handle the topic. In the 1980s New York's Central Park served as background for two plays where issues of race, family, and aging did move to the fore: *Horowitz and Mrs. Washington* (1980) by Henry Decker, and the much more successful *I'm Not Rappaport* (1985) by Herb Gardner, a play about the relationship between an old Jewish radical and an old African American. The interaction between Jews and blacks in the South was depicted in Tony Kushner's musical play *Caroline or Change* (2004), about the relationship between a lonely well-off Jewish child and the family's black domestic. The most successful play on the topic is *Driving Miss Daisy* (1988) by Alfred Uhry, a Pulitzer-winning play that chronicles the slowly changing relationship from 1948 to 1973 of an elderly Jewish Atlanta woman and her African American chauffeur. The play was the first in Uhry's *Atlanta Trilogy*, which centers on Jewish life in that city in the early twentieth century. *The Last Night of Ballyhoo* (1996), set in 1939, during the much-anticipated premiere of the film *Gone with the Wind*, deals with a Jewish family preparing for an important southern Jewish social event and offers commentary on the difference between southern and New York Jews,

especially in reference to the maintenance of Jewish identity. This theme also appeared in Uhry's musical play *Parade* (1998), about the 1913 trial and lynching of the innocent Jewish factory manager Leo Frank, a twofold outsider as a New York Jew.

In the 1980s, reflecting the changing mores of America, Jewish playwrights bonded Jewishness and homosexuality in "coming out" plays and reshaped the map of American drama. Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* (1981) focused on Arnold Bekoff, a flamboyant drag queen; his bisexual lover; and his past and present family, including his emphatically Jewish mother. William Finn's *Marvin Trilogy* included three musical plays, all focused on Marvin, a Jewish man. In *Trousers* (1979), Marvin, a married father, is torn between his homosexual orientation and his desire not to upset his family life; in *March of the Falsettos* (1981), he leaves his wife and son for another man; and in *Falsettoland* (1990), written in the context of the AIDS epidemic, he and his former wife celebrate their son's bar mitzvah, which is followed by Marvin's death. In 1993 Tony Kushner made theater history with his Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, a seven-hour two-part play, respectively, titled *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*. Jewish ethics and tradition are fundamental to the moral journey of Louis Ironson, a neurotic young Jew, whose lover is suffering from AIDS. The play, which was also made into a television miniseries, so dazzled in its monumentality that it may have stunted the development of other major plays on this theme.

Since the 1980s, the Holocaust and its survivors have become a key topic in the work of Jewish dramatists, who often use the encounter of survivors and persons who have not gone through the horror to bring about a deeper understanding of personal and communal history and its imperatives. Some focus on female interaction: Wendy Kesselman's *I Love You I Love You Not* (1982) in which the troubled Daisy visits her grandmother, who tells Daisy about losing her two sisters in Auschwitz; Barbara Lebow's *A Shayna Maidel* (1985), a tender evocation of the initially awkward reunion of two sisters, one an American, the other a survivor, and the reunification of a Jewish family in the post-Holocaust years; and Emily Mann's *Annulla: An Autobiography* (1985), a one-character play, in which a seventy-four-year-old survivor tells her life story to a young woman off-stage. Donald Marguelis's *The Model Apartment* (1988) and Jon Robin Baitz's *The Substance of Fire* (1990), both family dramas, are located, respectively, in a Florida condo and New York apartment. Marguelis's Max and Lola, an old Jewish couple of survivors, newly moved retirees from Brooklyn, are tracked down and joined by their abusive and semiretarded daughter and her companion. The play explores survivor's guilt and the ongoing debilitating effects

of the Holocaust. Baitz's play demonstrates in a more minor way the clash of the value systems of the survivor Isaac Geldhart and his children, who wish to protect the family's financial interests by saving their father's highbrow publishing company from bankruptcy through publishing trashy materials. Other important works, all set in Europe, include Tony Kushner's *A Bright Room* (1985) set in Germany in 1932 and 1933; the plot, based on Bertolt Brecht's *The Private Life of the Master Race* (1938), focuses on a middle-aged actress, with all of the action taking place in her apartment. The action is occasionally interrupted by scenes featuring Zillah, a young woman in the 1980s living in Long Island who believes that President Ronald Reagan is beginning to resemble Hitler. *Lebensraum* (1997) by Israel Horovitz describes what would have happened if the German chancellor, as an act of redemption, would have invited six million Jews to Germany, promising them jobs and citizenship. *Old Wicked Songs* (1996) by Jon Marans, which takes place in 1986 Vienna, centers on the relationship between a Viennese music professor in his late fifties and his new twenty-five-year-old American student.²⁶ Anti-Semitic slanders and insults from his teacher create enormous tension. As they reconcile, it turns out that the teacher himself is a Jew and a concentration camp survivor. Tim Blake Nelson's *The Grey Zone* (1996) follows a group of Sonderkommandos, somewhat privileged Jewish prisoners at Auschwitz who were actively involved in gassing their fellow Jews and cleaning the chambers from the litter of death. The play deals with their shattering guilt as well as their acts of compassion.

It is impossible to predict the scope and themes of future Jewish American drama. The number of Jewish playwrights is certainly impressive, but the question arises whether Jews are still an interesting topic for America when a host of new minorities have captured the public's attention. Can American Jews sustain a serious theatrical venue that will cater to their specific concerns? The newest "Jewish play" of 2013 alludes to these questions. Joshua Harmon's farcical comedy *Bad Jews*, a title that made no one blink, offers a smorgasbord of many of the themes mentioned in this essay: intermarriage and the reunion of three young cousins, all college students, after the death of their beloved grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, whose "chai" pendant, which he wore throughout the Holocaust, they all crave. They fight like cats and dogs over the pendant and its interpretation, and it is finally grabbed by Daphne, a hyperactive "super-Jew" with a supposed Israeli soldier boyfriend, who intends to move to Israel after graduation. Will she be the keeper of the historically and emotionally loaded pendant? Can the hysterical young woman be trusted with it? Who, we may ask metaphorically, will keep the "chai" alive and where? It is an open-ended question that only time can answer.

Notes

- 1 Though it goes beyond the scope of this survey, it must be remembered that many of the playwrights mentioned in this essay also wrote film and television scripts, both adaptations of their own plays and original works, some of them on Jewish topics. The interaction between the theatrical stage and its offshoots needs to be taken into account when considering the larger field of Jewish American dramatic works. This is particularly the case with the Holocaust theme. The television miniseries of the 1970s are of particular relevance as they universalized and Americanized the subject. They include *QBVII* (1974), *Holocaust* (1974, teleplay by Gerald Green), and *Playing for Time* (1976, teleplay by Arthur Miller).
- 2 Henry Popkin, "The Vanishing Jew of Our Popular Culture," *Commentary* (July 1952), 46.
- 3 The original production of *Fiddler* surpassed three thousand performances. It held the record for the longest-running Broadway musical for almost ten years.
- 4 For a detailed discussion see my *From the Ghetto to the Melting Pot: Israel Zangwill's Jewish Plays* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006).
- 5 John Corbin, "The Jew as a Dramatic Problem" (*New York Times*, January 5, 1919), 40.
- 6 Stephen Bloore, "The Jew in American Dramatic Literature (1794–1930)," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 40 (June 1951): 359. The pre-1908 play to which he refers was Henry Churchill DeMille and Davis Belasco's *Men and Women* (1890). Belasco (1853–1931), a Sephardic Jew, was one of America's leading theater thespians.
- 7 Louis I. Newman, "Elmer Rice's 'Counsellor-at-Law,'" *Jewish Exponent*, January 27, 1933, 1.
- 8 Another example is William Gibson, a non-Jew who devoted his attention to Golda Meir, the Israel prime minister, composing *Golda* (1977), which he rewrote in 2003 as a one-woman show titled *Golda's Balcony*.
- 9 Norton herself did not include overt Jewish themes in her work.
- 10 "Pseudo Jewish Writers," *Boston Advocate*, February 28, 1908, 4.
- 11 Louis Lipsky, "As a Man Thinks," *American Hebrew*, May 12, 1911, 9.
- 12 See Edna Nahshon, "Anne Frank from Page to Stage," in *Anne Frank Rebound*, eds. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jeffrey Shandler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 59–92.
- 13 *Salesman* was the recipient of the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and Tony Award for Best Play.
- 14 George Ross, "On the Horizon: 'Death of a Salesman' in the Original," *Commentary*, February 1951, 184.
- 15 The critic Alexander Walcott commented on this phenomenon in the *Century Magazine*, pointing out that the large percentage of Jews among the "alert, discriminating, sophisticated public" made "literary plays" so successful.
- 16 It is not surprising that in 2000, three of his short plays were translated and performed in Yiddish under the title *Shpiel! Shpiel! Shpiel!* (Play! Play! Play!). See Lawrence Van Gelder, "Jewish Experience in 3 Generations," *New York Times*, March 26, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/26/theater/reviews/26shpi.html>

- 17 The 1934 comedy *The Bride of Torozko*, by Otto Indig and adapted from the Hungarian by Ruth Langer, also used the theme of indefiniteness of Jewish racial traits by telling the story of a Christian girl who is shunned after suddenly being exposed as being born a Jew only to discover that her alleged Jewish identity was after all a bureaucratic mistake.
- 18 Louis Lipsky, "The Theatre," *American Jewish Chronicle*, October 26, 1917, 722.
- 19 Martin Golde, "Jewish Books and Jewish Authors," *Jewish Exponent*, December 25, 1925, 9.
- 20 A total of 250,000 Jews served, representing approximately 5 percent of the American armed forces.
- 21 "Mr. Hornblow Goes to the Play," *Theatre Magazine* 32 (December 1920), 424.
- 22 In 1977 Laurents wrote *Scream*, one of the earliest Holocaust themed American plays.
- 23 Alfred Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), 80, 82. Quoted in Jonathan B. Krasner, "The Interwar Family and American Jewish Identity in Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing!*," *Jewish Social Studies* 13:1 (Fall 2006): 6.
- 24 In 1979, the successful comedy was adapted into a musical titled *The Grand Tour*.
- 25 Mamet received the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for *Glengarry Glen Ross*.
- 26 Horowitz is also the author of *Unexpected Tenderness*, a largely autobiographical play about domestic violence in a Jewish Massachusetts family.

Jews and Film

JONATHAN FREEDMAN

In a recent made-for-television series, *Episodes* (2011–), a big-time L.A. television exec, Merc Lapidus, is greeting guests at his father's funeral. Wearing a *kippa* and a sorrowful countenance, he accepts the condolences of his friends, rivals, business partners, all of whom are secretly thinking about the relative sizes of their floral tributes – it is an orgy of sycophancy and bad faith. Suddenly, Merc's cell phone goes off. He looks stricken, torn between the solemnity of the occasion and the importunities of the deal. After some brief and comic hesitation, the latter wins out, and the scene ends with Merc yelling obscenities into his cell while the rabbi and the other mourners proceed with the service.

Even though we have moved into a postfilm, poststudio era, this episode of *Episodes* references as it updates a number of clichés about Hollywood: that it is ruled by petty motives, vanity, and ego, which overwhelm even the most sacred of human relations; that it is populated by tyrannical potentates and obsequious subjects. And most importantly of all, that it is fundamentally and irrevocably Jewish. This cluster of associations is hallowed in popular history and literature alike. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's words, which Neil Gabler takes as his title for a popular history of the Hollywood Jews, it was "an Empire of Their Own." There was, and is, no need to ask who "they" are.

Fitzgerald also wrote, gnominically but tellingly, in his notes for his Hollywood novel *The Last Tycoon* (1941) that "Hollywood is a Jewish holiday, a gentiles [*sic*] tragedy."¹ Perhaps this view is accurate. Hollywood, and by extension, the American film industry, was indeed a remarkably Jewish space, in that respect like other culture industries, especially popular music, theater, and vaudeville, but more prominently so as movies became by the 1930s the most dominant of all entertainment modalities. That being said, there is a more complex story to be told here. Hollywood, as Fitzgerald's self-pitying comment unwittingly suggests, was a place where Jewish and gentile fantasies mixed, met, and collaborated – in part because the former had to attract (and

solicit) the latter as part of their business; in part because it was a place where, in a race-and-ethnicity-segregated America, Jewish people could reimagine themselves as anything – especially WASPs. (“The directors were all Jews,” says the noted stage actor Alvin Epstein. “The actors were all Jews pretending to be goys.” He was only exaggerating by a smidgen.)²

Impressive here is not just the name changing but the ways the American film industry offers a close-up view of the shifting relation between Jewish and gentile Americans’ self-conceptions in the twentieth century. I want to look here at four moments in the long history of Jews and Hollywood as representative of this pattern. Each should be taken as a rich and complex expression in its own right; each also betokens a different moment in the mutually defining Jewish and American self-understandings. The first is drawn from D. W. Griffith’s *Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912); the second from the Warner Brothers’ *Jazz Singer* (1927); the third, from Barbra Streisand’s *Yentl* (1983); the fourth, and most recent, from the Coen Brothers’ *A Serious Man* (2009). These films show the kinds of contortions and compromises by which Jews entered film first as objects then as (ambivalent) subjects; they demonstrate as well how Jews use the film industries to carve out new (and not unproblematic) itineraries for themselves in eras of ethnic revival, gender revolution, and post-modern hybrid identity formations challenging the very category “Jew” itself.

Musketeers: The Metonymic Jew

D. W. Griffith is most famous for his epic films *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916). He is also credited with being one of the inventors of the close-up, cross cutting, iris shots, and extended narrative development, all generated and perfected in the hundreds of films he produced for Biograph Pictures in the oughts and teens. In reality he originated none of these techniques. What he did, compellingly, was to unite the conventions of nineteenth century sentimental culture with the capacities of a new medium to engage in the most pressing issues of the day.

Such a conjunction is on vivid display in shorts addressing the hot-button issue of urban squalor, *Romance of a Jewess* (1908) and *A Child of the Ghetto* (1910). Jewish stereotypes are rife in their representations of urban life. But two other elements are also prepossessing in each film, one leading in the direction of realistic representation, one away from it. Both films contain documentary-style street scenes shot on crowded Rivington Street in the heart of the Lower East Side. Yet in each, a woman is sutured to the plots familiar from the popular sentimental fictions, whether negative – two mothers die in



FIGURE 1. The Little Lady encounters a ghetto street, complete with Jew. *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912).

D. W. Griffith, director.

Romance, another one in *A Child of the Ghetto* – or positive – in the latter film, a plucky orphan escapes from a problematic environment to find wholesome love in a world elsewhere.

All three elements are present, but with a telling difference, in one of Griffith's most influential films, *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912). *Musketeers* is enormously important because it first captured the ambivalence that remains the heart of the genre, the covert attractiveness of the gangster, whose cocky charisma overcomes the stigma attached to his criminality (think of Edward G. Robinson as *Little Caesar*, or Jimmy Cagney in *Public Enemy*, or for that matter James Caan's Sonny in *The Godfather*). Here the gangster is called Snapper Kid, and the object of his affections, played by Griffith's stock-company star Lillian Gish, is called the Little Lady. Like Ruth, the Jewess in Griffith's earlier film, she faces the death of her mother; unlike the former, she sets out alone onto the ghetto streets, encountering Snapper and his gang and ultimately saving them by lying to the police about their whereabouts. In between, she walks down a street carrying her laundry (Figure 1). And just off the side,

presiding over this scene, but not at all a direct part of it, is an egregious Jew. A tradesman – he is selling fruit, it seems – he is marked Semitic by his role as street vendor, his enormous and well-tended beard, and his reading of a text, marking a passage with one hand while he raises the other to emphasize it:

This Jew is not like the figures on display in Griffith's Biograph films or those in the shorts being produced at the same time by the rival Edison Company. These grow out of familiar stereotypes that populated the stage in the pre-cinematic era – the shyster, the skinflint, the clown with a tumescent nose. The Jew in *Musketeers* is by contrast distinguished by his foreignness, which makes him appear at once more benign and more malign. On the one hand, with his text reading and his fruit selling, he appears to be lost in a world of his own. On the other, the street he presides over is far more troubled than that on display even in *Romance of a Jewess*. There, the street scenes have a neutral, documentary feel to them – and Griffith even adds an intertitle praising the entrepreneurial energy of the teeming crowds. Here the street scene is carefully managed to create a parade of vice condensed into one shot: adult prostitutes (one of whom the Little Lady almost bumps into), a child prostitute, a gang of street urchins, and a store window stocked with whiskey bottles. The shot offers a dream vision of urban vices from which the Little Lady averts her eyes but to which ours are drawn and to the visual completion of which the Jew is crucial (note how he balances the composition of the shot as the Lady proceeds in the upper left corner and he dominates the lower right). Marginal to the parade of vice that he visually superintends, this Jew is at the same time part of it; he is a living metonym – a stand-in for the goings-on taking place behind his back, representative of yet not identical with those pleasures and practices.

This shot captures well the new image of the Jew emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The sentimentalized young Jewish woman fades from cultural view (the WASP version remains central not just to Griffith but to the culture at large); the Jewish man slides into position as arch alien and embodiment of the ghetto itself. Sometimes this Jew is envisaged as a criminal or participant in this world of dangerous pleasures; but more often he is seen in this metonymic light, as a facilitator, a go-between, a pimp, or procurer. The so-called white-slave trade (as the period called organized prostitution rings), for example, was claimed to be dominated by Jews and indeed, in some instances, was alleged to have been organized by the (quite mythical) heads of the Jewish community. Similarly, as Marni Davis observes, the rise of the Prohibition movement paralleled a critique of Jews as

purveyors of spirits. Importers, transporters, tavern owners, whatever: “Jews are on the side of liquor and always have been,” cried Henry Ford.³

Urban pleasures of all sorts thus were facilitated by the Jew’s mercantile spirit even as they were affiliated or identified with their moral deficiencies (and vice-versa). And one of the prime city-centered pleasures was the movies. Although the production and distribution of American movies were initially affiliated with WASP-dominated entities like Thomas Alva Edison’s Trust, Jewish entrepreneurs opened cheap theaters largely but not exclusively in working-class neighborhoods, the so-called nickelodeons. These provided entertainment, on-the-fly-language instruction, and a social gathering place for Jews as well as many other immigrants. But it also provided the theater-owner-cum-entrepreneurs with capital to fuel their chutzpah. They soon cut out the middleman, broke the Edison Trust, and supplied their own product. William Fox, Carl Laemmle, Louis Mayer, et al. – second generation Jews, by and large, and wholly secularized descendants of men like the Hebrew-reading tradesman in *Musketeers* – built their own studios, then relocated them to California to take advantage of abundant sunshine and non-union labor. So doing, they created, as Gabler would say, an empire of their own – Hollywood.

These figures rapidly became known as “moguls,” notorious for their power and rapacity and emblematic of a medium and a place that became signifier of gaudy, exotic, almost Orientalized excess. “MR KAHN A PLEASURE DOME DECREED” is the slogan that draws the rioting crowds to a premiere in the apocalyptic conclusion of Nathanael West (né Nathan Weinstein)’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939), conflating Harry Cohn, head of Columbia Pictures and an infamous vulgarian, with the opium-hazed vision of Kublai Khan of Coleridge’s poem: makers and products of dreams.⁴ The truth of the matter was less grandiose. The genius of the Hollywood system, in Thomas Schatz’s words, lay in its application of the principles of industrial production to the making of movies, which rolled off the back-lot assembly lines with as much regularity and precision as working with talented but neurotic human beings could allow; and in the system of vertical integration, in which, by owning theaters, studios could control demand as well as supply.⁵ If these practices are reminiscent of those of another transformative industry emerging at the same moment, the automobile industry, it is all the more significant that the foremost critic of the new entertainment venues and of their ostensible Jewishness was none other than Henry Ford himself, whose *Dearborn Independent* thundered in the 1920s against the Jewish-dominated entertainment industry as a Semitic corruptor of the native American spirit. Constructed, like Griffith’s

Jew, as irrevocably other, Hollywood Jews were as central to the making of a new America as was their most prominent antagonist, and that is doubtless why the full force of his culture's ambivalence about its own modernity fell upon them.

The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Place

Given fears of resurgent anti-Semitism, the relatively small number of Jews in the mass American audience, and their dependence upon the good grace of government to keep their monopoly alive, the Jewish moguls have been rightly seen as downplaying Jewish themes, issues, and subjects in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s – up until, say, *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), the blockbuster critique of anti-Semitism, which added that social malaise to the list of issues that Hollywood “problem films” addressed. One needs to add some qualifications – as Patricia Erens reminds us in her invaluable book on Jews in American film, Hollywood offered a number of historical films on Jewish subjects, such as the 1929 *Disraeli* starring George Arliss; urban melodramas of the period continued to include Jews in the panoply of big-city ethnics.⁶ Moreover, there emerged in the 1930s a vibrant international Yiddish film industry conjoining New and Old World audiences. That being said, there remains a sad truth to this insight, particularly in light of the enormous flood of talent to Hollywood from the Yiddish theater (e.g., Paul Muni, John Garfield), from Tin-Pan Alley (Arthur Freed, head of MGM's renowned musicals unit), and from Europe (where the rise of the Nazis forced onto America's shores not only actors including Peter Lorre and directors such as Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, or Otto Preminger, but such cinematographers as Karl Freund and composers as Eric Korngold, all introducing techniques pioneered in Europe). The gap between what Hollywood was ethnically and the ethnic makeup of the worlds its films portrayed was cavernous, particularly as studio heads such as Louis Mayer insisted on pumping out Americana like the Andy Hardy series of small-town comedies or Vincente Minnelli's musical evocation of an American past, *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944).

There is one spectacular exception, however, which calls into question this view: the Warner Brother's *Jazz Singer* (1927). That film was, of course, the first “talkie,” and the result of an enormous gamble by Frank and Harry Warner, who bet the future of their entire studio on this sound technology – and won. *The Jazz Singer* was an unabashedly Jewish production in theme, in plot, and in male lead – it was the vehicle by which the great Jewish vaudeville entertainer Al Jolson became a movie star. It revealed as well some of the tensions at the

center not just of the Hollywood Jews' experience of America, but that of Jews across the board.

For the film is really a miniallegory of that most frequently invoked and abused process – Jewish assimilation. Its protagonist, Jack Robin, has, like so many entertainers of his era, changed his name, from Jake Rabinowitz and his profession from cantor in training to jazz singer. Spurning his father's pleas and his mother's tears, he embarks on a relentlessly upward career path that involves the love of a shikse – costar Mary Dale – and a Broadway premiere, on the very night, it seems, of the holiest of Jewish holidays, Yom Kippur. Indeed, on that night, he faces an extreme moral test. Jack's father is dying and has asked him to take his place as cantor. Bowing to the will of the patriarch and the community, he abandons his theatrical ambitions for that night and chants the Kol Nidre service, which his dying father hears at his last moment on this earth; Mary and his director also listen, with the title card (the technology only allowed for very brief patches of sound, usually focused on Jolson's vocal performances) reading, “–a jazz singer – singing to his God.” But somehow, magically, there are no consequences for his desertion: The show goes on the next night and he is, predictably, a huge hit (Figure 2), singing “Mammy” in blackface to a crowd including his adoring mother seated in the front row.

As Michael Rogin reminds us, the film is a redaction of the Warner Brothers' own passage to Hollywood success: Indeed the film's premiere was shadowed by the illness and the death of Sam Warner, who, like Jack/Jake, was partnered with a gentile woman.⁷ It also offers a resolution to the guilt generated by their seeming betrayal of their Jewish origins. In its wish-fulfillment ending, the Jewish entertainer is able to be true to his faith *and* to his desire to become a star and the partner of a shikse. Assimilation brings no discontents, and the guilt that accompanies it is absolved along with the force of the choice between Jewishness and Americanness, which disappears into thin air.

It is an allegory, too, of the racial dynamics of this process. Rogin has provocatively argued that the blackface in which Robin performs is emblematic of the means by which first Jewish entertainers, and then Jews across the board, moved from the off- or not-quite white, and more generally objects of otherness and cultural suspicion, into fully credentialed members of the U.S. polity. Their “racial cross-dressing” defines the Jew as not-black, and in the increasingly binarized world of twentieth-century America, blackface guarantees whiteness.⁸

Critics have contested Rogin's thesis. Lary May shows that the African American press and audiences alike responded powerfully to the film, sensing



FIGURE 2. The jazz singer triumphant. *The Jazz Singer* (1927). Alan Crosland, director.

in it the solidarity that Rogin contests.⁹ Andrew Heinze argues that Jews never experienced themselves as anything but Jews even in the racialized context in which they found themselves;¹⁰ Joel Rosenberg has reminded us that “Jews in 1927 America were in no position to assume any sort of triumphalist posture in either the sunshine or the klieg lights of their adopted land, much less to lord it over others among their fellow marginalized.”¹¹ Doubtless all are correct – though if nothing else, Rogin’s argument testifies to the power of film to engage the imagination of collective as well as individual destinies.

Whatever one feels about the argument, it does contain an element of truth: Entertainment industries including film did indeed serve Jews as one of the prime vectors of success when many institutions (colleges, professional schools, law firms) remained closed to Jews or at least restricted their entry; and the entertainment industries captained by Jews did indeed make much hay out of the black vernacular tradition. In popular song, and blackface performances of vaudevillians, Jewish appropriations of black voices, black faces, and black culture contributed (although not, as Rosenberg reminds us, either uniquely or essentially) to their success.¹²

Yet to focus on this one instance is to miss another vital component of *The Jazz Singer*. Over the course of the film, the model of Jewish masculinity that Jack embodies is shown to be highly nonnormative. Partly, this is a function of Jolson's hyperkinetic performance style. As he shakes and gyrates on the stage, as his eyes bulge and his words quiver to the point of a stutter, Jackie/Jolson appeared neither white nor black but profoundly unnatural:

Electronic sound systems had not been invented yet, so performers had to rely on all sorts of tricks to catch an audience's attention. Jolson knew them all, and even invented a few of his own. He danced, stamped, cried real tears, improvised risqué jokes and outrageous physical gags – even sashayed about with wildly effeminate gestures. Once he had an audience, Jolson wouldn't let go until they were begging for more.¹³

The film connects this performance style to Jake's ethnicity. In his climactic Kol Nidre performance, dressed in full cantorial gear, he begins to *shokel* – to sway back and forth, as religious Jews frequently do in prayer. The movements are remarkably similar to the ones he makes while performing as jazz singer, marking both sacred and secular performances as powerfully Jewish.

Second, and more powerfully, Jake/Jackie's object choices mark him as nonnormative. We are perhaps so familiar with the phenomenon of the gentile-chasing Jewish man that we miss the transgressive force of his yearning for the *shikse* Mary Dale, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a common anti-Semitic aspersion was that Jewish men lusted for non-Jewish women – a propensity denounced by such varied prophets of hate as Édouard Drumont in France, his American disciple Telemachus Thomas Timeyensis, and other nativists like those writing in the *Dearborn Independent*. As I have suggested elsewhere, the Jew's affections also comport themselves with another common stereotype, for they are paradoxically revealed to be endogamous as well as exogamous.¹⁴ Jack is, not to put too fine a point on it, madly in love with his mother, and she with him. When, for example, he returns home during one of his many trips, the two of them embrace, he kisses her on the lips, and sings for her adoring response, demonstrating a greater degree of physical and emotional warmth than he shows to his girlfriend. His final blackface performance also cements his affections to mother love. He addresses his beloved mother directly, turning his back on Mary, who is left to admire Jack admiring Mom from backstage. A generation after Freud and two before Philip Roth's Sophie Portnoy, the film articulates the cultural stereotype of all-encompassing Jewish mother in a fin-de-siècle

idiom that links the love of that mother to the incestuous affections of the not-quite-masculine Jewish man.

The point is not that the makers of the film or its producers were aware of these dynamics – to the contrary. The film is fascinating because such matters remain profoundly unconscious. These behaviors might have seemed normal to Jewish men making the movie but doubtless elicited other responses from gentile audiences who saw the movie in, say Muncie, Indiana, or Pocatello, Idaho. For them, the Jack/Jake character would read as rather one profoundly odd, different – exciting, but perhaps a little laughable; at any event, probably an object of curiosity. The Jewish man may find his place in the American imagination in *The Jazz Singer*, but it remains a profoundly equivocal, nonnormative one in which he is called upon repeatedly to perform his own deviance. As Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Carl Reiner's *Where's Poppa?* (1970), and the complete works of Woody Allen suggest, this performance remains a resource for Jewish writers, comics, and filmmakers for decades.

Yentl: Ethnic Revival, Feminist Style

Like virtually all the writers on Jews and Hollywood, I have focused on the male side of the story of Jewish entry into mainstream American life by film. But in the 1970s, crucial developments in Jewish life arrive to challenge the story I have been telling. One is the advent of the feminist movement led in large measure by a number of Jewish women, including Betty Freidan, Shulamith Firestone, and (on her father's side, but also via self-identification) Gloria Steinem. The second is the so-called ethnic revival beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, which occurred in a number of ethnic venues but was felt with particular force in the Jewish world with the publication of Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* (1976), a resonant account of the ghetto Jackie Robin and his descendants abandoned. In both cases, what had once been abjected – the ethnic, the female – was moved to the center of cultural and social value, and the nature and tenor of Jewish life were never the same.

Barbra Streisand's 1984 film *Yentl* is one of the few works that speak to both sides of this process. Originally conceived as the follow-up to her monumental hit *Funny Girl* (1968) – a musical set on the Lower East Side celebrating the comedian Fannie Brice – *Yentl* took more than fifteen years to reach the screen, finally doing so with Streisand herself as star, director, executive producer, and partial financier – she contributed \$1.5 million from her own salary to pay for retakes. Its narrative is in line with the greater interest in the folklore, mores, music, and culture of the old country that the ethnic revivalists had in their

wake. Set in what we might want to call (troping Jeffrey Shandler's "yiddish-land") "shtetl-land," a mythical "Eastern Europe" also conjured by wildly popular fare such as the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (Broadway version 1964; film version 1971), the film is based on a story originally written in Yiddish by Isaac Bashevis Singer, then turned into a moderately successful (English-language) Broadway play in 1975 before being liberally adapted by Streisand and her cowriter for the screen. Anita Norich has argued that Singer's text is far more subversive in its deconstruction of gender norms than Streisand's film.¹⁵ True enough, but this misses the point, at least from the Jewish American point of view, as the movie tells us much about the gender revolution that marked American Jewish self-conceptions in the 1970s and 1980s.

Yentl is the story of a young girl, played by Streisand, raised by her father, a rabbinical scholar of much subtlety and *menshlekheyt*. He indulges her thirst for knowledge by educating her as he would a son – a fact that she must keep quiet in a world where the proper public place for a girl is selling fish in the market or serving it at the dinner table. After he tragically dies, she travels – disguised as a male – to a yeshiva in a nearby town, where she is accepted as a student ("it's by their questions that we choose our students, not only by their answers," in the words of the kindly rabbinical school teacher who delights in her supple yet sapient mind). Falling in love with a fellow student, Avigdor, she ends up through a number of plot contrivances marrying his fiancée and then, following some comic confusions, revealing all; she and Avigdor look as if they are headed for the altar but she leaves when he insists that she give up her studies. *Yentl* is last seen on a boat to America, ecstatically singing to her father of the new life as a free educated woman she might have there.

Singer commented astringently:

We all know that actors fight for bigger parts, but a director worth his name will not allow one actor to usurp the entire play. When an actor is also the producer and the director and the writer he would have to be exceedingly wise to curb his appetites. I must say that Miss Streisand was exceedingly kind to herself. The result is that Miss Streisand is always present, while poor *Yentl* is absent.¹⁶

This is just but also beside the point, at least considered in the unfolding relation between Jews and Hollywood. The system that had sustained the all-male moguls had broken, done in by the Truman administration's forcing it to sell its theaters and by the increasing competition from television. Replacing the studio system was a mess of freelance talent seeking to make deals, with film studios essentially limited to providing resources and distribution. In such a

world, a female star like Streisand – by then a commanding figure in Broadway and popular music along with film – had the clout and the connections to have her film made on her own terms. The results are impressive. The camera work is supple, actors well directed, the film's recreation of shtetl never-never-land every bit as assured (if also every bit as fake) as that on offer in *Fiddler*.

Streisand's endeavor connects her with the efforts of other American Jewish women to articulate a feminist alternative to a male-dominated public sphere. This is made explicit, and explicitly American, at the end of the film. Singer objected to Yentl's singing with particular vehemence:

[Streisand made] Yentl, whose greatest passion was the Torah, go on a ship to America, singing at the top of her lungs. Why would she decide to go to America? Weren't there enough yeshivas in Poland or in Lithuania where she could continue to study? Was going to America Miss Streisand's idea of a happy ending for Yentl? What would Yentl have done in America? Worked in a sweatshop 12 hours a day where there is no time for learning? Would she try to marry a salesman in New York, move to the Bronx or to Brooklyn and rent an apartment with an ice box and a dumbwaiter? This kitsch ending summarizes all the faults of the adaptation. It was done without any kinship to Yentl's character, her ideals, her sacrifice, her great passion for spiritual achievement. As it is, the whole splashy production has nothing but a commercial value.¹⁷

Again, this is splendid and funny but somehow beside the point. Streisand's Yentl goes to America singing in a boat at the top of her lungs because in *Funny Girl* Streisand's Fanny Brice travels to a boat singing "Don't Rain on My Parade" at the top of her lungs – and just misses the boat (Figure 3). It is a self-referential gesture in which the trajectory plotted for the fictional character is that of a self-actualizing star invoking an idealized America as a space where women could find fulfillment – just look at Fannie Brice, whose path is more successfully followed by Barbra herself!

It would seem, then, that the feminist ambitions of the film overwhelm its ethnic-revival agenda. But matters are more complicated. Singer is himself hardly a traditionalist: He is a liminal figure, a modernist who likes to play with traditionalist themes as well as a figure steeped both in the literature of the European fin-de-siècle and in the culture of Eastern European Jewry. These various impulses merge in *Yentl*, where he creates a figure of genuine gender ambiguity reminiscent at times of both the imagination of the fin-de-siècle as well as modernity. Yentl is a kind of a supernatural creature, a spiritual hermaphrodite "with the soul of a man" and the body of a woman.¹⁸ Yet at times in the story, as Warren Hoffman observes, Singer does not hesitate to



FIGURE 3. Barbra Streisand in full voice at the end of *Yentl*. *Yentl* (1983).
Barbra Streisand, director.

give a homosexual spin to his gender play, as when Yentl's love for Avigdor is compared to David's for Jonathan.¹⁹

Virtually none of this enters Streisand's film, which substitutes physical comedy for gender ambiguity, as in the scenes when Yentl has to sleep in the same bed as Avigdor or has to maneuver not to sleep with "his" bride. But as such, it reveals itself to be engaged in a dialogue with tradition in a different way. The kind of comedy that Streisand accomplishes here places her in the line of cross-dressing Jewish actresses from Sara Bernhardt through Sophie Tucker and Molly Picon, star of the Yiddish film industry that sprang up in America and Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Picon, like Streisand, was a titanically important figure in a number of venues, including Yiddish theater, song, vaudeville, and film; her career continued even after the death of the Yiddish-speaking audience well into the 1970s, when she acted the part of an aging madam in Streisand's *For Pete's Sake* (1974) as well as appearing in *Fiddler*. Streisand's *Yentl* alludes to Picon's penchant not just for cross-dressing, as she did in her most famous film role *Yidl mitn fidl* (1936), but for cross-dressing as a *yeshiva bokher*, as she did in her famous stage role as *Yankele* (American premiere, 1923) and as she did again in one of her most successful Yiddish films, *East and West* (1923) (Figure 4).

This latter film is a rough sketch for *Yentl*. Picon plays an American girl named Mollie, who, on a visit to Galicia, disrupts the traditional world she



FIGURE 4. Molly Picon prepares a knockout punch. *East and West* (1923).

Sidney M. Goldin and Ivan Abramson, directors. Courtesy of the National Center for Jewish Film.

finds there via acts of transvestism and travesty, including boxing and gorging herself just before Kol Nidre as well as cross-dressing. She finds herself married to a *yeshiva bokher* who is inspired to modernize himself, changing his appearance, dress, and demeanor in order to stay married to her. The most important similarity between Picon and Streisand, however, is not cross-dressing per se, but rather its use to designate the American, whether prospective, as Yentl, or actual, like Mollie, as that figure who crosses lines of all sorts and inspires others to do the same. This is the most quintessential of American myths – that of the self-remaking person (in a different gender guise, the “self-made man”) – and it links Picon’s films to Streisand’s ambitions to be more than just a singer or actress or even a star: to remake herself as an auteur and, implicitly, a cultural critic. *Yentl* intervenes in the World of Our Fathers moment of the ethnic revival to suggest that women, too, were part of the Jewish American roots, and not just as mothers, girlfriends, or even fishmongers, those parts in which they seemed to be cast. As Yentl/Streisand sings to her father on the boat to America, the movie reminds us that she is traveling to the place where

Jewish American feminism was to grow; and her revitalization of the rich gender play in Yiddish film that Picon represents suggests that Yiddish films were already recording as they were helping generate this new ferment in Jewish American life.

A Serious Conclusion

The major themes of Jewish American life, then, resonate complexly through films about Jews as well as films made by Jews. There are of course many more to mention. One might discuss Jewish leftists and the anti-Semitic dimensions of their blacklisting in the 1950s, which are at the fore in such films as *The Front* (1976) and, again starring Streisand, *The Way We Were* (1973). One might also cite Jewish responses to (and indeed propaganda for) Israel with *Exodus* (1960) – directed by Otto Preminger, with a script by Dalton Trumbo, himself a blacklist victim. Or one might note the increased interest in the Holocaust capped by Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). One might even discuss the Catskills resort as a locus of freedom and female self-invention in *Dirty Dancing* (1987) and *A Walk on the Moon* (1999).

Then there are films, very rare indeed, that address the theological concerns of American Jewry. By this I do not mean portraits of religious Jewish communities, like the film of Chaim Potok's novel *The Chosen* (1967) or Sidney Lumet's *A Stranger among Us* (1992), in which Melanie Griffith plays a New York policewoman who goes undercover in Hasidic Brooklyn. I want to focus instead on the Coen Brothers' *A Serious Man* (2009) both for what it can tell us about Jews in the unfolding narrative of post-Hollywood film and for what it can tell us about the concerns of baby-boomer generation Jews like the Coens.

The Coens are also important because they represent the final breakdown of the Hollywood studio system and new possibilities the post-Hollywood milieu offers for Jewish self-expression. Film and philosophy students, they shot on a shoestring budget a comic suspense movie, *Blood Simple* (1984), attracting an independent distributor after its showing at the Sundance Film Festival. They have not wanted for attention since, recently establishing their own production company and signing an independent distribution contract with Focus Films, a division of the old Universal. Their rise signals an infrastructure that grew up in the aftermath of Hollywood and is now supported by a chain of institutions including Sundance, revival and small movie houses, direct sales to cable networks and more recently to streaming-video platforms like Netflix; these have opened networks for Jews (and everyone else)

to make or distribute films that lack appeal to a large audience. For explicitly Jewish themed work, this path was pioneered by Joan Micklin Silver's *Hester Street* (1975), shot on a microbudget with financing arranged by her husband, Raphael Silver; the success of that movie helped them raise money for a number of others, including *Crossing Delancey* (1988) with Amy Irving, the Yiddish stage star Reizl Boyzk as her grandmother, and Peter Reigert as the fishmonger who wins her heart. The independent movie path has been followed by a number of Jewish-oriented films from around the world, including of course Israel, but also Argentina, France, and Italy, which found distribution in the United States through this venue. All these have prepared the way for *A Serious Man*, which is explicitly addressed to a niche market. (Box-office receipts are telling: It grossed a mere \$10 million domestically, roughly the cost of one star's contract for an action-adventure extravaganza.)

Riv-Ellen Prell has shown the precision with which the Coen Brothers recreate the Minneapolis Jewish suburb St. Louis Park, in which they grew up, from the household décor to the theological blandness of the rabbis to the use of the names of hated Hebrew school teachers to a recreation of their own bar mitzvah ceremonies.²⁰ Moreover, she historicizes the all-Jewish environment, reminding us that Minnesota Jews faced a climate of resurgent anti-Semitism in the 1950s that led them to cleave to largely Jewish communities. What neither she nor any critic of the film can address, though, is the reason for setting the Job story in that setting. The contrast is symptomatic of the film's narrative strategy, which is to present a series of sharply defined possibilities without resolving the tensions they pose. Its protagonist's quest for meaning is mimed by the film itself, which simultaneously gestures toward resolvable significance and frustrates it.

The film opens in "*shtetl-land*." An Eastern European Jewish couple confronts a visitor who may or may not be a malign spirit, a *dybbuk* (played by Fyvush Finkel, a star of the Yiddish theater); the wife thinks so and stabs him with an icepick to see whether he will bleed (results are ambiguous).

We then segue to their (generic) grandchildren, specifically Larry Gopnik, a nebbishy physics professor up for tenure. Over the course of the film, Gopnik's wife will drain his bank account and leave him for Cy, a family friend, who, it turns out, has been sending slanderous anonymous letters to his tenure committee; his idiot savant brother will be accused of sodomy; a student will offer a bribe for a passing grade; his son, Billy, is developing a marijuana habit and has his transistor radio confiscated at Hebrew school; his daughter is angling for a nose job. As his troubles, serious and comic, mount, Larry, a serious man indeed, turns to rabbis for comfort and wisdom, only to receive self-absorption



FIGURE 5. The last shot of *A Serious Man*. A voice from the whirlwind? Or a Midwestern tornado? *A Serious Man* (2009).

Ethan and Joel Coen, directors.

from one and an incomprehensible parable about a meaning-bearing tooth from the other. With one turn of the wheel of fortune, matters look as if they will improve. Cy is killed in a car crash at the very same moment Larry survives a different one; the tenure committee reports a favorable decision; his son does a fine job at the bar mitzvah even though he is stoned; and there is a hint of reconciliation with his wife. But in the last minute of the film, matters swing in the other direction. Larry accepts the bribe and then, in rapid succession, is called with an ominous diagnosis by his doctor, and his son is trapped outside the temple as a tornado bears down and an ineffectual teacher struggles to open the shelter door (Figure 5).

Job-like indeed, although the Coens disavow the connection. But it is also filled with the minutiae of everyday life, with hardly a biblical reference (well, a whirlwind) to be found. Is the coalescence of the two dismissive of the grandeur of the biblical narrative? Or is it the opposite, a way of imbuing a familiar text with quirky relevance? There is nothing in the film to tell us either way. The quest for meaning that Larry undertakes similarly yields contradictory results. Significance is either there or not there, like the *dybbuk*, who is either a spirit or not; like the rabbi's parable of the tooth, which is either a fantasy of the pervasiveness of meaning in the world (even onto the *goyim*!) or a sign of its complete absence. Similarly ambiguous are the words of wisdom that the aged rabbi speaks to the young Billy after the ceremony: "Be a good boy." Are these utterly meaningless, or full of profundity – live your life ethically as a man the way we have tried to teach you to do as a child? The ultimate image of this doubleness is the physics conundrum Larry writes on the board in his classroom, Schrödinger's cat, a thought experiment

in which a cat in an enclosed space can turn out to be either dead or alive at one and the same time.

In comic wrestlings with faith in a world of science, with the sexual revolution (including the topless-sunbathing neighbor whom Larry spies when fixing his TV aerial), and with an impending generation gap, the Coen Brothers capture the beginning of the baby-boomers' slide away from the faith that their own parents took to the Minneapolis suburbs. But in raising these questions in 2009, they remind us that this generation – Billy's generation, their generation – is facing the questions that begin to pose themselves in later life. Larry doubtless is dead by the time the film that commemorates his quest for meaning is made, but Billy will have grown and perhaps become part of the recrudescence of traditional Jewish congregations, and his sister may well participate in the birth of a feminist Jewish theology. Or perhaps not – perhaps they have continued on the path toward full secularization, even as they face their mortality and its attendant complexities. It is the genius of the Coen Brothers to capture the origins of this dual path and to trace its timelessly irresolvable nature to their own coming of age – and that of their generation.

Whatever its sociological import, *A Serious Man* suggests the ways in which the new post-Hollywood film industry might open up new possibilities for Jewish filmmakers, freed from the burden of anti-Semitism that confronted the first generations and the imperative to fit in, however bizarrely adopted by their successors. Setting aside the Hollywood Jews at the top of the heap – Steven Spielberg comes to mind – a number of younger auteurs have set out to explore the possibilities opened up by newer forms of production and distribution – the multitude of new media platforms, which, the agent Dina Kuperstock informs me, represent the hope for an industry desperately looking for new revenue streams in an era when DVD sales have slumped and the foreign market, which has always provided a needed supplement to the domestic one, has also plateaued. While many of these are significant (like mainstream Judd Apatow or the more indie-minded Noah Baumbach), I want to focus on the remarkable success of Lena Dunham, because she returns us to so many of the themes and variations that I have been looking at throughout this essay and is at the same time embedded in so many of the media platforms of the future.

Dunham – like Streisand – is a Jewish woman who has achieved a great measure of success and creative autonomy in a male-dominated industry; she made her way with an updated version of the Coen Brothers' independent film route. After Oberlin, where she majored in English, Dunham made a series of YouTube videos, which she parlayed, with the help of friends and

small investors, into an award-winning feature film, *Tiny Furniture* (2010), in which Jewishness is all-pervasive: Its protagonists negotiate a Jewish-inflected world in hipster New York (“Shalom! Hubba-hubba!” is a fairly typical greeting at a dinner party). With a boost from Judd Apatow, she adapted many of the themes and even some of the actors from *Tiny Furniture* into an HBO TV series, *Girls* (2012–). But like Dunham herself, *Girls* is not Jewish in any determinative way. “I am a half-Jew, half-WASP, and I wrote two Jews and two WASPs . . . each character was a piece of me” writes Dunham,²¹ and the show extends the dialogue between a Jewish sensibility (hypervocal, sexual deviant – Jewish Hannah outs herself as a chronic masturbator, yearns to contract an STD, and sleeps with a Jewish man who fantasizes with her about having sex as an underage crack whore) and a gentile one (represented best by her neat-freak goyish roommate Marnie). Here Jewishness remains, as it has been for all of the figures I have been discussing, a matter to be imagined, shaped, and interrogated in the context of a culture where it is not only possible, but inevitable, that one make one’s identity anew, whether moving from the old country to the New World, or, like Dunham’s Hannah (think of her as Larry Gopnik’s freaky granddaughter), from Minnesota to Brooklyn. But what is made of it remains profoundly, mysteriously up for grabs. “Shalom! Hubba-hubba” indeed!

Dunham represents one of the possible paths that Jewish Americans are taking in the brave new world of post-Hollywood film. She reminds us that post-Hollywood, like Hollywood itself, remains as it has been since its inception, a contact zone where Jewish self-inscriptions and gentile imaginings (like the two sides of Lena Dunham herself) can meet, collaborate, and form new imaginative formations: a holiday and tragedy for Jews and gentiles alike. Whatever else we can say, it is clear from her work and that of her peers that Hollywood in the broadest sense of the word – the place for the creation and dissemination of visual narratives in an increasingly wide array of media formats – remains what it has been for more than a century: a site for the renegotiation of Jewish identities in non-Jewish culture and vice versa, and a place of mutually constitutive fantasizing that will continue to spin off new possibilities of identity and identification for years to come.

Notes

- 1 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western*, ed. Matthew Broccoli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 199.
- 2 Jonathan Fried, “In Alvin’s Words: A Monologue,” presented at the Bread Loaf School of English, July 2013.

- 3 Marni Davis, *Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 2–3. Davis is quoting from Ford, “How Jews Gained American Liquor Control,” *Dearborn Independent* (December 7, 1921).
- 4 Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust* (New York: New Directions, 2009), 175.
- 5 Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon 1988), 5.
- 6 Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
- 7 Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 85
- 8 *Ibid.*, 73–120.
- 9 Lary May, “Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot (review),” *American Jewish History* 85:1 (March 1997): 115–119.
- 10 Andrew Heinze, “Is It ‘coz I’m Black?” *Jews and the Whiteness Problem*, University of Michigan Frankel Center (Belin Lectures), 2007.
- 11 Joel Rosenberg, “What You Ain’t Heard Yet: The Languages of *The Jazz Singer*” *Prooftexts* 22:1/2 (Winter/Spring 2002): 41.
- 12 The best account I know of this process is Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African-Americans, Jews and American Popular Song* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- 13 “Al Jolson Biography,” www.musicals101.com/jolsonbio/html. Consulted August 12, 2014.
- 14 Freedman, *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 33. The analysis here and in the next paragraphs is drawn from this book.
- 15 Anita Norich, *Writing in Tongues; Yiddish Translation in the 20th Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 58 and ff.
- 16 “I. B. Singer Talks to I. B. Singer about the Movie ‘Yentl,’” *New York Times* (January 29, 1984).
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Yentl the Yeshiva Boy*, trans. Marion Magid and Elizabeth Pollett (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 8.
- 19 *The Passing Game: Queering Jewish American Culture* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 137.
- 20 Prell, “A Serious Man in Situ: Fear and Loathing in St. Louis Park,” *AJS Review* 35 (2011), 365–367.
- 21 National Public Radio interview, “Lena Dunham Addresses Criticism Aimed at Girls,” <http://www.npr.org/2012/05/07/152183865/lena-dunham-addresses-criticism-aimed-at-girls>, consulted August 5, 2014.

DRAMA

PART III



PLACE AND PEOPLEHOOD:
REDEFINING “HERE”
AND “THERE”

Hebrew in America

MICHAEL WEINGRAD

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Jews devised many often competing political and cultural programs they hoped would enable a dignified and stable Jewish existence in modernity. One of these enterprises was Hebraism, based on the idea that the Hebrew language was the only vehicle for a Jewish national identity that could both draw deeply on the stores of Jewish civilization and religious heritage and provide its creative and vital continuance in a secular age.

From today's perspective, the revival of Hebrew as a modern vernacular has been a success, so much so that it is often difficult to remember that the great manifestation of this success, the Hebrew-speaking society of modern Israel, was a century ago but one part, and at that time not the most obviously promising part, of a network of small centers of Hebrew literary production scattered across the globe. Hebraism had early and obvious affinities with Zionism, and in retrospect it is not surprising that after the first third of the twentieth century the future of Hebrew culture was definitively bound up with the territory and political fate of the Jewish state. Yet prior to that, and in lingering ways since, the map of Hebrew language, literature, and culture was an international map, its significant cities including Odessa, Paris, Warsaw, Berlin, London, and other places where Jews wrote, published, and read modern Hebrew literature. Hebraists were for the most part Jews who had grown up in the ambit of traditional Eastern European Judaism and who found their way into Western modernity through the cultural programs and literature of the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment), prizing Hebrew literature as both the means and centerpiece of this Jewish modernity.

The mass migration of Jews from Eastern Europe carried some of these Hebraists to the United States, which thereby joined the international Hebrew map, adding New York City to the major centers of Hebrew literary production. Indeed, during the First World War, given the travails of Jews in both Europe and Palestine, the United States seemed to many as if it would be, with

its numbers of Jews and its greater material and physical security, the most promising twentieth century frontier for modern Hebrew culture. There was, of course, an earlier, Christian history of Hebrew in America, as attested to by various Ivy League university seals, but the esteem given to biblical Hebrew in the divinity schools of colonial America was a far cry from the later efforts on the part of Jews to foster a living Hebrew culture on American soil – though, as we will see, the Jewish writers of Hebrew were not indifferent to the interest American Christians have taken in the language of the Bible.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Hebrew writers in America included Naphtali Hertz Imber, whose poem “Hatikvah” (1878) later became the Israeli national anthem, and who lived in the United States from 1887 to his death in 1909; Menahem Mendel Dolitzky, who arrived in 1892 and had been a disciple of the great Haskalah poet Judah Leib Gordon; and Gershon Rosenzweig, who immigrated to America in 1888, and whose *Talmud Yanqi* (Yankee Talmud), a collection of satirical writing about American life, was published in 1898. These and other forerunners toiled in poverty and obscurity, sometimes turning to what they often felt was a kind of literary prostitution by writing for the Yiddish press. Nevertheless, late nineteenth century activity helped lay the technical foundations for Hebrew publishing, and as more immigrants gathered, a small critical mass of Hebraists came into existence and these efforts began to gather steam. Ahiever, a Hebrew culture and publication society, was formed in 1908. Ambitious if short-lived Hebrew journals began to appear: seven issues of *Shibolim* (Sheaves) in 1908, fifteen issues of *Hadrar* (the Swallow) in 1911. A milestone was the appearance in 1913 of *Hatoren* (the Mast), a Hebrew literary journal, which was soon placed under the editorship of Sholem Aleichem’s son-in-law, the Hebrew writer Y. D. Berkowitz, and which ran as a weekly until 1925. *Hatoren* was the main platform in 1916 for calls to create a new organization for the promotion of modern Hebrew culture, accomplished the following year with the launch of Histadrut Ha’ivrit, the Organization for Hebrew Culture. More than a hundred people attended the first congress of the Histadrut Ha’ivrit, including major Zionist and Hebraist figures such as David Ben-Gurion, Henrietta Szold, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, and Daniel Persky. A daily newspaper, *Hado’ar* (the Post), appeared in 1921, reorganized as a weekly the following year under the auspices of the Histadrut Ha’ivrit. *Hado’ar* would be the most important forum for Hebrew literature in America and, until its demise a decade ago, the longest-lasting journal in the history of Hebrew publishing.

Hebrew writers and readers in America were never remotely comparable in numbers to their Yiddish and English fellows. By way of comparison, while

the largest Yiddish paper, the *Forward*, reached a peak circulation of around 200,000 during World War I, *Hado'ar's* was around 10,000. Nevertheless, the Hebraists created a rich if small literary and ideological subculture, often on the margins of other Jewish, Zionist, and cultural nationalist organizations that never made the Hebrew idea as central to their own projects as the Hebraists would have liked. Hebrew writers in America, of whom at least a dozen are significant figures in the story of modern Hebrew literature, produced poetry, fiction, scholarship, criticism, memoirs, textbooks, and translations, and they created a variety of literary and scholarly journals that featured their creations.

The most immediately visible influence they had on American Jewish life was not as authors but as educators. Beginning in the 1920s, many of the Hebraist immigrants helped to found, staff, and shape a network of Jewish teachers' colleges, whose products transformed much of American Jewish synagogal education, at least for a few decades, into what became known as the "Hebrew school," emphasizing secular and national Jewish culture as much as or more than purely religious or liturgical instruction. Moreover, one sees that the islands of Hebrew culture the Hebraists created and helped to foster exerted a profound if still underappreciated influence on the shaping of American Jewish culture. An attentive look shows that many of the cultural and communal leaders of American Jewry over the past half-century – rabbis, intellectuals, editors, professors, activists – attended and were shaped by the educational institutions the Hebraists ran or helped to inspire. And today, as the global Jewish population consists of two major centers, a growing one in Israel and a shrinking one in the United States, the example of the Hebraists, Jews who resided in America but who saw themselves as part of a nation whose cultural focus was upon the Land of Israel and the language of Hebrew, may be more relevant than ever.

Although many of these writers did eventually move to the state of Israel, it was the latter focus, the language of Hebrew, that was the more decisive homeland. As Alan Mintz writes, the devotion to the language and its culture was for these writers "not merely a principled commitment but something on the order of a fierce and burning *idée fixe* that made Hebrew into the cornerstone of national and personal existence."¹ Mintz argues that "the secret spring of American Hebraism"² was an attachment to the language that was fundamentally erotic. Hebrew was "the object of their desire." Although this libidinous apprehension of Hebrew is almost never articulated explicitly in their writing, it is the assumption that underlay the entire Hebraist project and does emerge in sumptuous detail in the long 1946 poem by Avraham Regelson (the

uncle, not incidentally, of Cynthia Ozick), “Haquqot otivotayikh” (Engraved Are Your Letters). This technical tour de force lovingly, even obsessively anatomizes the Hebrew language, singing paeans to its grammatical forms, tenses, historical strata, linguistic nuances, and more, in each case making use of the lauded aspect in the verse. Throughout the poem, “Hebrew is incarnated, feminized, and eroticized,” writes Mintz.³ “By becoming an active ‘practitioner’ of Hebrew, the Hebraist tapped into an unstinting and nurturing source of quasi-erotic stimulation and enjoyment.”⁴

This eros was in some sense a form of religiosity, one of the ways in which the Haskalah did not necessarily extirpate the vitality of traditional religion but rather displaced it into new forms. Just as many Zionists found God in the land of Israel, the Hebraists found him – or, in Regelson’s case, her – in the language of Israel. As Dan Miron has remarked, it is perhaps no accident that this dimension of modern Jewish culture – supposedly secular yet in fact reframing and refracting traditional religion in new forms – would find its most extreme expression in America, far from the land of Israel and the Jewish heartland of Europe, and where language rather than politics, territory, or formal religion was the Jewish devotee’s deepest access to the divine currents animating Jewish existence through the ages.⁵

This was not the only aspect of American Hebraism’s Haskalah legacy. Until the middle of the twentieth century, the American Hebraists were under the sway of an aesthetics determined by Haskalah classicism as well as the late nineteenth century romanticism embodied in Chaim Nachman Bialik, the most influential Hebrew poet of the modern period. This aesthetics profoundly conditioned the American Hebrew writers’ hostile responses to the landscapes of New York City and other American cities. In the early twentieth century, Hebrew lacked much of the vocabulary necessary to render the modern city. In Hebrew poems from the 1910s, one encounters footnotes explaining new coinages for such concepts as “elevator” and “subway.” Yet the difficulty and hesitation with which the American Hebraists grappled with the urban landscape in their works were not primarily a matter of gaps in vocabulary, which were soon rectified. Rather, the aesthetic and ideological codes of the Hebraists rendered them indifferent and even hostile to urban reality. The proper subjects of literature were lofty and classical. How was one to find such material in the crowded, chaotic streets of New York City? In the 1920s, the American Hebraist writer Shimon Halkin wondered at the ability of Yiddish writers to wrest poetry from “America of all places, this mediocre country with its common reality” and especially from “the drab buildings of New York’s Jewish quarter.”⁶ Yet it was the Yiddish poets’

openness to literary modernism that enabled them to forge a dynamic urban poetry.

The Hebraists, by contrast, composed most of their major poetic works in and about locales removed from New York City. Halkin especially, in his major nature poems, maximized the resources of late romanticism in Hebrew, while treating themes such as Zionism and the Holocaust with intricate ambivalence. The long poem “Al hof Santa Barbara” (On the Shore at Santa Barbara), written in the early 1920s on one of Halkin’s treks across the United States, allows the poet at the Pacific seascape an ecstatic encounter with nature and the divine, drawing from theological concepts of *unio mistica* that he had absorbed from his Hasidic boyhood, and fusing these with their close cousins in the poetic stances of European literary romanticism. Halkin’s poem “Tarshishah” (To Tarshish), written in the 1930s, describes a similarly ecstatic dissolution of the poet into the American landscape, conveying the poet’s attraction to the possibility of losing himself in America, giving himself over to animal drives and biological desire, rather than the stern demands, personal and cultural, of state building in Palestine. In the 1940s, Halkin’s American landscape poems became the site for conflict between the romantic poet’s desire to apprehend in nature intimations of the divine, and the awful knowledge of the Holocaust and the agonies of Jews fighting in Palestine. In the sonnet cycle “Behararei-haholot beMishigen” (At the Michigan Sand Dunes), Halkin still manages to hold on to the tatters of a Wordsworthian belief in the saving power of nature, despite the extent to which the American landscape is haunted in his imagination by the mass death in Europe. In his “Mar’ot beNova Scotia” (Visions in Nova Scotia) sequence, begun in 1948, Halkin again acknowledges his desire to lose himself in American nature but frames it as a guilty betrayal of his Jewish responsibilities.

The ambivalence and anxiety that could be generated when the Hebrew poet grappled directly with urban reality are seen most strikingly in a series of long poems written in the 1910s by Shimon Ginzburg. In the first, “Bamigdal” (In the Tower), written in 1912, the poet describes his immigration to America as a tormenting exile from Russia, “the land of all I hold dear.”⁷ When he first arrives at the harbor of New York, the Statue of Liberty, rather than appearing as a welcoming, maternal figure as in Emma Lazarus’s famous poem, instead (in the first published version of his poem) raises “a clenched fist”⁸ and is indifferent to the immigrant’s ultimate fate: “Die here of hunger / like a stray dog,” she challenges, “or rise up and rule overnight!”⁹ New York City is a satanic mill that chokes and crushes its enslaved, faceless populace. The poet flees the city in an idealized dream vision of the land of Israel, which is

everything that America in the poem is not: pastoral, beautiful, and Jewishly faithful. Most interesting, though, is a section of the dream vision in which the poet enters a museum that houses Greek statuary, Christian religious paintings, and an Egyptian mummy and is located by a botanical garden. Rather than any reality of Palestine, Ginzburg has here imported the Metropolitan Museum of Art into his Zionist dream vision. America is thus portrayed as a hellish and threatening wasteland, while the positive elements of New York City – the museum and botanical garden – are made part of the Zion of Ginzburg's yearnings.

A few years later, Ginzburg followed this treatment of New York City with "Behar bet Kolombiyah" (On the Temple Mount of Columbia). This poem expresses envy and wonderment at the material and educational riches of Columbia University, which is compared to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which lies desolate while the American center thrives and conquers. Its main preoccupation, though, is the dissolution of Jewish national identity in America, and the poet, after eavesdropping on a conversation among assimilating Jewish university students, again finds imaginative refuge in a dream vision of Israel.

Finally, in his 1917 poem "No-York" (an odd, perhaps punning, rendering of New York), Ginzburg rejects an imaginative escape from the city, but does so by rendering the city in apocalyptic terms as a Sodom or Nineveh and imagining its ultimate destruction. New York is ruled by a demonic figure called "Moloch" or "Lord of the City," who is responsible for all the exploitation, alienation, and misery the poet witnesses in the hellish metropolis. The poem promises that one day the city and its Moloch will be overthrown, and only at the end does the poet offer a brief "hymn of trust" to replace his bitter "prophecy of New York," describing the Williamsburg Bridge as a cosmic harp "waiting confidently for the unknown player who will come, / To play . . . the great song of the future."¹⁰ This coda, though, is hardly a counterweight to the rest of the poem, which considers the city to be, as it was for Bialik in a poem on New York he wrote in 1926, "the domain of Satan."¹¹

A partial exception to the Hebraist poetic resistance to the city was the work of a former student of Ginzburg's, Avraham Zvi Halevy. A Hebrew Baudelairean who explored the dives and cheap streets of New York in his one collection of poems, *Mitokh hasugar* (Inside the Cage, 1948), Halevy rendered bars and burlesque shows in florid Hebrew. Gabriel Preil, the best known of all the American Hebrew poets, was also a modernist outlier who used the cafes of New York happily and frequently as the backdrop for his wry and lyrical explorations of self.

These two exceptions indicate the connection between the Hebraist aversion to the city and its resistance to modernism. In contrast to Yiddish literature in America, which was far more open both to the cultural assumptions of modernism and to the modern urban environment that found a natural set of idioms in literary modernism, and in contrast to the development of Hebrew literature in Europe and Palestine, where German expressionism, Russian futurism, and other lines of postsymbolist literary experimentation were felt, Hebraist writers and critics in America tended to look askance at modernist trends. The *maskilic*, neoclassical ethos of the American Hebraists was seen in their championing of literary norms and canons, linguistic purity and shared standards, over what they often saw as the destructive and irresponsible impulses driving modernism.

In the introduction to his 1938 anthology of Hebrew poetry in America, Menachem Ribalow, then the foremost critic in American Hebraist circles, described the rise of modernism as a “storm [that] swept through all literatures and rocked the foundations of poetry,” boasting, “Only America did not contribute to this madness.”¹² In the early 1920s, Hillel Bavli published a series of five articles on contemporary American poetry that shows how difficult it was for the Hebrew poet in America to see Anglo-American modernism as a resource and a model. Writing of his first encounter with the work of Carl Sandburg, Bavli describes his “shock and astonishment”:

is this poetry? And is one such as this a poet? – No! No! – cried thousands of voices from my youth within me. The hysterical bombast in these poems, the excessive, sometimes offensive realism that erupts from their lines, the crude vulgarity infusing their expression erected a barrier – for me, in any case – between them and the true legacy of poetry, which is noble and refined, and graced with beauty and purity even as it treads this earth and passes through the muck of this life.

“And yet,” he admits, “it was impossible to forget this poetry.”¹³ Bavli found elements to admire in Sandburg, Frost, Masters, and several other American poets of the time. But he nowhere suggests that Hebrew poetry should follow their example.

Instead, Bavli and his fellow Hebraists advocated a principled literary conservatism. In a 1924 article he wrote defending Hebrew poetry in the United States from its critics in Palestine and Europe, Bavli argued that modern Hebrew culture was still too new, its roots too weak, for the revolutionary approaches of modernism to be healthy – a very plausible position in the 1920s, when a Hebrew-speaking society was just beginning to burgeon confidently

in Palestine. "What our literature needs now is not an innovation based on extirpating the old and uprooting what has been planted," Bavli cautioned, "but rather a renewal based on a turning of the ploughed soil,"¹⁴ which meant in part a fuller absorption and extension of the romantic aesthetics of Bialik, rather than the revolts of Hebrew modernists such as Uri Zvi Greenberg and Avraham Shlonsky.

In prose fiction, however, Hebrew writers in America did not feel the obligation to uphold the Parnassian purity they felt should obtain in poetry, and they engaged in both modernist experimentation and urban realism. One of the major achievements in the Hebrew novel prior to the creation of the state of Israel did both. Halkin's *Ad mashber* (Until the Crash), written in the 1930s and first published in 1946, portrays the intergenerational conflicts and alienation of a group of Jews and non-Jews in New York City and does so using modernist stream-of-consciousness techniques. Halkin also published pseudonymously a sequence of free verse poems that he retrospectively claimed were satires of Yiddish modernism, but come across as interesting jazz age forays into themes of race, sex, and city life, topics that Halkin could treat openly in prose fiction but not in poetry. A number of significant novels and other works of prose fiction, including historical fiction, immigrant tales, naturalist and sociologically realistic novels, autobiography, and comic and tragicomic vignettes, were produced by American Hebrew writers such as Reuven Wallenrod, Harry Sackler, Samuel Blank, Bernard Isaacs, Efraim Lisitzky, Yohanan Twersky, and Lev Arieli-Orloff, a stream of literary creation that began in the 1920s and showed its full strength in the 1940s and 1950s.

Beginning in the 1920s, Hebraist poets and critics presented their resistance to literary modernism as a defining feature of their Americanness, a way of contrasting the Hebrew literary center in the United States with that in Palestine. American identity was a source of tremendous unease and ambivalence for the Hebraists. Hebraism, while it emphasized culture far more than its natural ideological partner Zionism did, was no less of a national conception of Jewishness. American national identity and the melting pot ideal were therefore of little interest to the Hebraists. In the poem "No-York," Ginzburg savagely parodies the melting pot in his depiction of a crowded subway car in which people of different nationalities and ethnic and religious backgrounds are crushed together, with a Jewish girl groped by an Italian man as the bridges of New York call out mockingly, "come to the melting pot, and be melted in it!"¹⁵ Even cultural pluralist and transnationalist conceptions of American identity, which still understand Jews in largely ethnic, rather than national terms, fall short of the Hebraist ideal. Unlike Jewish American writing in

English, the literature the Hebraists produced was not an ethnic literature, even in the sophisticated and dialectical sense elaborated by Werner Sollors in his classic study *Beyond Ethnicity*. Certainly Sollors's tracing of the persistent biblical typology used by almost every American immigrant and ethnic group to dramatize their relation to and arrival in America breaks down when we come to the Hebraists, whose promised land, even when idealized or kept at arm's length, was the actual Zion and not the United States.

Rather than promised land, America was often figured by the Hebraists in terms of a temporary refuge (when it was not dressed in the more negative biblical tropes of Egypt, Babylon, Nineveh, primeval chaos, or the comparatively neutral tropes of wilderness and exile). *Miqlat* (Refuge) was the title of one of the signal Hebrew literary journals in the United States, as well as the title of a short story by Reuven Wallenrod that exposed with brutal honesty the psychic numbness and compartmentalization required of many Jewish nationalists who continued to reside in the United States. The concept of America as a refuge figures prominently in several Hebraist literary treatments of Mordechai Manuel Noah, the nineteenth century American Jew who called for a Jewish state (named "Ararat" after the resting place of the ark in the biblical Noah story) to be created under American auspices in Upstate New York. "To recover in Ararat – this is permitted," says the Mordechai Manuel Noah character in a play by Harry Sackler, "to remain there – forbidden."¹⁶

But if America could not furnish an authentic national identity for Jews, then what were the nature and purpose of the Hebrew literature produced there? This question took on urgency in the 1920s, presumably driven by the rise of the Jewish protostate in Palestine, the radical new developments in Hebrew language and literature happening abroad, and the ending of large-scale immigration to America. By the middle of the 1920s, American Hebrew writers and critics began to fashion a conception of their own Americanness, often through published exchanges with literary critics in Palestine who denigrated the American Hebraists as derivative and conservative.

The classicism of Hebrew poetry in America, which critics abroad mistook for aesthetic timidity, was a result of the influence of Anglo-American literature. First put forth by Halkin in his 1924 essay on Hebrew poetry in America and elaborated further in subsequent versions of the essay, this argument was taken up by many of the American Hebraists to justify their aesthetic and ideological differences from the Hebrew literary centers elsewhere, and to indicate the special contribution they could make to Hebrew literature in general. Halkin argued that while Hebrew poetry in Europe and Palestine followed in the wake of European and Russian modernism, American Hebrew

poetry reflected the influence of British romantic and Victorian poetry, as well as the work of American writers such as Emerson and Longfellow. From these writers the Hebraists in the United States derived values of aesthetic clarity, rhetorical restraint, and moral seriousness that could be beneficial to the health of Hebrew literary culture.

In actuality, Halkin's arguments were an *ex post facto* justification without much evidence. While Halkin did appreciate the British romantics, especially those elements that had parallels to the Hasidic theological elements that he knew from his upbringing, the aesthetic of the American Hebrew poets was a product of the Hebrew literary culture in which they developed, not Anglo-American influences. This was evidenced not least by their often indiscriminate respect for nineteenth century canonical authors as well as their indifference to twentieth century literary developments, especially American ones. Nevertheless, Halkin's invented literary history allowed the Hebraists something they needed: a way of seeing themselves as American writers and seeing a value in their Americanness.

Another way in which the Hebraists fashioned their American identity was through Native American themes. Three different book-length "Indian epics" were published by American Hebrew poets: Benjamin Nahum Silkiner's 1910 *Mul ohel Timurah* (Before the Tent of Timurah), Israel Efros's 1933 *Vigvavim shotekim* (Silent Wigwags), and Ephraim Lisitzky's 1937 *Medurot doakhot* (Dying Campfires). Native American subject matter allowed the Hebraists to mark their work as archetypically American while avoiding the contemporary urban realities that thwarted their poetic aims. Indeed, in several works the Indian characters are presented as a noble counter to the encroachments of urban reality, as in Ginzburg's "No-York," in which Belvedere Castle, the three-quarter-scale artificial castle in New York City's Central Park, is reimagined by the poet as an "Indian Masada" where an ageless chieftain presides over a last island of tranquility safe from the surrounding city. The figure of the Indian also functioned for these poets as a mirror for their own anxieties about cultural destruction. It is notable that in all three Hebrew Indian epics, the Native Americans are rendered positively as compared with the cruel predations of the whites. Silkiner's poem quickly became emblematic, in critical debates, of the promise or failure of the American Hebrew center as a whole, praised for its exotic subject matter and ambitious scope or denigrated for its detachment from American specificities. In fact, Silkiner's strangely bewitching and operatic poem was far more an autobiographical record of the poet's personal and Jewish anxieties, especially concerning physical and cultural extinction, than it was any kind of ethnological engagement with

Native American culture or foundation on which American Hebrew literature could build.

Such occasional uses of Indian themes became central to the collective identity and self-assessment of the American Hebraists. However, an even more significant trait of American Hebrew literature, certainly in comparison with both American Yiddish literature and Jewish American literature of the same period, was the extensive engagement of the Hebrew writers with rural and Christian America. This engagement was made possible in part because of the Hebraist's perception that America was a country founded culturally on the Bible, which the Hebraists considered to be "their" text. In works such as Harry Sackler's *Bein erets veshamayim* (Between Earth and Heaven, 1964), Halkin's *Ad mashber*, and Lisitzky's *Ele toldot adam* (In the Grip of Cross-Currents, 1959), Bible reading becomes a basis for cultural connection and friendship between Jewish immigrants and devout small-town Christians. Sometimes this does not work as the characters would wish: In Bernard Isaacs's story "Amos mokher tapuzim" (Amos the Orange-seller, 1953), a Jew tries to escape his Jewishness by moving to a small town in Florida, but the philo-Semitic Christians there embrace him precisely for his Jewishness (at least as they imagine it) and insist on viewing him as a holy prophet like his biblical namesake. More characteristically, the speaker in Hillel Bavli's 1924 poem "Misis Vuds" (Mrs. Woods), a dramatic monologue delivered by a ninety-two-year-old widow living on her isolated farm in the Catskills, is presented as an entirely wholesome and decent Bible-loving American. She first appears with Bible open in her lap and in the poem describes the Sunday observances when she was a girl and her family "used to sit around the large stove, / dressed in our sabbath clothes, listening eagerly to father / read sweetly and eloquently from the Good Book."¹⁷

The Hebraist appreciation of Christian esteem for the Bible and its narratives extended beyond white Protestants to southern blacks and even to Mormons. (Catholicism, by contrast, even in its American forms, tends in the works of the Hebraists to be associated with the more hostile realm of European Christianity.) Lisitzky, who lived and taught for decades in New Orleans, published a thick volume of poems based on African American folk songs, spirituals, and sermons. Lisitzky's imaginary black preachers retell biblical stories but set them in the modern day American South, a kind of midrash on a Bible that has been handed back and forth from the ancient Israelites to African Americans to an American Hebrew poet who then imagines it springing forth again in the black churches of his poems. Halkin's *Ad mashber*, in contrast, presents the familiar American Jewish tendency to see similarity between Jewish and black identity as a false racialization of Jewish

identity that attempts unsuccessfully to compensate for Jewish cultural dissolution. Meanwhile both Bavli and Regelson wrote long poems, based on their visits to Salt Lake City, that recount the early history of the Church of Latter Day Saints, and the novelist Yohanan Twersky's historical fiction of the life of Mordecai Manuel Noah credits the young Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, with Noah's proto-Zionist idea of establishing a Jewish state in America. In all these cases, the Hebraists evince an excitement at recognizing their textual and national passions reflected, even when in distorted form, in the Christian American cultures surrounding them.

It was this sense of recognition and proximity that lent additional poignance to Hebraist attention to America's response to World War II. Reuven Wallenrod in his novel set in the Catskills during the period of the Holocaust and Ginzburg in his poem "La'ivrim ba'Ameriqah" (To the Hebraists in America) written at that time both ask anxiously whether American appreciation for the biblical patrimony of their culture would translate into empathy for the plight of the Jews in Europe. Preil, in the early 1950s, published a sequence of poems dedicated to Abijah Lee, an early nineteenth century "Christian devoted to the Bible." But even as Preil, writing in Lee's house in Putnam Valley, New York, notes this spiritual cousin's immersion in Jewish Scripture, he contrasts this with the murder of European Jewry by Christians, telling Lee: "in my day, your kin have shattered every last vessel / and stand with hearts of ice in the wasteland they have sown."¹⁸

Above all, rural, Christian America functioned for Hebrew writers as a powerful temptation and test of their Jewishness. It was this most nationalistic and culturally separatist of secular Jewish literatures in America that could take the fullest measure of the real possibility in America of leaving one's Jewishness behind, losing oneself in its wild anonymity. Lisitzky's autobiographical novel turns on his decision whether or not to marry a Christian woman and settle down in small-town Ontario. Bavli depicts a similar impulse in his sequence of poems "Al brekhat Georg" (On Lake George), linking the allure of North American nature with the erotic allure of the non-Jewish woman and shedding one's Jewishness. Halkin wrote about this temptation in his poems, as we have seen, and his novel *Ad mashber* features Jews running off to rural Arkansas and Montana, while the heart of Harry Sackler's novel *Bein erets veshamayim* is a long section, "Habrehah laYurika" (The Flight to Eureka), in which the protagonist tries to lose his Jewishness in a small fishing village and undergoes a total moral collapse. If we think of American Jewish culture as ignoring or setting itself against (sometimes humorously) small-town American life – the big city Jew in the Christian small town is still a staple of comedy and drama

today – the literary production of the Hebraists is notable for its intensely sympathetic and emotive engagement with the American heartland, even or especially when this engagement is fraught with risk. This is one of the most compelling and unique aspects of the Hebrew literature produced in the United States from the 1920s to the 1960s.

By the 1960s, the vanishing of American Hebraism accelerated. Many of the key writers and activists died or immigrated to Israel. There was a new wave of mostly American-born Hebraists who began their activity in the 1930s and 1940s, including important scholars such as Gerson Cohen, Moshe Davis, Jacob Kabakoff, and Milton Arfa, and who launched the journal *Niv* (Expression), which ran from the 1930s to the 1960s. The teachers' colleges nurtured by the Hebraists continued to function as important, often quietly influential islands of Jewish cultural nationalism and scholarly seriousness. The academic field of Jewish Studies that began to burgeon in the 1960s owes much to the groundwork and example laid by Hebraist educators and scholars. And yet the heyday of Hebraist hopes in America had long passed, and the culture itself shrank to pockets and individuals. Eisig Silberschlag, former dean and president of the Hebrew College in Boston, wrote some of his finest poems during the 1970s when he was a professor at the University of Texas at Austin. Before his death in 1993, Gabriel Preil considered himself the "last of the Hebrew Mohicans" as he was the last major figure among the American Hebraists still literarily active and residing in the United States. The great mainstay of American Hebraism, *Hado'ar*, after late reorganizations as a biweekly and finally a quarterly, went out of business in 2004. The Iraqi-born UCLA professor Lev Hakak, himself a writer of Hebrew poetry, subsequently took up the editorial mantle of *Hado'ar*, dropping a letter and turning it into an American Hebrew annual titled *Hador* (The Generation).

The poet Robert Whitehill-Bashan, reflecting on the progressive disappearance of American Hebraism, recently quipped that if the preceding publication dropped any more letters it would become but a *hed* (echo). Whitehill-Bashan is the only significant American-born Hebrew writer active today in the United States, and it reflects both on the disappointments of American Hebraism and its quixotic optimism that he did not emerge from the schools and institutions of American Hebraism but rather from an assimilated Jewish family in Lubbock, Texas, where, as a teen, he began teaching himself Hebrew out of an entirely personal and idiosyncratic passion for things Jewish and Israeli. There have been American-born students of the Hebraists who went on to publish volumes of Hebrew poetry, including Chana Farmelant, Chana Kleiman, and Arnold Band, the last being the dean of Hebrew literary studies in the United

States, but none of these efforts dates past the early 1960s. Whitehill, by contrast, began publishing in the 1970s in Israeli journals, and in recent years he has been praised by a younger generation of Israeli poets who value his eclectic mix of linguistic registers, his interest in formal as well as free verse, and the unsettling mirror his poetry holds up to a Hebrew literature that has not been primarily diasporic for generations. His fourth collection of poems, *Steps bahorim shehorim* (Tap Dancing through Black Holes), which includes rending confessionals about his childhood in Texas and a comic vision of a café conversation with the historical messiah figure Shabbatai Zvi, was published in 2014. While read in Israel, to which he plans to immigrate one day, his situation in America is one of literary anonymity. “The center of American Hebrew poetry,” he explained recently in the Israeli daily newspaper *Ha’aretz*, “is located on the second floor of my house, in my study.”¹⁹

The decision to take on Israeli citizenship and reside in the Jewish state would place Whitehill-Bashan in the company of other American Jewish writers who have done the same, and whose work constitutes a considerable body of American Israeli writing. Most of this is conducted in English and so does not fall under the purview of this essay, except that, like American Hebrew literature, it represents, in the very fact of its authors’ leaving America for Israel and all that such a change of society and citizenship entails, an American Jewish culture that departs radically from some of the basic cultural and ideological assumptions of mainstream American Jewish culture. This highly diverse group of writers includes essayists, memoirists, and journalists such as Yossi Klein Halevi, Hillel Halkin, June Leavitt, Sherri Mandell, Adina Hoffman, Haim Chertok, Daniel Gordis, Haim Watzman, Aaron Wolf, Marcia Freedman, and Judy Lash Balint. Fiction writers include the popular novelist Naomi Ragen, the historian and former Israeli ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, and the bohemian expatriate Alfred Chester. Poets of note include Shirley Kaufman, Robert Friend, Peter Cole, Gabriel Levin, and Karen Alkalay-Gut. These writers’ relationships to Zionism, to American Jewry, to Mideast politics, and to their place in the literary cultures of Israel and the English-speaking world vary widely. Their work and their unique roles in the literary sociology of their original and adoptive countries deserve further examination.

More germane to our topic here are the few American-born Israeli writers who have made their literary careers in Hebrew. Rather than struggling to find a place for Hebrew in America, as the American Hebraists did, they have attempted to make a place for their American backgrounds within Israeli literature. Though these are two different groups, they have each sought

the meeting ground of Hebrew culture and American identity, if from opposite ends. These American Israeli writers of Hebrew include T. Carmi, who grew up in a Hebraist household in the United States and so did not have to undergo a major linguistic upheaval; Harold Schimmel, whose playful New York school poetics, influenced by such poets as Frank O'Hara and George Oppen, have been so refreshing to Israeli poetry; and Jacob Jeffrey Green, whose 1998 novel *Sof-shavua ameriqani* (American Weekend), set in western Massachusetts in the 1970s, is a fascinating snapshot of American and Jewish countercultural identities. In a forthcoming volume I have translated selected poems of another Hebrew writer, Reuven Ben-Yosef, who was born Robert Eliot Reiss in New York City in 1937. Rebelling against his assimilated upbringing, the young poet moved to Israel in 1959 and switched from English poetry to Hebrew poetry, changing his name along with his language. While he tried to reinvent himself in Israel, he was haunted by his American origins and his highly conflicted relationship with his American parents and siblings. His best poetic work and one of the finest Israeli long poems of its time is "Mikhtavim la'Ameriqah" (Letters to America), a sequence of poems he wrote in the 1970s that take the form of plangent, angry letters sent to his family members in the United States, ironically none of whom could read Hebrew.

Today, technology and new media make separate, geographically identified linguistic subcultures less distinct if they exist at all. English-language writers in Israel speak through the Internet to their audiences in the Anglosphere, while Israeli writers who reside in America, such as the novelist Maya Arad, are clearly part of the literary market and culture of Israel. To the extent that a new flowering of Hebrew culture in America such as the Hebraists accomplished is at all conceivable, it would be an extension of Israeli literature and not a center in its own right.

Nevertheless, the literature produced by the Hebraists, in addition to its aesthetic achievements, can function as a provocative reminder to American Jews of a road not taken, a language not learned, and a national identity not chosen, a radically different way of being American Jews. Already in his 1954 collection *Ner mul kokhavim* (Candle Facing Stars), Gabriel Preil warned future scholars not to underestimate the stakes and relevance of the vanishing world of American Hebraism. In the poem "Hamtanah lamahar ha'atomi" (Waiting for the Atomic Tomorrow), Preil imagines a future in which extraterrestrial academics ponder the nature of humanity "after our little world is blown up."²⁰ This reflects cold war fears of atomic destruction but is also a metaphor for what Preil knows will seem to future generations the remote and quixotic

efforts of American Hebraism. Nodding to the Hebrew Indian epics, Preil writes:

Then, on a neighboring planet, a scholar will discuss us, an historian
will analyze us:
we will seem to them like faceless Indians, like anonymous Aztecs. . . .

But in the final lines of the poem, Preil turns his perspective upon us, supposedly “wise” in our distant future, yet whose cultural survival is itself in question as we search for inspiration and cultural nourishment.

From now on the responsibility no longer falls to me.
The wise men will go about on their nearby planet, and they are the ones
who will chase after a lone bird that vainly seeks a thin trickle of water
in a cleft of the scorched rock.²¹

Notes

- 1 Alan Mintz, *Sanctuary in the Wilderness: A Critical Introduction to American Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 5.
- 2 Ibid., 67.
- 3 Ibid., 78.
- 4 Ibid., 108.
- 5 Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Towards a New Theorizing of Jewish Literatures* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2005), 90–91.
- 6 Shimon Halkin, *Paths and Side-Paths in Literature* (Jerusalem: Aqademon, 1969), 66.
- 7 Shimon Ginzburg, *Poetic Works* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1931), 199.
- 8 Shimon Ginzburg, “In the Tower,” *Hashiloah* 29:1 (1913): 66–74; 29:2 (1913): 165–176, 70.
- 9 Ginzburg, *Poetic Works*, 203.
- 10 Ibid., 284–285.
- 11 Chaim Nachman Bialik, *Poems*, ed. Avner Holtzman (Israel: Dvir, 2004), 443.
- 12 Menachem Ribalow, ed. *Anthology of Hebrew Poetry in America* (New York: Ogen, 1938), viii.
- 13 Hillel Bavli, “The New American Poetry,” *Hatequfah* 14–15 (1922): 684.
- 14 Hillel Bavli, “Old and New in Our Literature,” *Hado’ar* 4:39 (1924): 5.
- 15 Shimon Ginzburg, *Poetic Works* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1931), 278.
- 16 Harry Sackler, *Plays* (New York: Ogen, 1943), 292.
- 17 Hillel Bavli, *Poems*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1937), 143.
- 18 Gabriel Preil, *Candle Facing Stars* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1954), 75.
- 19 Robert Whitehill-Bashan, “I Am a Zionist and I Am Crazy,” *Ha’arets*, May 28, 2010. <http://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1203987>.
- 20 Preil, *Candle Facing Stars*, 36.
- 21 Ibid., 37.

Ladino in U.S. Literature and Song

MONIQUE RODRIGUES BALBUENA

Ladino is living a seemingly contradictory moment: While it disappears as an active language of daily use, it also undergoes a general revival, with increased cultural production. As the site where a politics of identity was shaped that encouraged ethnic identification and the “celebration of difference,” the United States sees a plural and productive stage in the development of Ladino. In this paper I will initially discuss the beginnings of Ladino usage in the United States, introducing the Ladino press and then offering a comprehensive – and yet nonexhaustive – picture of poets and writers who wrote in and about Ladino. In a second part I will introduce a few contemporary artists who have created and performed in Ladino and observe their stance toward language preservation, while interrogating their place in both the Jewish and the broader community. I will argue that the present stage of “bridging” between Sephardic/Ladino and Latino artists not only can be one of the most powerful tools in the efforts of preservation of the Ladino language and tradition but also renders possible innovative and creative aesthetic choices, thus enlarging both the Jewish and the broader non-Jewish repertoires. Furthermore, such a bridging or collaboration participates in the shaping of a new view and a new discourse about ethnicity, minorities, and viable political alliances.

When Longfellow visited the Newport Jewish Cemetery in 1854, he was struck by the sounds of Portuguese and Spanish names that did not resemble the more familiar Ashkenazi names to which by then he had grown accustomed:

The very names recorded here are strange,
Of foreign accent, and of different climes;
Alvares and Rivera interchange
With Abraham and Jacob of old times.

His encounter with what he depicts as a dead Jewish world points to the long presence of Portuguese and Spanish Jews in American life, communal Jewish

life having developed since twenty-three Jews arrived in New Amsterdam from Brazil in 1654. Sephardic Jews were the majority in the early decades of settlement and maintained cultural predominance until the early 1800s, but by the first two decades of the eighteenth century the numbers of Ashkenazi immigrants had already surpassed their own.

The colonial Jewish settlement, shaped by aristocratic Sephardic Jews, is not the historical moment when Ladino appears in the United States. Portuguese was the lingua franca of the western Sephardim, and Spanish was a high cultural language, used in translations of prayers and in literary texts. Ladino, the vernacular Judeo-Spanish, a fusion language with Hebrew and Aramaic elements, developed in the diaspora, mostly as a result of the encounter of different regional varieties of Spanish in the setting of the Ottoman Empire, also absorbing elements of the local non-Jewish languages.

It is only when Jews from the Ottoman Empire begin arriving in the United States in the first two decades of the twentieth century that Ladino becomes a language to be found, for the most part, in the streets of New York. These new Sephardic arrivals do not have the cultural, political, or historical cachet of the western Sephardim established in the United States. This great migratory wave of “Levantine Jews” coincides with the arrival of masses of Ashkenazi Jews (in a 1:66 ratio), who would define the recognized face of American Jewry, rendering the non-Yiddish-speaking Jews barely visible.

An article in the *New York Tribune* from September 22, 1912, announces with great surprise, “In New York is a city set apart where live Jews who know no Yiddish. They come from Oriental lands and speak a hodgepodge of Spanish, Greek, Turkish and Arabic.”¹ They are also taken for gentiles – Turks, Italians, or Greeks. A tiny minority within a minority, not recognized by their brethren, these “Oriental Jews” settle in the Lower East Side – the majority of them speaking Ladino.

The dire conditions in which the Levantine Jews live and the lack of resources available to them help explain the role that the Judeo-Spanish press would acquire. The first enduring newspaper is *La America*, appearing on November 11, 1910, and lasting fifteen years, or 706 issues. Moïse Gadol, a Bulgarian Jew, Alliance-educated and active Zionist, decides to settle in New York and use his own resources to publish a newspaper in Ladino. He wants to provide practical information and advice to ease the Ladino-speaking Jews’ life in the new country (getting and keeping jobs, for example), as well as intellectual guidance, that could introduce them to new ideas and lift their spirits. Very pointedly, Gadol believes that a Sephardic newspaper, printed in Hebrew letters, could give those eastern Jews a “proof” of their Jewishness, serving thus

as a crucial tool to curb Ashkenazi skepticism and denial of a shared ethnoreligious identity, especially when the Yiddish-speaking Jews are the Ottoman's potential employers.

Recognition of eastern Sephardim's Jewishness is a declared goal, but Gadol also wants to educate and organize the new Sephardic immigrants: "We must show the Portuguese Jews and the Ashkenazic Jews that we Sephardim of the Orient are descendants of the Spanish-Jewish greats and we are capable of united action."² In addition, he seeks to promote communication and cooperation between Ashkenazim and Sepharadim and eventually unite them in the United States, as "children of one great nation."³ Furthermore, together, in Gadol's view, Ashkenazim and Sepharadim can "fight and defend[our] ancient Jewish Homeland."⁴ Toward such goals Gadol even publishes essays in Yiddish in *La America* and includes English lessons and glossaries of English, Yiddish, and Judeo-Spanish words and phrases side by side (the English words often appearing in both Rashi script, common in Judeo-Spanish texts, and Latin letters).

The paper once translates the American immigration laws into Ladino; it also offers poetry and serialized literary works (Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* among them); commentaries on art, poetry, theatre, and literature in general; and discussions of women's rights. One of its features is "Postemas de Mujer," an advice column by Bula Satula, a pseudonym for Salonika-born Moïse Soulam. The column runs from 1913 to 1934 in three different Ladino newspapers – *La America*, *El Progreso*, and *La Vara* – and it is a humorous piece (as is typical in Ladino journalism) in which the young Soulam adopts the identity of a matronly woman.⁵

Soulam also publishes under his own name, and an example is a poem about his hometown, Salonika, and the reasons that forced him to leave for New York. In "Un ultimo adio a mi sivdad natala" [A Last Farewell to My Hometown], appearing in *La America* in 1913, Soulam laments the destruction of Salonika under Greek rule, and the disappearance of a vibrant Jewish life, which rendered the city the moniker of "Jerusalem of the Balkans,"

Adio, adio Saloniko, sivdad de jidios puevlada,
I ke oy restas kaji deziertada,
Sivdad ke ayer eras yena de ermozura,
I ke oy kien te ve siente amargura.

Adio, sivdad ayer ermoza
Ma oy triste i danioza,
Sivdad ayer manan leche i miel
I oy manan tristeza i fiel.⁶

Ladino journalism has a long tradition that began in the Ottoman Empire in the 1840s and is considered one of the greatest literary achievements of Ladino-speaking Jews. Such a tradition continues in the United States and comes to reflect the immigrants' experience and the cultural, political, and religious transformation they experience in the new country. The press is the vehicle through which the Ottoman Jews redefine themselves on American soil. Between 1910 and 1948, nineteen other Ladino newspapers appear in the United States, including the socialist *El Progreso* (which later becomes *La Boz del Pueblo*) and its successor, *La Époka de Nu York*.

A rival of *La America*, which would endure until 1948, *La Vara* is the last Ladino paper published entirely in Hebrew characters not only in the United States, but in the world. Published by the Salonika-born Albert Lévy, *La Vara* is a popular, creative, and satirical publication that describes itself as a "serious-humorous newspaper." It offers primary sources such as advertisements, exhortations to communal organization, reviews of theater plays, necrologies, and articles about current events, including Zionist efforts.

Many of the poems in *La Vara* are published anonymously, reminding the reader of a tradition previous to that of the *poesía de autor*, or authorial poetry, when the communal aspect of an orally transmitted poetry was emphasized. The recurrence of poetry to speak of love, death, immigration, toothpaste, groceries, or pastries affirms the privileged position of the genre in Sephardic life. Even the editorial text, urging the readers to subscribe, is a poem in nine stanzas (one quintet and eight quartets). This is how it ends:

El abonada que pagara primero
que mostrara ser amigo sincero
recibirá un regalo valutoso
un "ashcolson" muy grandioso⁷

Several of the advertisements in *La Vara* appear in the form of simple-rhymed and didactic anonymous poems. If they are not great examples of poetry in Ladino, they do serve as pictures of the many negotiations Ladino speakers make in transporting culinary customs and life-cycle ceremonies from the Ottoman Empire into their new American life.

In an ad for the "Original French Pastry" in East Harlem (also known as Spanish Harlem), the speaker lists a number of typical pastries appreciated by the Turkish *colonia*, or community: *maruchinos*, *rebanadicas*, *curabies*, *shat-nei*, *filas*, *cadaif*, and *baklavas*. And next, following these mostly Greek and Turkish-sounding sweets, is a "sponge-cake," representing the cultural presence of the surrounding Anglophone community and signifying the "Turkish"

community's immigrant status.⁸ References to the rites and life changes are abundant in this and other ads, especially "pasatiempos, fiestas y bodas"⁹ [pastimes, celebrations, and weddings].

Cualunque boda es bien servida
 departe esta patisería conocida
 sus dulzurias hacen alagar la vida
 ande más al parido y a la parida¹⁰

The interaction of the different populations and its effects in the cultural and linguistic repertoire of the Ladino-speaking Jews are reflected, for example, in the lexical choices of Moïš Solas, who published a number of poems in *La Vara*. In his critique of his fellow Turkish Jews in the United States, especially of their prayers in the month of Elul, before Yom Kippur, which now are not accompanied by acts of charity, Solas writes in his poem "El mes de la santidad" [The holy month]

Jalim para kehilot son alquilados
 jazanim para oraciones son engajados
 muchos van laborando, corriendo
 escaleras abashando y subiendo

Quién sube escaleras del degradado?
 Quién jarva la puerta del desafortunado?
 Ninguno, siendo en este lugar
 hay muy poco dar y muy mucho rogar¹¹

The poet sees the community weakening its ties and its commitment to the poorer among its members. He also criticizes outward demonstrations of faith that are not accompanied by actions. But in this long poem that is both a critique and a lamentation, Solas exemplifies some of this change he sees in the new country in the language he himself uses: *jalim* is a word that combines the English word "hall" with the Hebrew masculine plural suffix "im." The interaction with English can also be seen in *engajados* ("Jazanim para oraciones son engajados"), where the past participle meaning "hired" is clearly from the English "engaged."

In addition to its use in the press, Ladino appeared in autobiographies and some fictional works. No more in Hebrew letters, these longer texts are written in English, with Ladino words representing the past, the ancestral culture. Léon Sciaký, an immigrant from Salonika, published the first autobiography of a Sephardic writer in the United States in 1946. Written thirty years after his arrival in New York State as a twenty-two-year-old man, and in the aftermath of the Holocaust, *Farewell to Salonica* is a nostalgic book that depicts a

world before its destruction. Sciaky's focus is not his encounter with the new American environment – in fact, the United States is only mentioned twice – but rather the emotional description of smells, sounds, landscapes, traditions, familial and communal relationships that shaped the author's life, and ultimately his consciousness, in his place of origin, Salonika.

In his tribute to a lost world, Sciaky stresses the permanence of the past within him, even as he grapples with his identity as a religious minority and a pro-Ottoman nationalist. His affection for the Judeo-Spanish culture of his family – which defines his Judaism – is only matched by his attachment to the city of Salonika itself, and to the history of the Jews in the city, where he learned about freedom and democracy. Ladino, then, appears in the book in scenes of childhood and domestic family interaction. It is almost a symbol of stability – as the Ottoman Empire begins to change, before the dissolution into nation-states – and certainly an element in the preservation of the past and affirmation of an ethnocultural identity.

Already in the prologue, where the author is introduced as “a boy of five,” Ladino appears in the text in the form of an old song,

Decild'a la morena que lla me va ir,
La nave lla 'sta'n vela y lla va partir.¹²

The song speaks of departure and change, while the boy looks outside and “as with eyes wide with wonder he beholds the transformation”¹³ of a dying day reflecting on his garden. The “conflagration [of the sun] in the west and its reflection in the east”¹⁴ announce early on what is later more explicit in the text: that “stealthily the West was creeping in, trying to lure the East with her wonders.”¹⁵

The Frenks (French), their inventions, and the education they introduced via the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle are a great part of this cultural shift. If the city's linguistic diversity and multiethnic composition were already inscribed in Sciaky's text by the use of Turkish, Spanish, and Arabic words – the book begins with a call for prayer from the muezzin – the new reality is reflected in yet another language added to the mix, French. The family buys *mousseline de soie* and reads fashion books from Paris.¹⁶ David Boton, the school headmaster, visits and reads to the family, adjusting to the family members who still do not speak Turkish and French and introducing works to their repertoire: “For the benefit of Nono and Grandmother, who knew no French, he was translating *Les Misérables* into Spanish.”

The tension between tradition and change takes place in the linguistic conflicts and interactions. “The Spanish Jews,” writes Sciaky, “were much like a

palimpsest on which French culture and thought were superimposed upon a tongue and customs of a dim past.”¹⁷ Sciaky is educated in a French lycée and grows up with multiple languages, as a member of the Francophone elite in Salonika who eventually sees France as his cultural mother.¹⁸ His grandmother, standing for tradition and representing the Spanish (Sephardic) diaspora in the Ottoman lands, resists the unavoidable changes:

Life had changed enough about her. . . . New schools had been opened and were now teaching in foreign tongues. The young people were forgetting the traditions of their fathers and made little of old-age customs. God preserve us! She did not want to live the day when Spanish, the language of our ancestors, would be forgotten.¹⁹

In his depiction of daily life, Sciaky describes the objects, the songs, and the culinary delicacies that make up the memories of his Salonikan childhood. In those descriptions, Ladino appears in the text, typically accompanied by definitions or explanations; in explicative appositions, as in “*pistil*, dried-apricot paste that looks like brown linoleum”;²⁰ or straightforward definitions: “*Roskas* were wheel-shaped cookies sprinkled with sesame seeds.”²¹

These same resources for the representation of the language are used by Emma Adatto Schlesinger in her story “Tía Estambolía.” Schlesinger was born in 1910 in Istanbul, Turkey, and immigrated to Seattle, Washington, in 1912, where she lived in an environment ebullient with Sephardic social and cultural life. Eventually she studied Spanish and in 1935 obtained an M.A. in Sephardic folklore from the University of Washington, with a thesis titled “A Study of the Linguistic Characteristics of the Seattle Sefardi Folklore.” “Tía Estambolía” is an autobiographical narrative. Interspersing words in Hebrew, Ladino, and Turkish, the text introduces oral traditions, customs, food, and clothes of Sephardic Jews in the United States. It also presents Madame Vida de Veisí – an immigrant from Constantinople (or Istanbul), a communal source of cultural knowledge and folk material, and the woman who for two decades taught Schlesinger about Sephardic traditions, including those of storytelling and the Romancero.

As the title character arrives from Turkey in her relatives’ house in Seattle, we read the clarifying apposition: “a houseful of relatives busily preparing a *pranso*, a feast for the morrow’s welcome home party for her.”²² The same resource is used in “I was to bring the *dulce*, the sweet that was offered as soon as a guest entered the house,”²³ or “*cidra*, candied grapefruit rind.”²⁴ Sometimes, rather than an explanatory sentence, words in Ladino are followed by a direct English translation, as in “We had our *dulce* and *café con leche*,

coffee with milk, and *bizcochos*, cookies”;²⁵ and “Older women were referred to as *tías*, aunts.”²⁶ Most of the terms in Ladino are nouns related to food and specific objects of a Sephardic home, but sometimes whole phrases are inscribed and translated: “I have no *kef*, I’m not in the mood,”²⁷ in which *kef* is actually a Turkish word, or “Then she would begin, *avía de ser*, there was once,”²⁸ or yet “*ya basta*, that’s enough.”²⁹ The following excerpt offers a good picture of the linguistic dynamism in a Turkish Sephardic home in the United States in the beginning of the twentieth century:

The white liquor was poured into tiny glasses for the first blessing; only the older women beginning with La Tía were given some also. After the first blessing, they said, “*Salud, beracha, buyurun*” in Spanish, Hebrew, and Turkish, meaning: please, sit down, and begin eating.

There was not much conversation during the meal except for complimenting the cooks, *bendichas manos*, blessed hands, or a teasing *te afitó el horno*, the oven was in good form. After the blessing, the men sang *pizmonim* and told tales from the Midrash.³⁰

The trilingual exhortation is inserted in the text and accompanied not by a literal but by a communicative-approach translation. *Salud* is literally “health” and is used in a toast. *Beracha* is Hebrew for “blessing” and is used here as a wish that the addressees receive blessings. *Buyurun* is the second person polite or plural form for “order” or “command” in Turkish but is typically used in the same way that *Bevakasha* (literally, “in a request,” but used both as “please” and “you’re welcome”) is employed by Israeli shopkeepers to mean “At your service” or “How can I help you?”³¹ Schlesinger’s text adds a translation that at first, at least formally, seems to be a literal one, as the three items are given correspondent equivalents in a similar or parallel enumeration. But it is not, as one immediately realizes, and it becomes clear that the whole syntagm, combining the three main languages of Ottoman Sephardi life, is a call to move along and start the meal.

Language is discussed in other ways in Schlesinger’s text. The Sephardic oral tradition of vibrant storytelling is recognized as “live entertainment for those who could not speak English.”³² Recent immigrants and an older generation do not speak English and have kept Ladino as their primary, sometimes only, language. In the polyglot Ottoman Empire, the *millets*, or national minorities, had not been constrained to learn Turkish. Jews learned Turkish, or any other language, because they needed to, in order to do business or engage in trade. This attitude toward language accompanied many Ottoman Jews to the United States, and so this first generation did not see learning English as more than a practical tool. For the second generation,

the linguistic status of Ladino and English began to change. As noted earlier in our discussion of the Ladino newspapers, Hebrew – the ability to read, pray, and write in Hebrew – was a way for Sephardic Jews to affirm themselves as Jews before a skeptical and overwhelming number of Ashkenazim. Now, not only were the young more exposed and attached to the surrounding language, English, as is natural in the immigration process, but (Judeo-) Spanish, their home language, was also identified with other spurned minority groups with whom Sephardic Jews shared spaces, the poor Puerto Rican and Cuban immigrants. Thus, representing the generational linguistic shift, Schlesinger reads at one point, “The slender Estreya just smiled and greeted us [my mother and me] in Ladino, asking me in Spanish accented English, “How are you, Emma?”³³

The children are addressed in Spanish-accented English, and the readers are told that the language that they read as English, in Latin characters, is Ladino. The fact that Ladino qua Ladino gradually disappears from the text and is increasingly represented as English, or included only as snippets, as names of dishes and religious objects, followed by translations, foregrounds the reduced audience of Ladino writers. Authors who speak of Ladino, and who consciously seek to preserve the language, are writing for readers who can no longer read it, and who for the most part participate in a nostalgic identification with the Sephardic language and what it represents. At times, the writers themselves do not master the language.

Such is the case of the poet Vicki Angel. Her poem “Falling in Line”³⁴ presents a speaker who bemoans the loss of a shared linguistic heritage with her grandmother. Speaking as an adult who looks back at her childhood, the speaker remembers her many efforts at fitting into American society (“cookie-cutter structure”), hiding her Jewishness, and conforming to an idealized American identity:

I did what I could, kept the lawn
mowed and clipped, as coiffed and stiff
as our kiddy-corner neighbor, Mrs. Mitchell’s
beehive hairdo. . . .

only to be betrayed by the smells, sounds, and tastes that revealed the continuing and overpowering presence of the “Old Country.”

But the kitchen reeked
of feta and *cashcaval* and the cupboards
dripped down rose petal jam even thicker
than my father’s foreign tongue.

Food, again, is an important marker of a Sephardic cultural identity, and the semantic field of the few words that appear in Ladino,

I thought I could disguise it, but the Jew in me
oozed through like grease stains
that soaked into my shameful lunch sacks
filled with fried fish cakes and *paneizicos*
bilebizas and spinach pie.

The Jew in her oozes – there is a powerful movement, a domineering, dripping dynamism of this “old Sephardiness,” resembling the initial image of the poem, when “the Old Country mix[es] into the mortar” and “seep[s] into the walls” of the new house. Movement, more like rolling waves, will describe the language as well. The poem presents Ladino as a mellifluous, a dancing and delicate language, of affectionate, whispered words, offered in counterpoint to the girl’s rejection of a religious and cultural identification that could out her as an undesirable minority.

Every time I thought I may as well be dead
My grandmother’s language swished and dipped
It hiprolled off her lips like a merengué.
Querida mia, she purred, *preciada de me corazon*.³⁵

Note how the “dance” of the language, equated to a merengue, is played in the assonant “i’s” and alliterative “p’s” and “l’s” that announce the simile. The repeated sounds of short “i’s” – in “swIshed, dIpped, It, hIprolled and lIps – combine with the “p’s” and “l’s” of “hiProLled,” “LiPs,” and “Like,” while the “r’s” of “hipRolled” and “puRRed” provide the lengthy undulation akin to that of a body dancing “meRengue.”

This musical excursion does not prevent the melancholic lament with which the poem ends. On the contrary, it seems to highlight the degree of loss suffered by the speaker by not inheriting the ancestral language. The adult’s present is filled with regret for the interruption in the chains of linguistic transmission. The speaker recognizes her part in this process of cultural loss as she alludes to the story of Esau, Jacob, and the birthright. The words in Ladino (which, this time, point to English), placed in the middle of the stanza, become the *punctum*, catching the reader’s eyes and irradiating desolation.

How was I to know that when I demanded,
when I raged and locked my arms
across my chest, Grandmother speak to me
solo en Inglés that she would listen?
Now I’m left with a mouth full

of swear words, holed up in this brick
basement rambler selling birthrights
for a goddamned bowl of beans.

Michael Castro is another poet who evokes Ladino as he writes about his Salonikan grandparents. His memories of Ladino are, in his poems, vestiges of an old world, pieces of a great heritage and a poetic tradition that he seeks to embrace later in life.

As a middle-aged man, I've returned to my own culture, my own identity, and realized a nourishing depth and beauty there that is relatively unknown to the world at large. So increasingly ground my being and my writing in the fact that I am a Hispanic Jew, and increasingly discover ways, to my wonder, in which my life's path has been an unconscious expression of that cultural heritage.³⁶

The same reverence for the Sephardic culture appears in the stories by Gloria DeVidas Kirchheimer,³⁷ who writes about the experiences of Sephardim in the United States. The world of the Levantine immigrants is depicted in her works, and Ladino is included, but mostly in translation. At times a few words or phrases make their way into the text, in italics, only to be followed by translations, as in “*Los hombres son locos,*” she says. Men are crazy. This is the first time she smiles.”³⁸ Most of the time, though, Ladino is a reference, a signal, a reminder of a past that conflicted with the “sophisticated” French learned in the schools of the Alliance, or with the “travesty of the one true tongue,” that is, the Spanish spoken by the “errant proletarians” – “Hispanic waiters and saleswomen” among the “Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Cubans” of Washington Heights in Manhattan.³⁹

Thus, if the more obvious “*Mi amor*” or “*Chérie*” stands alone in the text,⁴⁰ DeVidas Kirchheimer inserts strong cultural references in English, or translated Ladino. In some examples there is a stylistic representation of an exchange between characters speaking different languages. The readers only know about this variation in language because the narrator states explicitly, “Victoria says, speaking in Ladino (followed by a translation of Ladino proverbs),” and “‘Fine, fine,’ my father says in English.”⁴¹ Such information allows the readers to suspend disbelief and accept the words they read in English as being uttered in Ladino. Proverbs or famous songs of the Ladino repertoire are recognizable in English clothing, as the character speaks in quotes:

“At my age,” Victoria continues in Ladino, “a woman wants rest. Trees cry for rain and mountains for air, and that is how these eyes of mine are crying.”⁴² It is terrible to be a stranger.”

Some Sephardic authors discuss their relationship to the Ladino language in memorialistic works. Morrie Camhi and Victor Perera also introduce Ladino in their texts either in snippets, and glosses, or directly in English. Ladino is presented as the ancestral language marking a cultural past that is being lost. New York-born Morrie Camhi introduces the food – the *espinakas*, *roskittas*, and *dulse* – that he claims to be “the preamble to all Greek discourse”⁴³ and thus the way his parents, from Monastir and Salonika, entertained and first addressed guests. He again reminds the readers of the interaction of Sephardic Jews and Spanish American immigrants in New York when recognizing that, despite his bilingual youth, his fluency had faded, and his “Ladino subtly transmuted into the modern Spanish spoken in America’s Hispanic neighborhoods.”⁴⁴

In *The Cross and the Pear Tree*, Guatemalan-American Victor Perera chronicles the history of his family, tracing it to fourteenth-century Toledo. He discusses the role of the Judeo-Spanish language in family life and family history, but Ladino appears rather sparsely in the more than three hundred pages of the book. Especially in the very beginning – when the author presents his mother and the popular sayings that she used to make sense of her surrounding reality and to instruct her children – Ladino is present on the page and typically emphasized by the use of italics. Ladino is the source of popular wisdom and gives the color of a particular family lect that marks its difference from the surrounding environment. Ladino appears most vividly when Perera depicts his mother, complete with her “body language and vocal inflections”:

When Mother responded to one of my tall tales with “Etcha otro huevo en la olla, este salió caldudo” (“Toss another egg in the pot, this one came out soupy”), her sidelong glance and lift of the shoulders conveyed the disdain of one of Solomon’s concubines for her rivals.⁴⁵

Described as “a living archive of the wisdom and prejudices as well as the fortunes and misfortunes of our tribe,”⁴⁶ Ladino is a powerful vehicle of scorn, by way of its colorful colloquial epithets, or of tenderness, expressed in diminutives and affectionate phrases. It serves as the emotional vehicle that brings to the author both good and bad memories of his mother, and to his mother, an ease to her discontent at living in Guatemala, until her Ladino blooms once again in Israel.

The “evocations of a remote past”⁴⁷ poured out in Ladino will also mark the memories of a little girl dazzled by the delectable Passover feast offered in her grandparents’ house. With colorful and sensorial images, the Cuban-born

Ruth Behar tries to convey in her memoir the mixed sense of amazement and nostalgia prompted by the Judeo-Spanish language.

Abuelo's Spanish, Abuela's Spanish, what glorious Spanish they spoke. It was Spanish that could not be learned in any school. Their Spanish made you think of gardens filled with pomegranates, yellow canaries singing in gilded cages on sunny afternoons. It was a gift from my stubborn ancestors, this Spanish for which I had no name when I was a girl, not knowing yet that it was an old Spanish they spoke, a Spanish taken out of Spain many centuries ago.⁴⁸

Behar also notes the affectionate diminutives that characterize Ladino, and alludes to the death of the language, in a quasi-poetic discussion of its phonic and phonological qualities,

How I would love to hear their voices again, to hear one more time my Abuela calling me, with so much gaiety, not Ruth or Ruti but Rutica; even to hear, one more time, the sadness in Abuelo's voice when he called my brother simply "Mori," for we found "Morris" too stuffy to use in daily life. Mori with the accent on the *o* is how we pronounce my brother's name, but if you place the accent on the *i* it becomes *mori*, which in Spanish means "I died."⁴⁹

As I anticipated in the beginning of this paper, amid the discussion of death that marks much of Ladino production today, there is also a considerable momentum toward renewing the language. Interest in Ladino is growing not only in academic settings but also in broader, popular environments. Traditional genres receive new treatment and Jewish and non-Jewish groups establish strategic collaborations that breathe new life into the language.

I start with Ladino theater in the United States, which was an important element in Sephardic cultural life. There was a tradition of communal theater in Ladino in the early twentieth century in New York, especially in the Lower East Side, where there were around twenty-five thousand Ladino speakers. The Ladino press in New York (especially the newspapers *La Vara* and *La Luz*) accompanied and registered the performances of the many drama troupes. Papers reported productions in Sephardic centers such as New York and Seattle, as well as in Rochester, Atlanta, and Portland. Plays were not only Ladino translations of foreign works, including European literary classics and Yiddish and Hebrew works, but also Ladino plays from the Ottoman Empire and a number of original texts written locally, in the United States.⁵⁰ The performances were an opportunity for social gathering, drawing together the different sectors of the Sephardic community. Besides entertainment, the plays served as vehicles for social and political activism.⁵¹

In 1994 a new Ladino troupe appeared on the New York scene. Producing and acting, the group also contributed to the repertoire with a new original text. Its founder, David Fintz Altabé (1929–2008), a poet and scholar of Sephardic culture, wrote *Merekiyas de Orchard Street (Orchard Street Blues)*, a play about Sephardic life on the Lower East Side.⁵² In the context of Ladino revival, this new troupe, the Ladino Players, composed of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, gave a new, albeit brief, breath of life to Ladino theater in the United States.⁵³ Unlike its predecessors, the group is very much invested in preserving and guaranteeing the survival of the Judeo-Spanish language. Not unlike contemporary Ladino poetry, where the language itself becomes a central theme, which develops through considerations about time and death, the new Ladino theater is concerned with the survival and updating of a linguistic and cultural tradition. Referring to a 1996 performance of the group, Mara Lockowandt uses the term “theater for survival” to describe the Ladino Players’ work, defining it as “the strategic use of theater arts for the survival of cultural identity.” Lockowandt writes that “preservation of culture motivates production,” and the troupe is moved by the “desire to revalue and reinvent the cultural identity into the present historical moment.”⁵⁴ In their effort to make Sephardic tradition and culture contemporary and relevant in late twentieth-century New York, the Ladino Players not only perform in Ladino, but discuss the use of the language in the play itself, creating a series of *mise-en-abîmes* that share with the audience the tensions between past and present, local and global, preservation and reinvention.

It is not totally clear who their audience is. Trudy Balch, one of the performers, claims that “she’s seen both Sephardic Jews and non-Jews attend performances, and she’s observed some interest in Ladino from non-Jewish Latinos who happen to live in New York.”⁵⁵

Indeed, non-Jewish Latinos have expressed interest in Ladino and in Sephardic genres, and nowhere is this interest more explicit than in music. I will now focus mostly on music, a fluid commodity that travels across nation-states and acquires new meanings, as it encounters conditions unlike those in which it was created and is transformed by them. Also, “songs are a strong identity marker,”⁵⁶ and Ladino songs are currently among the main cultural forms with which Sephardic Ladino-speaking Jews are identified or identify themselves, therefore acquiring a central place in the present Ladino repertoire. The Ladino song becomes, in Judith Cohen’s words, “an indicator of Sephardic presence, real or imagined, past or present.”⁵⁷ It is also in music that some of the most important developments of fertile cross-pollination between Jewish and non-Jewish art forms are taking place.

Moreover, even as we focus on Ladino, we also have to consider that the existence of the so-called Jewish languages cannot be dissociated from the non-Jewish environment among which Jews lived. Such languages appeared in contact with non-Jewish languages, in addition to, and in opposition to, them. In fact, the relationship between Jews and the peoples among whom they settled has shaped the development of the main elements that usually define their group identity as Jews. The cultural repertoires of Jews have been formed in the constant negotiation between inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, sameness and difference, tradition and change. If the dynamic interplay with the surrounding peoples has heavily informed what is recognized as “Jewish,” an assessment of any “Jewish repertoire” has to engage with these relational contexts and acknowledge the different elements that migrate from one group to another – elements that are absorbed, adopted, refashioned, and transformed. With its creative tensions, this complex and active process is, in the end, one of translation. The contact, exchange, and adoption of “foreign” elements bring change and innovation to the repertoire – a process that is not only historical but also synchronic, happening today. That is how we can account not only for the prestigious *Romancero*, but also for the old Turkish *Bestes* and Greek *Tragoudia* of Eastern Sephardic Jews, or for their Spanish *zarzuelas*, Argentine tangos, U.S. American charlestons, and French foxtrots in the early twentieth century; or, in a synchronic take on this diachronic practice, for the new Sephardic tango in Ladino in Buenos Aires today, or for Ladino punk, rock, or jazz in contemporary U.S. America.

Ladino theater performers as well as Ladino singers and composers have made repeated attempts to reach out to an audience that extends beyond the Jewish community. Some songs, perceived as pertaining to the traditional repertoire, receive updated arrangements and are fused with jazz, flamenco, and other musical genres. In other cases they can also receive “early music” treatment and arrangements, in an attempt by musicians to create or reproduce the often attractive and commercially successful medieval mystique. Besides the early music crowd, another targeted group has been that of Latinos, with whom Sephardic artists can more or less share a language and a sense of origins, even more so if these Sephardim are themselves Latinos. The genre that has garnered more interest from non-Jewish Latinos has to be what the market has branded as “Latino alternative.” Viewed by some as a subgenre of rock en Español, Latino alternative combines “alternative rock, electronica, metal, New Wave, pop rock, punk rock, reggae, heavy metal or ska with traditional Latin American sounds.”⁵⁸ The U.S.-American band *Hip Hop Hoodíos* – with an “h,” making “Hood,” and a pun with the Spanish *Judío* – is the one band

that presents itself as avowedly Jewish and Latino. Created by Josh Norek, who goes by Josué Noriega, and Avraham Velez, who is Jewish with Puerto Rican origins, Hip Hop Hoodíos plays not only hip hop, but also funk, rock, klezmer, and punk rock. Their publicity material boasts that “from Latin funk to klezmer to cumbia to straight-up rap, Hip Hop Hoodíos are a cross-cultural phenomenon. The band is almost certainly the only act in the history of recorded music to have co-headlined both the Salute to Israel Parade AND the Barrio Museum in Spanish Harlem.” Their songs combine three or more languages, and their audience is, according to them, half Anglo and half Latino, which in itself shows their ability to crossover.

East coast and West coast also draw different audiences: in LA, many Latinos; sometimes half of the audience is Chicana. In New York, they draw what Norek calls “a Jewish hipster Upper Westside crowd.”⁵⁹ The Jewish members of their audience also vary. Abraham Velez comments on how “there’s an older generation Sephardic community,” usually attracted by their rendition of “Ocho Kandelikas,” as well as “a younger set of people who are like me: part of the family is Jewish, part of the family is non-Jewish Latino.” He adds, “And I think for them, there’s a certain coming-out feeling about it.” If the metaphor of “coming out” is useful for people from mixed families, it is even more apt to describe crypto-Jews from Mexico and New Mexico who identify with the Hoodío’s combination of Jewishness and Latinidad and reach out to them through appreciative fan letters.

Such an association gives a Sephardic bent to my description, and one might be tempted to think that the Hoodíos repertoire is mostly Sephardic, and that is not really the case. While Jewish, nothing makes it Sephardic, with the exception of “1492” and “Ocho Kandelikas.”

“Ocho Kandelikas” is a fascinating case of traditionalization of the new. It is a favorite of many Ladino performers, but it also makes the crossover to performers who usually have nothing to do with Jewish music. The Portland-based international and multilingual band Pink Martini, for example, turned the song into a bolero and included it in their nondenominational holiday album *Joy to the World*. “Ocho Kandelikas” then, figures in the repertoire of Jews and non-Jews, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, and makes its way into a repertoire recognized simply as “Latino.” It is, in a way, so ubiquitous that its origins are lost and are unrecognized by many. As such, for those who are not aware of its history, the song becomes synonymous with the version they hear: Many fans of Hip Hoodíos think it is an original song, composed in “a punk-hop groove.” For many (though not all) Sephardic Jews and Sephardophiles, who recognize the melody and the words, the song is

considered old and traditional, part of a tradition that has been transmitted for five hundred years. The song is, in fact, quite modern, having been written around thirty years ago, in the United States, by Flory Jagoda, who is originally from Vlacenica, Bosnia. Jagoda also performs traditional songs, but she has created new melodies and lyrics, enriching the Sephardic repertoire and contributing to the literature in Ladino, and ultimately, to the future of the language, with original compositions.

Ironically, even though almost every Ladino singer has one, the most popular version of “Ocho Kandelikas” is that of the non-Sephardic but Jewish and Latino group Hip Hop Hoodíos. Ethnic “complexity” and a good position in the iTunes Latino charts (18) seem to do more for the general exposure and preservation of the Ladino repertoire than many artists who are explicitly concerned about Ladino language maintenance and Sephardic cultural revival. One of these artists is New York-based Sarah Aroeste, a classically trained singer and leader of a Ladino rock band. She has recorded three albums with traditional Ladino songs translated into a contemporary and “funkier” (also described as “sassy, edgy”)⁶⁰ style, where different sounds and genres are mixed, and instruments alien to the Turkish or generally Eastern musical tradition, such as electric guitars and bass, are introduced and cohabit with the oud and the dumbek. Aroeste is deliberate in her project of updating the tradition, making it relevant for the new generation of American Sephardim, for whom the language and the music are for the most part relegated to the past.

At the same time, Aroeste tries to draw a broader audience, outside the Jewish world, be it by her musical choices or by her collaborations with other artists, such as the Cuban composer and band leader Roberto Rodríguez (who, himself, by the way, has an album titled *Timba Talmud*). Like many other Ladino singers of today,⁶¹ Aroeste seeks to make Ladino music contemporary, speaking to different musical genres, or, as she puts it, “fusing the tradition with more modern sensibilities.”⁶² At times the search for a new sound might lead, counterintuitively but not unusually, to a return to older musical genres, such as the flamenco – which, even though registered only in the eighteenth century, is recognized to be a descendant of musical forms marked by common Jewish and Moorish experience in Andalucía. Aroeste achieves this in her music as well as Yasmin Levy, from Israel, with her album of Ladino songs heavily marked by flamenco.

Among the most original of her albums is *Gracia*, where Aroeste not only radically reinterprets some traditional songs, introducing new sounds to this music,⁶³ but also sings several original songs that she herself wrote in Ladino, in a conscious attempt to endow the language with new content and thus to

develop and preserve it. She defends her efforts toward language preservation and cultural innovation:

There's such a fear that Ladino culture is dead. But we can't preserve a culture by living backwards. We need to be creating new art in the culture to move it forward. Ladino is a treasure trove of ideas and beauty. It's meant to be on a wider world stage.⁶⁴

Aroeste also uses her music in this album to discuss feminism and establish several alliances: Her title song, "Gracia," about Doña Gracia de Nasi, is in her words a "Ladino feminist anthem of sorts," and it opens and closes with a vocal sample from a 1971 Gloria Steinem speech. In another track, "La comida la mañana," Aroeste has the spoken-word poet Vanessa Hidary read her poem "Wild Women." Hidary, also known as "Hebrew Mamita," is herself an intriguing cultural figure. From a Syrian family, she had a grandmother who spoke Arabic, not Ladino, but she identifies as a "cultural bandit," someone who can be "loyal to different ethnicities."⁶⁵ In her transethnic project, besides being Jewish, she then becomes "Puerto Rican" (the "Mamita"). Her art forms are slam poetry and hip hop.

The combination of Ladino songs, issued in great part from the tradition of the Spanish Romancero, and other genres such as the flamenco creates a productive situation not only in marketing, or artistic and aesthetic terms, but also in relation to a politics of identity. Finding common Spanish roots in musical genres also emphasizes common origins and cultural elements that both Sephardic Jews and Latinos share. Cuban-born Roberto Rodríguez, who grew up among Ashkenazi Jews in New York, speaks of "[his] connection with the Sephardic Jews of Spain"⁶⁶ and claims that "under the skin of many Latin Americans there's something in there . . . Conversos, Marranos." Sara Aroeste emphasizes "the commonalities of the Cuban experience and the Sephardic experience," both marked by "feelings of displacement, separation from family, wanting to return home." No doubt that marketability contributes to this possible overlapping, as it broadens the potential audience and increases Ladino singers' chances of being played in more commercial radios. As a result, singers have a chance to leave the walls of (Jewish) communal radio and effectively cross over. There are, however, other ramifications of this generic experimentation and fusion. It reveals and enhances common origins of the Sephardic tradition with genres that somehow made their way to Latin America and informed many musical and dance traditions now recognized as "local" or "typical." Awareness of such commonality helps break down barriers between groups, forging new alliances, and usually broadens

the popular perception of Jews. It increases visibility and broadens ethnic recognition.

It is fair to say that Ladino music only gets radio time in general – that is, non-Jewish radio – when included in programs about Latino music. Notices or articles about Ladino music, if not on the Jewish press, usually appear under a so-called Latino section. The “outer” world sees commonalities between the Sephardic and the Latino communities, whether for the same Spanish origins, the common language, or the musical genres – such as flamenco or Andalusian sounds – that enter the “local” genres. The larger exposure, the radio time, and the broader recognition better guarantee the survival of the Ladino language and the Sephardic cultural tradition, which has to be adapted and transformed in order to be preserved. “Our work is not so much about the past as it is about the future,”⁶⁷ affirms Aroeste. “I believe that in order to preserve our culture, we also need to be writing and producing new work.”⁶⁸ The cross-fertilization of different cultures contributes to the creative work in both of them, expanding their repertoires. This mutual exchange between the groups contributes to a renewed creative surge.

The dialogue and the joining of forces between Latinos and Ladino speakers or cultural producers contribute to the efforts for Ladino preservation. Furthermore, such collaboration renders Sephardim visible to the general public, broadening American perceptions of what is Jewish that extend beyond mainstream Ashkenazi identity. By identifying common interests and cultural elements, the two groups – which, in some cases, overlap – are able to recognize each other as minorities in the United States, strengthen their bonds, and forge alliances. Moreover, the connection between Sephardim and Latinos further leads to a connection between Sephardim and Latin Americans as well, promoting a more global and plural view of history and ethnic formation, with a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of people and their complex migratory, historical, cultural, and power relations.

It has been a century since Levantine Jews arrived in the United States and imported with them the Judeo-Spanish language. Ladino was spoken in the streets and the homes of Sephardic Jews in New York, Portland, and Seattle. A lively Ladino press was established, in which the use of Hebrew characters was a way to mark the community as Jewish, facing the general disbelief and dismissal from the much larger Ashkenazi communities. With the Americanization of the immigrants, Ladino gradually converted into a language of memory, nostalgia, and family origins, becoming not much more than an “accent,” a mark, a “color.” A few poets turned to the language, if only to bemoan their distance from it. But in a reinvigorating development – which,

alas, will not restore Ladino as an organic language of daily use – other artists and poets are creating original texts in Ladino and making it available to new generations, raised with very different cultural expectations. In this new moment of the language, bridges between Sephardic Jews and Latinos in the United States seem to be proliferating. In fact, in the early years of immigration, even as Jews shared spaces with Cubans and Puerto Ricans in Spanish Harlem, the links were not so strong: If Ashkenazim failed to see Sephardim as Jews, Puerto Ricans failed to see them as Hispanics. Today, American Sephardim, consciously updating the tradition and working toward Ladino preservation, feel they have a remarkable opportunity to embrace both their Jewish and their Hispanic character.

Notes

- 1 Reproduced in Joseph M. Papo, *Sephardim in Twentieth Century America: In Search of Unity* (San José, CA: Berkeley Pelé Yotetz Books/Judah L. Magnes Museum, 1987), 25.
- 2 Cited by Marc Angel in *La America: The Sephardic Experience in the United States* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1982), 33.
- 3 Cited by Marc Angel in *La America*, 53.
- 4 Cited in Joseph M. Papo, *Sephardim in Twentieth Century*, 44.
- 5 Aviva Ben-Ur affirms that the column's "main intention was to advocate the acculturation of Sephardic women into American society and to criticize Sephardic vices through social satire." In "'We Speak and Write This Language against Our Will': Jews, Hispanics, and the Dilemma of Ladino-Speaking Sephardim in Early-Twentieth-Century New York," translated and Annotated by Aviva Ben-Ur, *American Jewish Archives* 50:1–2 (1998): 131–142.
- 6 Farewell, farewell, Salonika, city once filled with Jews, / Today, you remain almost deserted. / Yesterday you were a city filled with beauty. / Today, you fill with bitterness all who look upon you. // Farewell, city yesterday beautiful, / Today, melancholy and noxious, / City that yesterday flowed with milk and honey, / Today, gushes forth anguish and bile. // Translation by Moïse Rahmani, cited in Moïse Rahmani, "Amiga Serena, Penseros de Nieta-Installment #11, Lamentasyon" in *Los Muestras*, 2002, <http://sefarad.org/lm/048/page42.html> (accessed on November 15, 2014).
- 7 The subscriber who is the first to pay, / Who proves to be a sincere friend / Will receive a valuable gift, / Will receive a great bravo (my translation). Reproduced in Berta Savariego and José Sánchez-Boudy, *Vida y cultura sefardita en los poemas de "La Vara"* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1987), 28.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 9 In "Grocería moderna," *ibid.*, 30.
- 10 Any wedding is well served / By this famous patisserie / Its sweets make life happier / More so to a newborn and she who bears him (my translation).
- 11 Halls are rented for the congregations / Hazans are hired for the prayers / Many work and run / Up and down the stairs / Who goes up the staircase of the unfortunate? /

- Who knocks on the door of the wretched? / Nobody. In this place there is very little to give and much to pray for // (my translation), *ibid.*, 31.
- 12 Tell my dark-haired one that I am going, / The ship has set sail and is leaving. (Translation offered by the author in a footnote.)
- 13 Léon Sciak, *Farewell to Salonica* (New York: Current Books., 1946), 4.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 129.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 130.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 72.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 72.
- 22 Emma Adatto Schlesinger, "La Tía Estambolia," in *Sephardic-American Voices: Two Hundred Years of a Literary Legacy*, ed. Diane Matza (Waltham, MA: Brandeis, 1997), 73.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 79.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 79.
- 31 With thanks to Paul Bessemer.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 34 Vicki Angel, "Falling in Line," *Seattle Review* 18 (fall 95/ winter 96): 35–36.
- 35 It should read "merengue," and "Querida mía, she purred, *preciada de mi corazón*."
- 36 In Diane Matza, *Sephardic American Voices*, 151.
- 37 The first artist to record Ladino songs in a "folk song" style (in 1958, as Gloria Levy), DeVidas Kirchheimer writes novels and short stories. Today she is a frequent user of the electronic site Ladinokomunit'a.
- 38 Gloria DeVidas Kirchheimer, *Goodbye, Evil Eye* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 2000), 128.
- 39 See preface in Gloria DeVidas Kirchheimer, *ibid.*, xiv–xv.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 127.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 126.
- 42 Reference to the verses of "Arboles lloran por lluvia": *Arvoles lloran por lluvia / y montañas por aire / Así lloran mis ojos / por ti querido amante*. *Ibid.*, 127.
- 43 In Diane Matza, *ibid.*, 88.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 88.
- 45 Victor Perera, *The Cross and the Pear Tree: A Sephardic Journey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 4.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 9.

- 48 Ruth Behar, *Traveling Heavy: A Memoir between Journeys* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 25.
- 49 Ibid., 25.
- 50 See Marc D. Angel, "Judeo-Spanish Drama: A Study of Sephardic Culture," *Tradition* 19:2 (Summer 1981), 182–185. Published by Rabbinical Council of America, JSTOR (accessed August 11, 2014).
- 51 See Aviva Ben-Ur, "Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) Theater in the United States," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. March 1, 2009. Jewish Women's Archive (Viewed on November 8, 2013) <<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/ladino-judeo-spanish-theater-in-united-states>>.
- 52 There is a 1996 video version of this play.
- 53 The troupe was active between 1994 and 2004.
- 54 Mara Lockwandt, "Theatre for Survival: Language and Cultural Preservation in the Work of the Ladino Players," *Platform* 4:2, Mapping Performance, Autumn 2009, 22–36: (25).
- 55 http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Languages/Other_Jewish_Languages/Ladino/Today.shtml (accessed on February 8, 2008).
- 56 Judith R. Cohen, "Judeo-Spanish Song as Identity Marker, from Iberian Neo-Sephardic Activities to the Internet," in Hilary S. Pomeroy and Michel Alpert, *Proceedings of the Twelfth British Conference on Judeo-Spanish Studies, 24–26 June, 2001*. Vol. 3 of IJS Studies in Judaica (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill 2004), 159–168 (161).
- 57 Cohen, "E com razões de ladino," 2004, 159.
- 58 From Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin_alternative
- 59 NPR interview with Josh Norek and Abraham Velez. Transcript at <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=104378633> (accessed August 4, 2008). All the other quotes from Norek and Velez are from this interview.
- 60 See Ben Jacobson, *Jerusalem Post*, January 2, 2008.
- 61 Another band that modernizes Sephardic music is the indie rock band De León. Although it does not write original songs, the band bridges many divides, as it makes hipsters dance to songs in Ladino, with music that combines "junk drums, Appalachian banjo, Morricone guitars and mariachi trumpets." De León is also the first Ladino band to crowdsource its playlist, in their last album, *Tremor Fantasma*. See <https://www.storyamp.com/dispatch/85c1839d035794aa9a221f20e5ad6ce4> (accessed on November 8, 2014).
- 62 See www.saraharoeste.com
- 63 The *Forward* staff writes that "the Ladino songstress developed a style that borrows liberally from genres ranging from dream-pop to gothic metal." <http://blogs.forward.com/the-artys-temite/167508/forward-fives-in-music/#ixzz3La89Nk5N> (accessed January 14, 2013).
- 64 In Emma Alvarez Gibson, "You Just Don't Do That: Sarah Aroeste and Ladino Rock," *Jack Move Magazine* (September 2012). <http://jackmovemag.com/2012/09/13/2890/> (accessed January 14, 2013).
- 65 Bridget Kevane, "Passing – Performer and Poet Vanessa Hiday, the Hebrew Mamita, Mashs Up Her Jewish Identity with That of a Puerto Rican – and Unsettles Stereotypes," *Tablet* (January 25, 2012).

- 66 This and the following quotes from Rodríguez and Aroeste are from a radio interview: “Roberto Rodríguez and Sara Aroeste,” *Beyond the Pale* (WBAL, Pacifica Radio Network, New York: WBAL), May 10, 2009.
- 67 Radio interview on *Beyond the Pale*.
- 68 Robert Fulton, “Sarah Aroeste Brings Ladino Tunes to Jewish Music Fest,” *Washington Examiner*, April 28, 2013 <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/sarah-aroste-brings-ladino-tunes-to-jewish-music-fest/article/2528259> (accessed December 10, 2014).

Writing and Remembering Jewish Middle Eastern Pasts

DALIA KANDIYOTI

Literary and cultural studies of Jewish experiences have been fertile ground for developing widely influential ideas about memory and history and have played a central role in understanding and shaping the “global memory boom” of recent times. Despite the encompassing term “Jewish” in formulating “Jewish memory” and a Jewish “usable past,” however, the overwhelming focus has been on Jewish experiences of Eastern and Western European/Ashkenazi origin. The traditions, stories, and collective memories of the vast world of Jewry from the eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, North Africa, as well as Asia and Africa have not, for the most part, been the subject of Jewish studies practiced in the United States. Yet, while Europe, and especially France with its wealth of North African Jewish literature, is a better-known locus, the Americas have also been the site of an increasingly flourishing cultural production of music, poetry, memoir, and fiction with origins in Judeo-Muslim worlds. In literature, the anguish of exile, gendered injustice and trauma, Jewish-Muslim relations, cosmopolitanism, and colonialism are rendered in multinational, multicultural frameworks, in idioms ranging from elegiac to analytical and in experimental, magic realist, fabulist, and autobiographical forms. This essay will address one part of this rich cultural production by analyzing recent prose narratives of Jewish Egyptian and Iranian worlds published in the United States.

The stories of Middle Eastern Jews not only are relevant to the most vital concerns of global Jewry about its relation to the region but could also present a way of rethinking perceptions of intractable historical conflict and irreparable difference that help perpetuate conflict. In the United States, the contemporary associations of the Jewish community with white and European groups as well as the distancing of the Arab and Muslim world as a result of Israeli politics preclude affiliation with a history in the Muslim world.¹ Yet fictions and memoirs, whether or not they resist or comply with dominant ideologies around Israel-Palestine, the status of Middle Eastern Jews, or the U.S.

involvement in the Middle East, feature multiple, often internally contradictory strands of cultural and political reflection and present a complex picture of Jewish Egypt and Iran and the American migration and exile experience, changing the terms of both “Jewish” and “American” literature.

Many of these works are remembrances, with coming-of-age memoirs perhaps the most widely published and read. Some reasons for their popularity include the hypervisibility of the Middle East in public consciousness and popular culture because of the wars of recent decades,² the memory boom and the rise of confessional culture, the continued success of America-as-promised-land stories, and, importantly, the need to document Middle Eastern Jews absent from most representations of history and memory, especially given the frequent pronouncements about the communities’ demise. Often written by “1.5-generation” subjects who migrated as children, the stories of finality and loss also dovetail with the coming-of-age narrative’s prominent featuring of endings. The sense of mourning is present even in culinary memoirs, which have become common in Sephardic and Arab Jewish letters, as in the title, for example, of Colette Rossant’s *Memories of a Lost Egypt: A Memoir with Recipes* (1999).³ The prominent Jewish Egyptian author André Aciman has argued on behalf of memoirists that “it is not truth we’re after; what we want instead is something that was always there but that we weren’t seeing and are only now, with the genius of retrospection. Here we enter the spectral realm of quantum mnemonics. There is no past; there are just versions of the past.”⁴ Yet, whether as a result of or despite the intentions of their authors, memoirs are frequently presented as testimonials and complex stories of loss converted into political tools to assert a “neolachrymose” version of Jewish history “under Islam,” thereby establishing a parallelism with the fate of European Jewry and promoting an equivalence between Palestinian claims on Israel and Middle Eastern and North African Jewish claims on Arab countries. The memoirs do not simply “add” to a canon a Jewish literature published in the United States but are inducted into political discourses in ways that other U.S. Jewish writing is not. Memoirs allow visibility of Jewish Middle Eastern stories; at the same time, the genre opens the door to furthering political claims that negate both non-European Jewish and Palestinian continuity.

Remembering Cairo and Alexandria

Although Egyptian Jewish writing is located, deliberately or not, in the midst of ongoing political and cultural conflict and is often reduced to this conflict,

the memoirs and novels by André Aciman, Lucette Lagnado, Joyce Zonana, and Gini Alhadeff as well as many others published since the 1990s have also made remarkable contributions to U.S. and world readers' understanding of loss and exile. All Cairo- or Alexandria-born Egyptians who found themselves in the United States as children or young adults, the authors write in allusive prose thick with longing, against a bygone panorama of intertwined linguistic and cultural worlds. Egypt's Jewish population, about eighty thousand in the mid-twentieth century, not only was a part of the cosmopolitan segments of the country's major cities but was diverse in itself, including working-class Jews of Karaite or other origins whose primary language was Arabic, multilingual Jews with Ottoman origins in Turkish cities such as Izmir and Istanbul, Syrians and other Levantines settled in Egypt, and those with French, English, or Italian citizenship, or no citizenship at all. The millennial existence of the community, including descendants of ancient indigenous Jewry, twelfth and then nineteenth century Sephardic settlers from Iberia and the Ottoman Empire, and Ashkenazi immigrants, came to an end with anticolonial movements, the establishment of Israel, and pan-Arab nationalism between the postwar period and the aftermath of the Suez crisis.⁵ Those who emigrated to the Americas and published books about their lost Egypt are mostly born into upper-middle-class means with familial memories of comfortable to luxurious households in Westernized neighborhoods and education in foreign languages in British or French Catholic schools, while Arabness was viewed as the province of lower-class Jews.

Cosmopolitanism's Homes

Aciman's 1995 memoir *Out of Egypt* had a unique impact on the literary memoir scene and launched awareness of an interest in Jewish Egyptian and Middle Eastern narratives. The author's formative years in Alexandria, from birth in 1951 to exile in 1966, are told through a lyrical, yet jaundiced perspective on his milieu after the 1952 Free Officers' Revolution and the Suez Crisis, when the position of the elites and non-Muslim or foreign populations changed drastically. Aciman's text, both a meditation on and an account of displacement, features a well-off family with origins in Turkey and Italy. Belonging is formulated multiply. References to lost, abandoned, and adopted homelands of Spain, Italy, Turkey, and Egypt abound. Languages are not simply "native" or foreign, as each has its own valence, use, and place: from the comfort zone Ladino of the elders to the home idiom of French, pidgin, and scorned Arabic as well as the aspirational English of the "mimic men" and

mimic women of colonialism. There is a telling conflict within the family between the Arab Levantine and the Judeo-Spanish-speaking Turkish sides, even as the family's tensions increase watching most of their fellow Jews depart while they stay and hedge, becoming some of the last to leave. Their prosperous lives and clamorous Eurocentricity are brushed with Jewishness, the very identity element that is both defended and degraded by the Jewish characters themselves.

Remembering Egypt for many authors involves remembering a lost Egyptian cosmopolitanism, with its showcase the luminous Alexandria, historical site of glory and learning, lost library, and origin of the Septuagint as well as colorful histories of Jews, Greeks, and Italians. A much used yet compelling concept, cosmopolitanism has been variously linked with elite domination and minority circulation, colonialism and subversive universalism, Jews and also Muslims, empires and enclaves. Jews have been associated as much with religion as with their status as "strangers" (Simmel) or "conscious pariahs" (Arendt) modeling a "supra-national quality" and an "inborn and evidently irreparable cosmopolitanism" (Bauman).⁶ But in the West, the Jew in question has been the urban European and not the Sephardi/Eastern/Levantine, who is more frequently perceived in terms of primitivism. In Egypt, the otherwise-European status accorded to many Jews, though certainly not all, assured them a significant place in colonial cosmopolitanism. While there are debates as to whether Alexandria is "the paradigm case of Middle Eastern cosmopolitanism"⁷ and its cosmopolitanism one of "peaceful coexistence" or simply the province of colonial minorities,⁸ many scholars also argue that Egypt's cosmopolitanism had multiple founts: It is not only European, but also "deeply rooted in the classical Arabo-Islamic cultural heritage."⁹

However, the U.S.-based memoirists' awareness of this depth of historical modes of coexistence is only scantily felt in works that center on European Egypt. While there are Jewish Egyptians who have written in Arabic about non- "cosmopolitan" contexts,¹⁰ the authors of the widest renown in the United States tell of childhoods that exclude the majority Arab component of urban life. It is mostly Westernized urban spaces, rituals, and commodities and not Arab culture that constitute the nodes of nostalgia for cosmopolitanism. Aciman's revelation of the absence of Arabs and Arabness from his milieu led one critic to assert that the author was "out of Egypt" long before his exile.¹¹ "To remember Alexandria without remembering myself in Alexandria longing for Paris is to remember wrongly," Aciman writes. "Ours was merely the copy of an original that awaited us in Europe. Anything Alexandrian was a simulated version of something authentically European."¹²

Colonial longing and mimicry are featured in many autobiographies and novels with origins in upper-class and/or minority groups in Egypt, Jewish or not.¹³ For example, in his memoir *Out of Place*, Edward Said writes of the “artificial quality” of his family, one “determined to make itself a mock little European group despite the Egyptian and Arab surroundings.”¹⁴ But while Said’s own powerful anticolonial perspective is central to his understanding of the situation, Lucette Lagnado, for example, is uncritical of the kings Fouad and Farouk, because Jews were privileged and “cossetted” under their rule. Yet Lagnado also makes frequent references to long-standing Judeo-Muslim coexistence that is not simply attributable to neo/colonial privilege. Of Cairo, she writes in her first memoir, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* (2007), “in a way of life the world has now forgotten, this quintessentially Arab city was supremely accepting of the Jewish inhabitants.”¹⁵ She explains that in Sakakini, her mother’s modest non-European neighborhood of origin, and elsewhere, her eccentric grandmother was tolerated, whereas in her exile in Israel, the old woman received “far less kindness, less of that wondrous quality the Egyptians call *rahma* – mercy, compassion – than she had encountered in Cairo at the hands of Arabs.”¹⁶ Despite such declarations and Aciman’s often frank exposure of his family’s diasporic adaptability at the expense of both Jewish and Arab cultural validation, in most memoirs the decline narrative of a lost cosmopolitanism after Arab nationalism is prominent. Clearly, the elision or deliberate distancing of Arab literature, language, and culture challenges authors’ bemoaned lost cosmopolitanism, an exclusionary one, after all, despite claims of universal inclusiveness.

After Egypt, many found a home in the United States, but it is exile and not settlement that largely defines the identities found in these works. Of course, “home” itself was never uncomplicated: Colonialism, Westernization, or gender and religious status led to a sense of belonging that was often uncategorizable. Lagnado, whose Western education distanced her from Arabic, her father’s mother tongue and grandmother’s only language, remarks on her “foreign” status everywhere: as a non Arabic speaker in Egypt, as someone from Egypt in France, and in the United States as a person from Cairo and Paris.¹⁷ Yet, these Jewish Middle Eastern authors’ fictions and memoirs bespeak a complicated nativeness and sense of home in the Middle East, sharpened in U.S. exile. Joyce Zonana’s *Dream Homes* (2008) is in great part about the compensation for the loss of such belonging in Cairo through homes found in Brooklyn, Oklahoma, and New Orleans, whose layout, furnishings, and spirit, substituting for the exile’s lack of heirlooms, the author describes in loving detail.

For Egyptians in diaspora, Passover is, unsurprisingly, a trope, as its observance involves reflecting from afar on double exile from both ancient and modern Egypt. “In Brooklyn,” Lagnado reports, “our holiday had become not a celebration of the Exodus from Egypt but the inverse – a longing to return to the place we were supposedly glad to have left.”¹⁸ Aciman explains that in fact the irony in the annual holiday celebration of the exile from Egypt *in* Egypt had never occurred to his family during his childhood.¹⁹ But once their homeland became an inhospitable place and Jewish Egyptians were caught between Israel’s and the Arab world’s unforgiving nationalisms, wars, and Israel’s covert operation in Egypt in the “Lavon Affair,” conditions changed. He reports of post-Suez seders: “After almost three centuries of tolerance, we found ourselves celebrating Passover the way our Marrano ancestors had done under the Spanish Inquisition: in secret, verging on shame, without conviction, in great haste and certainly without a clear notion of what we were celebrating.”²⁰

The invocation of historical crypto-Jewishness is evocative of more than one aspect of Jewish Egyptian life and its aftermath. To describe exile, Aciman coins “Marranism of time” to refer to the act of “living doubly,” drawing an analogy between the doubleness of some Iberian converts, publicly Christian but secretly Jewish, and that of exiles, whose double consciousness oscillates between here (in exile) and there (home).²¹ Like *Marranos* living in “double time” (“real” time and the time in which they burrowed), his own parents decided to “lie low” (stay), rather than act (leave) even when the future looked bleak and most others had left Egypt. Here, Aciman participates in recent discourses of “the Marrano as metaphor,” the historical crypto-Jewish condition as analogous to assimilation and dual identities produced under modernity.²² However, conversion is not only a part of the Sephardic past and a metaphor for the present, but also an important feature of more recent times. In Gini Alhadeff’s variegated and not completely exceptional family, with origins in Livorno, Rhodes, and Alexandria and sojourns in Japan and Nigeria, it is the father who decides to convert, partly out of Italophilia and also because of his brother’s capture in Rome and deportation to camps. Growing up Catholic in Alexandria, the author does not find out she is Jewish until age twenty in New York. As well, Alhadeff’s cousin becomes a monsignor; Colette Rossant’s mother converts to Catholicism and baptizes her daughter; and Lagnado’s Jewish family includes a priest.²³ Perhaps the most outré specimen of conversion is in Aciman’s *Out of Egypt*: Ugo da Montefeltro, a powerful stockbroker born Hugo Blumberger in Czernowitz, who ends up in Egypt purchasing an Italian passport, changing his name twice after anti-Semitic incidents to the

French and Italian versions of “Bloomberg” (Montfleury and Montefeltro). Ugo, the rakish, bon vivant “fop,” converts to Greek Orthodoxy after the rise of anti-Semitism in post-Suez Egypt, ending his days in penury but in the safety of a final turn: to Islam and Egyptian citizenship.

Conversion, occurring variously as survival strategy and civilizing mission, arises within manifold contexts of Eurocentric cosmopolitanism, which is, despite claims otherwise, religiously marked as Christian, as well as because of the experience of the Holocaust, and later, postcolonial nationalism. What is deemphasized through the Europeanization and various conversions is the exile and exclusion of Arab-Jewish continuity. As we see in the memoirs, however, the dissociation of Jew and Muslim is never complete, the Europeanization never fully authentic externally and internally. Contradictory perceptions of the Jewish self as deficiently Western or decidedly Levantine and native appear and disappear at different junctures, as our memoirists show us. These oscillations, sometimes expressed in conversions, evoke Freud’s narrative of the mixed origins of Jews and Egypt in *Moses and Monotheism* (1937). As Edward Said observed in *Freud and the Non-European* (2003), “in excavating the archeology of Jewish identity, Freud insisted that it did not begin with itself, but rather, with other identities (Egyptian and Arabian).”²⁴

Such uncomfortable alterities are at the heart of Egyptian Jewish writing, with historical and political circumstances making the legibility and promise of their inconsistencies very difficult. Zonana is explicit about the incongruities between her own origin stories and the Passover story of oppression and exile: Egypt as the space of oppression and slavery of the remote “ancestors” is starkly different from “the land of sunshine and ease” of her own family.²⁵ As a child, she cannot locate “the particularity of Egypt . . . in all its different names – the *Mizraim* of Jewish tradition, the *Misr* of contemporary national politics, or the lost colonial *Egypte* of my parents’ still-bright dreams.” The conflict among the ritual, the political, and the familial within Egyptian exilic consciousness is ongoing–illuminated but unresolved in literary remembrance.

“America,” Exile Space

In Lagnado’s *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* (2007), some of the most poignant words are not in English. The phrase “Aller sans retour” refers to the final document promising to leave and never to return, which the family signs as its members board the ship that carries them into exile. The next words in a different language are the father’s cry in Arabic as they depart: “Ragouna Masr,” or “take us back to Cairo,” which he repeats during the entire journey

to Paris, having lost his customary decorum. In New York, a social worker opens war on the infirm and broken Leon, who “was by no means convinced the values of New York trumped those of Cairo. . . . He preferred being an old Egyptian to a new American.”²⁶ The Egyptians’ “settlement” becomes an accentuation of their exile and minoritized difference. In a scene familiar from early Jewish American immigrant novels (most memorably by Anzia Yezierska), where Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europeans confront the assimilated, patronizing German Jew, Leon faces “the wrath of Sylvia Kirschner.” At a distance from most of the trappings of European identity made in Egypt, the English-, French- and Arabic-speaking Jewish Egyptian of Aleppan origin dissolves multiple cultural founts into one, telling the Jewish social worker from an alien culture, “We are Arab, madame.” At the most humiliating point of his exile, Leon claims ownership in diaspora of what he can no longer be at home: an Arab. Of course, public acknowledgment of Arab identity in the United States is also akin to a taboo and nearly nonexistent. “We were all Arab Jews, a culture most Americans found puzzling and that even other Jews viewed with suspicion,” explains Lagnado; “We had no choice but to band together, and seek comfort and protection among one another, shunning the world outside. . . . I never had a conversation or played a game in the courtyard with an Ashkenazi child.”²⁷ Lagnado, Zonana, and many Middle Eastern and North African Jews in the United States experienced depreciation and a narrow, prejudicial demarcation of Jewishness by their American coreligionists. With their devalued cosmopolitanism and scorned Arabness, a parochially defined Jewish Americanness extended, instead of terminating, exile.

Curiously, Lagnado explains away the ambiguities surrounding her father by analogizing his relationship to the social worker with the conflict “between the United States and the Muslim world decades later, when the United States would seek to spread its belief in freedom and equality only to find itself spurned at every turn by cultures that viewed America as a godless and profoundly immoral society.”²⁸ Lagnado exposes the complexity of affiliations and politics in telling vignettes throughout her two books but withdraws it in such observations that reduce global and national politics to colonial differences and clashes of civilizations. Such discrepancies in politics and affinities inform many Jewish Middle Eastern narratives.

A fictional work that further revamps the canonical “Jewish immigrant story” is Aciman’s 2013 novel *Harvard Square*, about an Egyptian Jewish doctoral student at Harvard meeting his Tunisian Muslim doppelganger, who drives a taxi. In this novel, the colonial cosmopolitanism that informs Aciman’s earlier work is transported to the exilic space that is “America.” Ironically, the

opening words are “Cambridge was a desert,” a pointed reference to the stereotyped landscape of the region of origins of the major characters. The real “desert” is Cambridge, because it is the space of the unnamed narrator’s exile and the antithesis of the (radiant, littoral, cosmopolitan) Alexandria of his youth. In Cambridge, there is no relief from summer heat, tedium, provincialism, and an aloof, scornful, privileged professoriate, until he frequents Café Algiers, the gathering place of misfits like himself, and meets Kalaj (named after a machine gun for his rapid-fire speech), an obnoxious, educated but misemployed Muslim Algerian, who delivers a whack to the protagonist’s house-of-cards life, jolting him out of his cocoon of alienation and abjection. The Arab-Jewish opposition falls away instantly as the two men bond over their impossible colonial dream: French culture as a bridge: “We reinvented France,” with background music and a few iconic foods, the narrator reports, knowing full well of course that theirs was a “France that does not exist” and is in fact another “house of cards” but serves as an easy site of fantasy in an American culture that is inauthentic and unconvincing, encapsulated by Kalaj’s insistent characterization of it as “ersatz.” Moreover, the narrator remarks, “we were . . . each other in reverse.” Kalaj is a mirror: “I was, it occurred to me, no different from Kalaj. Among Arabs he was a Berber, among Frenchmen an Arab, among his own a nothing, as I’d been a Jew among Arabs, an Egyptian among strangers, and now an alien among WASPs, the clueless janitor trying out for the polo team.”²⁹

As in many narratives of doubling across class and race, the passive, Prufrock-like narrator is reinvigorated by Kalaj’s brashness, uninhibited ideas, and, especially, amorous practices. He imagines he is “cut of the same mold” as Kalaj in colonial North Africa, although it is clear that his own class background and sense of entitlement, despite their common diminished circumstances, are rather different. The narrator likes in Kalaj what others do not, because “perhaps he was a stand-in for who I was, a primitive version of the me I’d lost track of and sloughed off living in America. My shadow self, my picture of Dorian Gray, my mad brother in the attic, my Mr. Hyde, my very, very rough draft. . . . Me without books, without finish, without a green card. Me with a Kalashnikov.”³⁰ But the relationship is short-lived. The very familiarity the narrator is drawn to stokes the fear that the Orientalist vision of himself as an Eastern, Egyptian Jew equated with the backward and crude Muslim Arab might be true, or, more importantly, be recognized by his superiors at Harvard. Despite his longing to acknowledge the Arab, defined as primitive, in his fragmented self of multiples, he must abandon Kalaj in his anxiety to succeed. Both the “civilizing” colonial project of uniting fragments of “the

East” under the banner of European culture and the American dream of egalitarianism are exposed. As well, the twin fates of the Muslim and the Jew are severed by more than one force: the old colonial divisions that privileged certain groups and brought some Jews closer to the West than other “natives” in addition to the racial and class underpinnings of the American dream.

Writing Returns

If the culturally and psychically unified self is a broken dream of exile, the trope of return, embedded in the *nostos* (return home) of *nostalgia* as the cure for displacement, is no less complicated in Jewish Egyptian writing. Perhaps because permanent returns have been made politically impossible because of political conflicts, they are key tropes in memoirs and literary essays about revisiting Egypt, often after many decades, and with much desire and trepidation. “Never straightforward,” write Marianne Hirsch and Nancy Miller, “the return to the generational family is always dependent on translation, approximation, and acts of imagination.”³¹ In many narratives of return, the most significant moments occur less in the sites of individual memory or family history than in the collective, representative lieux of the Egyptian Jews. Cemeteries and synagogues, some of them in ruin, are the central topoi of the exiles’ return. The quest to reach these sites, often locked up and difficult to find, leads to disillusion and even despair. As Svetlana Boym has observed, return “is far from circular; it is riddled with contradictions and zigzags, false homecomings, misrecognitions.”³² For Aciman, neither return nor nostalgia is “restorative.”³³ They only underline the fugitive nature and truthfulness of the memory of the past: “Alexandria wouldn’t exist if memory hadn’t invented it,” he writes in “Temporizing.”³⁴ Being a Proustian, he knows there is nothing to “recover,” given that the objects of nostalgia are but inventions, and the act of recollection itself impacts the content of memory. Or, as for Jacques Derrida, recollection “contaminates” memory. Aciman, who has written extensively about this intertwining of “internal” and “external” memory, nevertheless deploys the decline narrative, as do so many others, and is deeply disappointed by the little he finds of his mythified Alexandria in the actual (current) city.

Zonana resists the impulse to depict return as, in Boym’s words, “a second exile.”³⁵ Having contextualized the rift between Arab and European Egypt with reference to colonialism, she writes of striving to repair the divide upon her first return after the age of fifty. Working with “postmemory”

fed by parents' stories "so powerful, so monumental as to constitute memories in their own right,"³⁶ she also finds a mirror in her Muslim Egyptian friend, who is her generous guide, and on the streets of Cairo. As she looks for a home in the city's Muslim and Jewish culture, she not only retraces steps to her familial and Jewish community landmarks but also connects to the larger society by, for example, adapting to the city's Ramadan rhythm through the observation, however partial, of the fast. In Zonana's writing, which is a remembrance of suppressed lives and personal and communal connections unfulfilled in the past and lost in the present, writing and returning are also gateways to repair, as are the sprinkling of acts, friendships, and rituals. The kind of healing she finds in Cairo is also connective and not only personal. After much effort trying to locate it, Zonana finds the Rambam synagogue of the Harat al-yahud (Jewish quarter), constructed where Maimonides himself lived. She mourns its state of ruin, symbolic of the decline of Egyptian Jewry. But she also discovers that the synagogue was a place Muslims, Jews, and Christians went to in order to be healed by Maimonides's spirit. Lagnado also reports visits there, to "the Jewish Lourdes," as a young girl with an illness, as well as to the Ben Ezra synagogue, known to be graced by prophets and to have contained the incomparable *geniza* of ancient documents. Also documenting the Egyptian Jews' current struggles to keep artifacts at home in Egypt, Zonana attempts to recreate a heritage on new terms, Judeo-Muslim and traditionally Jewish, lost to colonial education and exile. Unique among the U.S. Egyptian memoirs for its desire to repair the rift among majority and minority Cairenes, Zonana rethreads the broken historical fabric and draws attention to the *longue durée* of intertwined Egyptian and Jewish heritage as well as creating new experiences, memories, and bridges across the shattered present of Judeo-Egyptian life.

Looking Back at Iran

Like Jewish Egyptian writing, Iranian writing in diaspora is permeated with the discourse of exile. Previously boasting 100,000 members, the community of more than two thousand years saw the departure of more than 60,000 in the late 1970s and early 1980s, most of them ending in Los Angeles. Jews have been living in Persia since the times of Cyrus the Great, that is, before Christianity and the arrival of Islam, speaking varieties of Judeo-Persian and other local languages, coexisting with Muslims, surviving the Safavid dynasties despite discrimination during this era, witnessing the intervention of Western Jews

exemplified by Alliance Israélite Universelle schools, legally equalized and living well under the last two shahs, with the majority fleeing after the Islamic revolution. Iran is still home to about 30,000 Jews, the biggest group in the Middle East, with Turkey's community following behind. Iranian Jewish writing in the United States in the recent period stands out both in quantity and in its "special" status in the space created by the intersection of history, foreign policy, and literature. Because of this conjuncture, there has been in recent years a telling explosion in the memoir genre by Iranian Americans, including Jewish Iranian Americans, most of whom speak to Iran-U.S. relations from their experiences of the end of the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the revolutionary years as children or adolescents or "postmemories" of this period through their parents.³⁷ The Jewish narratives need to be viewed in the context of the cultural production, from poetry to television, cinema, and digital storytelling by other Iranian Americans of the past decade,³⁸ rather than solely from within a Jewish or Jewish American tradition.

Iranian American narratives have mapped the road in diverse genres from "Tehran to Tehrangeles," and, sometimes, the paths back and forth between their countries, beginning with the 1978 *Foreigners* by Nahid Rachlin, considered a "pioneer" of "Iranian immigrant literature."³⁹ More recently, memoirs have garnered the most attention. While Marjane Satrapi's works, especially *Persepolis I* (2004) and *Persepolis II* (2005), have been the most popular and visible, a spate of publications by U.S.-based authors, mostly women of Muslim and Jewish background, have contributed to the growth of Iranian American literature, such as Azad Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), Azadeh Mavehi's *Lipstick Jihad* (2005), Tara Bahrapour's *To See and See Again* (1999), Galare Asayesh's *Saffron Sky* (2000), Roya Hakakian's *Journey from the Land of No* (2004), and Farideh Goldin's *Wedding Song* (2004). "So What's with All the Iranian Memoirs?" asks Gina Nahai, a prolific Jewish Iranian fiction writer, in the title of a short review article in which she asserts that it was the freedom of exile that allowed women to express themselves. Other critics have answered this question more amply: Gillian Whitlock and Nima Naghibi have interpreted Iranian women's memoirs as a literature of trauma – specifically, the trauma of revolution and subsequent exile. The theory of latency prominent in Holocaust trauma studies is the explanation offered for the dormancy of trauma within the diasporic Iranian writing community, with what Sidonie Smith terms "scar literature" appearing as late as decades after their immigration.⁴⁰ Drawing on Suzanne Henke's notion of "scriptotherapy," Naghibi explains the appearance of these memoirs thirty years after the traumas as a "gathering of the wounded" (Erikson)

and “a working through of revolutionary trauma” and the loss of home. Some narratives, such as by Bahrapour and Asayesh, are infused with nostalgia for early childhood and the subsequent tale of decline, while others, like Farideh Goldin’s, chronicle struggles of women from very early on under Jewish and Muslim patriarchy. Books like Goldin’s also register gendered and class traumas of the *prerevolutionary* period with some others demonstrating (but not focusing on) the injustices and cruelties of the shah’s regime. Critics have argued that because of the class and ideological status of their authors and the experiences they narrate, such memoirs, called “neo-Orientalist” by Ali Behdad and Juliet Williams (with Azar Naficy as the representative case),⁴¹ reinforce already existing perceptions of Iran; downplay the destructions wrought by intervention, colonialism, and the shah’s regime; and implicitly legitimate future interventionist foreign policy.⁴² Iranian memoirs published in the United States are not “embargoed literature,” to use a term by Edward Said;⁴³ instead they serve as a “soft weapon” in the “engineering of consent.”⁴⁴ That there are so many autobiographical writings by and about women also has to do, of course, with the way in which gender, particularly Muslim gendering, has shaped debates about Muslims and the West’s “responsibility” and legitimacy in saving Muslim women from Islam (though not from poverty or war).

Writing Struggle

In Jewish narratives as in the non-Jewish, gender, the axis of civilizational discourses about Iran and the Middle East, is key with many texts populated by women at the mercy of Jewish and Muslim patriarchal attitudes, which are in some cases compounded by class status. Farideh Goldin’s *Wedding Song* is a memoir focused on women’s plights, especially the fate of her mother, who, at the onset of Farideh’s menstruation, laments her daughter’s joining the ranks of the unfortunate. For the young Farideh, even Esther, the iconic queen of Persia, is depreciated: She is disappointed by a childhood visit to the shrine known as Esther’s tomb in Hamadan, which to her looks decrepit and not nearly dignified enough for the regal Jewish woman. In the novels *Harem* (2002) by Dora Levy Mossanen and *Caspian Rain* (2007) by Gina Nahai, girls who were given away at young ages fiercely resist submitting their daughters to the same fate but often fail. Even Roya Hakakian’s family, a happy and comfortable one until the shah and the postrevolutionary period separated them, is undergirded by women’s invisible labor and suffering. Gendered

miseries both within the Jewish family and in the larger society predate the revolution.

These depictions are often deployed to solidify a Western sense of superiority and political legitimacy over Jewish and non-Jewish “Eastern” subjects rather than to deepen a grasp of the issues past and present. Yet, the texts, wittingly or not, expose the ways in which one type of oppression overlaps with another and the discrepancies of the various social and political positions, thus allowing for a less restricted understanding of gender and belonging. At the opening of *Wedding Song*, the young Farideh’s father burns her precious books in order to prevent her from becoming too educated to find a husband. Later, he also burns his younger brother’s antishah literature as well as poetry and painting in order to protect the young man. These two “protective” acts scream for a connection the author does not make. Further, though Goldin presents herself as a grateful subject of U.S. benevolence, she reports that her generation in Iran, while not present at the 1953 U.S.-backed overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh and crowning of the shah, was “haunted” and “experienced this humiliating loss of self-determination through our parents’ memories. Despite the presence of the Shah’s ‘ears’ everywhere, there were those who whispered about our puppet king in the hands of the British and Americans, who had conspired to take over our lives, make us shadows of ourselves, to control us.”⁴⁵ Yet, the global diffusion of the American dream’s blandishments also had a hold on them. Like her, fellow high school students were antishah, on the one hand, and dreamed of America on the other: “I grew up in the pull between these two ideologies.”⁴⁶ The opening of the book, contrasting “Western freedoms” with the “lulling effect of Persian traits, customs, and ethics” in an unabashedly Orientalist manner, is in disjunction with this more complicated picture Goldin offers of Iran, albeit in glimpses. Despite the wounding discrimination that Goldin and others describe with reference to anti-Jewish taunts and exclusionary Shiite purity practices, the Jews of Iran appear to be fully, if not always equally, Iranian in autobiographical writings. Iranian Jewish works are differently valenced from the Egyptian ones, affirming a nativeness, vexed or not, that is less evident in the U.S. Egyptian narratives. Even when the Jewish Iranian texts expose Judeophobia in their societies of origin, current clichés about the eternal enmity between Jews and Muslims and the association of Jews with the (Christian) West despite the European Holocaust as opposed to their distance from the (Muslim) East, which have much currency and often pernicious political aims and consequences, do not hold up under scrutiny.

Reciting Iran

Iranian Jewish works are replete with descriptions of Judeo-Iranian customs, languages, practices, from the Shirazi Jewish language “Judi” and *hamam* rituals to aromatic cooking and Tehran urbanities. Significantly, the universal participation in Persian literary culture, most prominently through the knowledge and recitation of poetry, is also widely evident. For example, traditional wedding songs that lend Goldin her title are poetry sung by women. In exile in the United States, the tradition is broken by assimilation, not only into American society but also into the dominant Jewish community. As a result, an aunt who knew the most songs and was popular at weddings back in Iran refuses to sing because she has adopted, like so many Middle Eastern and North African Jews in the United States, Eastern European Jewish customs and restrictions, such as dress (she sports a wig) and the prohibition against *kol isha*, women’s voices in the presence of men, a custom unknown in Iran. When her aunt finally consents to recite a poem, she whispers it, but it falls on the proverbial deaf ears of the bride, who does not understand “the Farsi poem in its Shirazi Jewish rhythm.”⁴⁷ Such scenes reveal the vagaries of American forgetting, via assimilation to religious Ashkenazi or wider Anglophone U.S. cultures, and the attendant, perhaps ironic restrictions on women and cultural losses in the land of freedom. These losses are profound for all Iranians, to whom, Hamid Dabashi has asserted, poetry is essential to remembrance: Iranians “remember their past as the poetic resonance of their present – in fact, of their presence in history.”⁴⁸ The Persian national poet Hafez makes appearances in many exile fictions and memoirs. In Hakakian’s memoir, when a groom visits his prospective bride’s family, the family members try to outdo each other in their knowledge and appreciation of Hafez. Like Hakakian’s father, who displays Hafez on his mantelpiece, “as a flag in every schoolyard, equal tokens of patriotism,”⁴⁹ Isaac Amin, one of the main characters in Dalia Sofer’s novel *The Septembers of Shiraz* (2007), has on his desk a photo of the Hafez Mausoleum with the caption about Shiraz, its location, as the “City of Poets and Roses,” a description antithetical to the city of terror Tehran is about to become for Amin and others arrested for their anti-revolutionary bourgeois existence. We learn later from Shirin, his daughter who studies the *ghazal* – Persian lyric love poetry – while languishing at home thinking of her jailed father, that Isaac recited “the master” of this poetic form “after dinner, while shaving, or on long drives, when he would break the silence with a verse. Sometimes her mother would join him turning the poem into a duet.”⁵⁰ His only book in prison, the Qur’an, gives Amin some comfort,

and he recites from it as from his poetry. In *The Land of No*, the love of literature and learning saves Hakakian from the fate suffered by other classmates after the revolution, protected by her teacher, who admires her writing. More poignantly, her father, whose passport is confiscated, spends days composing a poem for the officials blocking his exit from an increasingly inhospitable Iran and produces a sonnet on “redemption through knowledge and piety as prescribed in the writings of Imam Ali,”⁵¹ ingratiating himself through his own love of literature to those who ran a country he did not want to lose. The love of books and Persian poetry marks a particular Jewish integration into Iranian culture.

Despite cultural unifiers, the authors depict a society divided like any other. Almost all the works treat aspects of the class differences and divisions within Iranian Jewry as well as the wider Iranian society. While Goldin makes frequent references to anti-Semitism, she notes that as a child she is struck by how, unlike her own less privileged family, the wealthier Iranian Jews seem and act entitled and not oppressed. As in other societies, the degree of assimilation, which the last shah facilitated for many Jews, is the determinant of status. In Gina Nahai’s novel *Caspian Rain*, the wealthy, snobby Arbab family that the unfortunate Bahar marries into has almost entirely abandoned religious observance other than Yom Kippur and favors the Iranian national holiday of Newroz, while Bahar’s own lower-class family remains observant. Even in Goldin’s more traditional Shiraz, the younger generation does not understand the remnants of Judi, the Shirazi Jewish dialect spoken by the elders. *The Land of No* makes evident the higher degree of comfort the family enjoys as urban, educated Jews, with minimal religiosity and Passover seders that are occasions for much mirth and pleasure. The Hakakian family celebrates Newroz with Muslim friends.

The political affiliations of the younger generations also reveal the identification with the liberatory national projects of Iran. In Goldin, Sofer, and Hakakian’s works, family members are persecuted or fear for their lives because of their antishah beliefs and activities. Hakakian herself reports how, as a girl, she waits for “the Agha,” the Ayatollah Khomeini, as a savior who will achieve equality and justice for Iran, and whose return from exile was, she is told, prefigured by Hafez centuries ago in a famous *ghazal*. As with many other Iranian exile memoirists, her coming of age coincides with the revolution and the subsequent failure of ideals⁵² as well as increasing Judeophobia, and later, of course, exile. Evidence of anti-Semitism predating the revolution includes Reza Shah’s association with Hitler, which is occluded in some narratives that praise this shah for abolishing legal discrimination against Jews

and other minorities, but is included in Nahai's *Caspian Rain*, where the main protagonists live across the street from where a Nazi couple, two of the many operatives settled in Tehran during Reza Shah's alignment with Hitler, commit suicide in the postwar period.

Transition, Rupture, Imagination

Dalia Sofer's prize-worthy novel *The Septembers of Shiraz* stages some of the complexity of Jewish assimilation under the last shah and postrevolutionary turbulences in a novel about a wealthy Tehrani family, the Amins, and their milieu. In separate chapters, the point of view alternates between those of the imprisoned father, Isaac Amin the gemologist; the daughter and mother, Shirin and Farnaz, in their luxurious home; and the son, Parviz, studying in New York, having become an impoverished foreign student after his father's imprisonment. Sofer captures the bourgeoisie that had flourished in the prerevolutionary period at the point of its demise, captivity, and exile as she portrays an Iran in transition at the cusp of the war with Iraq. The prison, a home in peril, and the American space of exile that structure *Septembers of Shiraz* are the sites of some of the main events of many recent Iranian dissident lives. Sofer's book dovetails with Iranian American literary and political writing as well as with other "post-revolutionary" exile writings in the United States such as those of Cuban Americans. In its focus on the middle classes, nostalgia, and exile as well as in its politics vis-à-vis U.S. foreign policy on the "homeland," Iranian American literature shares much with Cuban American writing. Moreover, the structure of *The Septembers of Shiraz* with its alternating perspectives and locations at home and in exile, unpretentious lyricism, and uniform style and voice shaped to a great extent by the use of the present tense is strongly reminiscent of Cristina Garcia's novels about Cuban exiles. U.S. diaspora and exile aesthetics, Iranian culture and politics, and Jewish identity dilemmas all coexist in Sofer's acclaimed novel.

Much of the trouble that visits the Amin family emerges from its privileged class status under the old regime, although Isaac's incarceration is due to his visits to Israel, which mark him as a possible spy. Most of the interrogation with the prison guard revolves around their class differences, with the resentful Mohsen accusing Isaac of quietism under the shah and a decadent lifestyle based on exploitation. Isaac's limp defense is that he only wanted to enjoy life, having pulled himself up from modest beginnings. Class differences and bourgeois oblivion are also salient in the "home" chapters, in which Isaac's wife,

Farnaz, patronizes her longtime servant, Habibeh, a Muslim, accusing her of parroting postrevolutionary “Marxist gibberish” when the housekeeper challenges the order of things for the first time. Parviz, the bewildered son in New York, loses class status sharply as support from home dwindles, and he finds himself indebted for lodgings and work to a Hasidic family. Unlike in the Egyptian memoirs, the Middle Eastern–Eastern European Jewish encounter is not portrayed in terms of exclusion or stark difference. Zalman Mendelsohn, Parviz’s landlord, is quick to make a connection when Parviz explains his state of arrears in rent payment by revealing his father’s situation: The Hasidic man shares his own father’s and “the Rebbe’s” (spiritual leader Menachem Schneerson’s) father-in-law’s incarceration in Leningrad, dismissing Parviz’s response that Isaac is “not a practicing man,” with “Yes, yes, it’s different. . . . But in the end, it’s the same.”⁵³ Zalman suggests the universality of anti-Jewish motives, eliding the differences between the Russian and Iranian revolutions and between religious and secularized Jews. Parviz in Brooklyn encounters absolutist Jewish particularity and globalized anti-Semitism. Apparently convinced by this new framework, Parviz sees his own story differently: “Zalman’s past vaguely comforts Parviz, making him see his own pain as only a blemish on the faded map of history. Others before him had endured grief, and others after him will, as well.”⁵⁴ Yet, with this statement Parviz both accepts and de-Judaizes Zalman’s positioning of historical Judeophobia with the image of universal suffering. Parviz is skeptical about the Hasidic commitment to Jewish identity and religion at the same time as he is attracted to it. The Mendelsohn family is mysterious to Parviz, yet it also represents an authentic, uncompromising Jewishness whose lack he experiences for the first time, as he observes an old passerby with “the fringes of his *tallit* peering from the bottom of his jacket a reminder, to himself and to the rest of the world, of who he is.” Parviz, here standing for a generic (not necessarily Iranian) assimilated Jew unsure of his identity, views his own survival tactics, becoming a “shop boy” for Zalman as both “a necessity and a betrayal – of his past, his family, his father.”⁵⁵ In Sofer’s novel, unlike in Egyptian memoirs, Brooklyn is the equalizing space for Jews, who become exposed to each other’s difference but still unite through their (Jewish) exile, whether from Cracow or Tehran. Although he resents being at the mercy of a lower-class family, he develops an interest in their daughter, onto whom he projects a “talismanic” quality: Thanks to her “purity” of belief and behavior, she would be his “liaison to God” to save his father from prison.

While Parviz is trying to quell his misery in the company of Jews whose religiosity would have “repelled him” in the past, his younger sister, Shirin,

at home gets closer to Leyla, a Muslim girl her own age but of a lower class, whom she would not have befriended before the revolution. Leyla's family's dietary and religious customs remind Shirin of Habibeh's, as the only exposure to lower-class Iranian life the Amin girl had had was through their housekeeper. The equalizing impulse of the Iranian revolution that unites the girls is not unlike the Jewish Brooklyn melting pot. Shirin's coming of age is marked by this relationship as well as her father's incarceration. But the friendship cannot last, because the new regime, like the old, divides Iranians by their former class status as well as by their support for or dissidence against the regime. In New York, ultimately, the gap between the Mendelsohns and Parviz is too wide for a union, but in this hopeful novel, the secular-religious and Middle Eastern–Eastern European breaches are mended, and the Amin family stands to reunite, after Isaac endures torture and loss of property but also bribes his way out of prison. The revolutionary Iranian and the Jewish rift is left as an open sore.

Whereas much Iranian exile writing is devoted to “documenting” the Iran of the past and the exilic experience through realistic fiction and nonfiction, other Iranian Jewish authors in the United States draw on the fantastic. For example, Dorit Levy Mossanen's *Harem*, a novel written in a fablelike, popular style, features a Jewish girl named “Gold Dust” who leaves the Jewish ghetto to become a favorite in the shah's palace, a site of the sex life of eunuchs, an ancient Zoroastrian fortune-teller, a one-eyed rabbi, and a fiercely protective, protofeminist Jewish mother, the official “bundle-woman” to the palace, who vanquishes Tamerlane in her bed with mint. In novels such as *Cry of the Peacock* (1991), *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* (1999), *Caspian Rain*, and *Sunday's Silence* (2001) written in a different register, Gina Nahai includes historical, supernatural, and fantastic elements found in other female-centered diasporic writing in the United States. In her work, women characters have fantastic powers of perception and fly to freedom from the Jewish ghetto, whose inhabitants believed the visiting Lubavitcher rabbi's claim that women are the source of evil and that silence is their only cure. As with many U.S. Iranian narratives, Nahai's first books trace the exile in Los Angeles. The author has explained that these novels are based on oral histories of Iranians she recorded over seven years after finding little material in libraries on Iranian Jews (Darznick and Nahai). Nahai has also distinguished herself by imaginatively linking the Americas to the Middle East. In addition to contributing to the narrative of Iranian exile, she has treated minoritization, religion, and regionalism in two continents in *Sunday's Silence* by braiding a little-known East and West, the remote Kurdish Iran and Appalachia, through parallels of stigmatized ethnicity and religion in both regions. Her Appalachian Christian and Jewish and

Muslim Kurdish characters belong to multiple worlds through migration, conversion, and hidden identities.

Conclusion

Fictional and autobiographical remembrances compel us to consider how memory work about acknowledging, interrogating, and commemorating the past is informed by what is “spectral,” ghostly, and “hauntological” (Derrida) in ways that can pressure and challenge the present. Many Jewish Egyptian and Iranian Jewish narratives, constituted by contradictions that make for intricate and difficult texts, face but also eschew the challenge to undermine present orthodoxies about Jews and the Muslim world. Acute and poetic self-awareness on a personal and community level is often accompanied by historical and political blind spots. The partition mentality that pervades our time regarding Muslims and Jews is dislodged to a certain extent by the implicit and explicit evidence of long-standing interweaving, transculturation, and affective ties. Yet this very undoing of divisive assumptions is frequently foreclosed by the reinscription of colonial and neocolonial discourses. On one hand, Jewish Middle Eastern writing enriches the U.S. literary canon with the relatively rare and skillful portrayal of Jewish-Muslim confluences, a topic on which there is very little research and that merits a lot more attention. This writing also signals the varieties and differences embedded in the Eurocentric term “the Middle East” we work with, made obvious in the juxtaposition of just two frames of reference, Egypt and Iran, which are distinguished as we have seen by the writing of different senses of “nativeness,” cultural affiliations, and relation to European languages and cultures. On the other hand, the authors can also lapse back into the binaries that undermine complexity and the potential to revolutionize our thinking about Jews, Muslims, the Middle East, Israel, Palestine, and U.S. literature. At the same time as they vociferously signal the end of Jewish life in the Middle East, Jewish Egyptian and Iranian texts reinscribe Jews into the Muslim world in the U.S. imagination, leaving open, whatever the authors’ particular intentions and attempts at closure, many questions about the lost realms of millennial Middle Eastern Jewish culture. In Sofer’s *Septembers of Shiraz*, the young Shirin remembers that when she asked her father how a *ghazal* about beauty and time ends, Isaac explained, “There is no end, Shirin-jan. That’s the first thing you should learn about ghazals. There is no resolution”⁵⁶ – fitting final words also to describe the complex politics of writing Jewish Middle Eastern pasts in the United States today.

Notes

- 1 See Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Dalia Kandiyoti, "What Is the 'Jewish' in Jewish American Literature?" *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 31:1 (2012); Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, *The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2007).
- 2 Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat, eds., *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
- 3 Colette Rossant, *Memories of a Lost Egypt: A Memoir with Recipes* (New York: Clarkson, Potter, 1999).
- 4 André Aciman, "How Memoirists Mold the Truth," *Opinionator* (blog), *New York Times* (April 6, 2013), http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/06/how-memoirists-mold-the-truth/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0.
- 5 Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
- 6 On "the stranger" see Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," in *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); on "the conscious pariah," see Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees," *Menorah Journal* 31:1 (1943): 69–77; and on Jews and cosmopolitanism, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 52–53.
- 7 Sami Zubaida, "Cosmopolitanism and the Middle East," in *Cosmopolitanism, Identity, and Authenticity in the Middle East*, ed. Roel Meijer (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 1999), 26.
- 8 Khaled Fahmy, "For Cavafy, with Love and Squalor: Some Critical Notes on the History and Historiography of Modern Alexandria" in *Alexandria, Real and Imagined*, ed. Anthony Hirst and Michael Silk (London: Ashgate, 2004), 263–280.
- 9 Joel Beinin, *Dispersion*; Hale Halim, "Latter Day Levantinism or Polypolis in the Libretto of Bernard de Zogheb," *California Italian Studies* 1:1 (2010), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4t3m9vc>
- 10 Deborah Starr, *Remembering Cosmopolitan Egypt: Literature, Culture and Empire* (London: Routledge, 2009).
- 11 Adam Zachary Newton, *The Elsewhere: On Belonging at a Near Distance* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 231. Aciman himself declares that "being in Egypt was an endless process of pretending I was already out of Egypt" and "dreaming Europe in Egypt" without explicitly contextualizing Eurocentrism in terms of colonialism and severance from Arab culture in the essay "Afterword: Parallax" in *Alibis: Essays on Elsewhere* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011), 186–187.
- 12 Aciman, "Afterword: Parallax," 187.
- 13 Starr, *Remembering*, 76.
- 14 Edward Said, *Out of Place: a Memoir* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 235.
- 15 Lucette Lagnado, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit: A Jewish Family's Exodus From Old Cairo to the New World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 28.

- 16 Ibid., 99.
- 17 Ibid., 116.
- 18 Ibid., 263.
- 19 Andre Aciman, "In a Double Exile," in *False Papers: Essays on Exile and Memory* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 108.
- 20 Ibid., 109.
- 21 André Aciman, "Temporizing," in *Alibis*, 64.
- 22 See Elaine Marks, ed., *Marrano as Metaphor: The Jewish Presence in French Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Yirmiyahu Yovel, *The Other Within: The Marranos: Split Identity and Emerging Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
- 23 Gini Alhadeff, *The Sun at Midday: Tales of a Mediterranean Family* (New York: Pantheon, 1997); Rossant, *Memoires of a Lost Egypt*.
- 24 Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003), 44.
- 25 Joyce Zonana, *Dream Homes: From Cairo to Katrina, an Exile's Journey* (New York: Feminist Press, 2008), 88.
- 26 Lagnado, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*, 207–208.
- 27 Lagnado, *The Arrogant Years*, 118–119.
- 28 Lagnado, *The Man in the Sharkskin Suit*, 208.
- 29 André Aciman, *Harvard Square: A Novel* (New York: Norton, 2013), 85.
- 30 Ibid., 53–54.
- 31 Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller, "Introduction," in *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 10.
- 32 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 8.
- 33 Boym develops the concept of "restorative nostalgia" in *The Future of Nostalgia*.
- 34 Aciman, "Temporizing," in *Alibis*, 74.
- 35 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 8.
- 36 Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14:1 (2001): 9.
- 37 Nima Naghibi, "Revolution, Trauma, and Nostalgia in Diasporic Iranian Women's Autobiographies," *Radical History Review* 105 (2009): 79.
- 38 On media, see, e.g., Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Janet Alexanian, "Poetry and Polemics: Iranian Literary Expression in the Digital Age," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 33:2 (2008): 129–152.
- 39 See Persis M. Karim and Nasrin Rahimieh, "Introduction: Writing Iranian Americans into the American Literature Canon," *MELUS* 33:2 (2008): 7–16.
- 40 On trauma see Naghibi, "Revolution" and Gillian Whitlock, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
- 41 Ali Behdad and Juliet Williams, "Neo Orientalism," in *Globalizing American Studies*, ed. Brian T. Edwards, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 283–299.
- 42 See, e.g., Behdad and Williams, "Neo Orientalism"; Hamid Dabashi, "Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire," *Al-Ahram Weekly* 797 (2006), <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/797/special.htm>; Negar Mottahadeh, "Off the Grid: Reading Iranian Memoirs in Our Time of Total War," *MERIP*, September 2004,

- <http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/grid>; Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2008).
- 43 Quoted in R. Shareah Taleghani, “‘Axising’ Iran: The Politics of Domestication and Cultural Translation,” in *Between the Middle East and the Americas*, 291.
- 44 Whitlock, *Soft Weapons*.
- 45 Farideh Goldin, *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 42.
- 46 Ibid., 42.
- 47 Ibid., 194.
- 48 Quoted in Persis M. Karim, “Charting the Past and Present: Iranian Immigrant and Ethnic Experience through Poetry,” *MELUS* 33:2 (2008): 111.
- 49 Roya Hakakian, *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004), 70.
- 50 Dalia Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz: A Novel* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).
- 51 Hakakian, *Land of No*, 207.
- 52 Whitlock, *Soft Weapons*; Naghibi, “Revolution.”
- 53 Sofer, 83.
- 54 Ibid., 84.
- 55 Ibid., 88.
- 56 Ibid., 177–178.

The Ghost of the Holocaust in the Construction of Jewish American Literature

EMILY MILLER BUDICK

While the Holocaust has undoubtedly been a major feature in the construction of Jewish American identity, it has had a far less clearly defined role in the production of Jewish American literature. In the period immediately following the Second World War, there was considerable reluctance to write fiction or poetry about the Holocaust. This was the case for at least two major reasons. As many critics have argued, the production of a literary work about such horrific events seemed both inadequate to the task of representation and morally suspect. Aesthetic satisfaction and the kind of coherence and meaningfulness literary texts usually provide seemed anathema to the task of writing about so pointless and catastrophic an event as the Holocaust (Ezrahi, Rosenfeld, Langer, Horowitz, Patterson). In the United States, the imaginative use of the Holocaust experience seemed additionally problematical, because the Holocaust had not happened in America. Indeed, the United States was one of several important places of refuge for Holocaust survivors, as it had been earlier for Jews fleeing European pogroms and anti-Semitism. To be sure, some novels did, nonetheless, deal with the Holocaust. Popular works such as John Hersey's *The Wall* (1950) and Leon Uris's *Exodus* (1958), *Mila 18* (1961), and *QB VII* (1970) immediately come to mind. These early postwar fictions and their movie adaptations did much to spread popular knowledge of what had happened to the Jews during the war. But until the late 1960s, the Holocaust does not appear as a prominent subject of investigation, at least not in the fiction of the more prominent of the American authors. At this point, because of both transformations on the American cultural and political scene and historical events such as the Eichmann trial in 1960 and the 1967 Israeli war (which was presented as threatening a second Auschwitz), the Holocaust moved front and center, not only in general American Jewish consciousness (Hasia Diner), but also in major works of fiction by major Jewish American

writers. The Eichmann trial and the Six-Day War revived awareness of the Nazi genocide, not to mention of continued Jewish vulnerability, despite the establishment of the Jewish state and the successful absorption of Jews into the United States. It forged a sense of communal connectedness among Jews. Additionally, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the temporal distance from the events of the Second World War had begun to permit a greater freedom in engaging what had happened both to Jews and to other victims of German Nazism. As Jewish writers in the United States have become increasingly identified in public ways as Jews and as the production of ethnic fiction by other American groups has seemed to necessitate a similar move among Jewish American writers, the Holocaust has come to occupy an even more dominant role in Jewish American literature.

Even though many readers might dispute whether Philip Roth's rather scandalous, veritably sacrilegious *The Ghost Writer* (1979) is in any sense a work of Holocaust fiction, I begin my discussion of the Holocaust in American Jewish fiction with this book for two reasons. First, in my view, it is the American text that first establishes the Holocaust as a topic of serious philosophical and cultural discussion, *not* as a sensationalist and exclusively Jewish object of discourse but as a paradigm of the complexities of moral and aesthetic thinking. Second, it creates one of the dominant tropes that will accompany the Holocaust subject through its transmigrations and transformations in American writing: the idea of the Holocaust as a ghost. This ghost is often, like the Anne Frank in Roth's novel, a resurrected victim. It is also very often a writer. Hence Roth's title hints both at the authorial ghosts of the past *and* at the way in which contemporary authors can become the mere ghostwriters of the dead writers' (ghost writers') stories. Roth introduces what will become a recurring motif in Jewish American writing: the degree to which, in the view of its major authors, American Jewry (perhaps world Jewry) is haunted by a past that cannot easily be put to rest but that, in the view of the writers, must not be dwelled on generation after generation. Rather the past must be mourned and buried, even if never forgotten. Yet, at the same time that the literary texts criticize the obsession of the Jewish community, including some of its writers, with the suffering and persecution of the past, they themselves, in resurrecting dead figures from the past (such as Anne in Roth's novel), evidence their own participation in the Jewish obsession they condemn. The texts too are unable to escape these ghosts. They ghostwrite the ghost writers' (and other victims') stories. It is the failure to mourn properly the victims of the Holocaust and early Jewish victims of European violence that, in texts by writers such as Roth, Cynthia Ozick, Saul Bellow, Art Spiegelman, Nicole

Krauss, and Jonathan Safran Foer, seems to explain one dominant feature of the Jewish personality (at least as expressed through the characters in the fiction): a tendency toward melancholy. Ironically, this is a tendency that the texts themselves share. It is not in the least incidental to the story of such Jewish melancholy and the Holocaust in American Jewish literature that the psychoanalyst who defined the difference between mourning and melancholy was himself a Jew or that Freud had had his own experiences of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. However else Freud separated from his Jewish origins, he seems to have maintained a sense of the importance of the Jewish rituals of mourning (sitting shiva). How the American authors' texts move from a position of melancholic obsession with the Holocaust to a place of mourning its victims is one of the circuits in contemporary American Jewish Holocaust literature that I would like to trace in this chapter.

The Ghost Writer is the first of the nine books that will one way or another involve Roth's most prominent alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman. At the center of concern in *The Ghost Writer* is Roth's own troubled relationship with his Jewish readership. This troubled relationship begins for Roth with his earliest publications, such as the short stories and novella published in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959; many of the stories appeared in print earlier) and his novel *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). Even though these fictions do not deal primarily with the Holocaust (the one story in *Goodbye, Columbus* that might be considered a work of Holocaust fiction is "Eli, the Fanatic," while "Defender of the Faith" does allude to the Holocaust), the public condemnation by American Jewry of the fiction's representations of Jews had everything to do with the community's post-Holocaust defensiveness. Thus, to quote the accusation voiced in the novel itself against the protagonist Nathan Zuckerman by Judge Wapter: "Can you honestly say that there is anything in your short story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels?"¹ Like Roth's own earlier fiction, Zuckerman's recently published short story does not, in the least, concern the Holocaust. Yet, Wapter reads the story in the light of what happened to the Jews during the Second World War. His comment is only a slightly altered version of the kinds of condemnations Roth himself had received at the hands of his American Jewish constituency, as he records those reactions in *Reading Myself and Others* (1975). Roth's response to this attack against him is, in *The Ghost Writer* (as his protagonist puts it about himself), to produce a work of "fiction that of course would seem to them a desecration even more vile than the one they had read."² In this fiction Roth, albeit through his character Zuckerman, does nothing less than resurrect the dead Jewish icon Anne Frank.

The novel puts the Holocaust visibly at the center of the American Jewish community's consciousness of who it is and what it has suffered. The community is shown to project onto Anne its sense of itself as threatened, even in America. But so is Zuckerman shown by the novel to perceive himself as threatened, albeit by the Jewish community and not American anti-Semitism. Like the community, Zuckerman also projects his own concerns onto Anne. It is Zuckerman, after all, and not the community, who resurrects Anne, even though by the end of the novel, and certainly in the consciousness of his older self, who is writing the novel, he comes to recognize this. Zuckerman/Roth achieves a level of self-consciousness not necessarily reached by the community at large. "The loving father who must be relinquished for the sake of his child's art was not hers; he was mine," Zuckerman says of his Anne Frank, who is really Amy Bellete "(whoever *she* might be)."³ Zuckerman's desire to "wed" himself to Anne Frank, as Roth sets it up and as Zuckerman himself comes to see, replicates the community's own wish to marry itself to past suffering, to wed the ghost of the past. The Holocaust as an object of projection is not unique to Roth's novel. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Anya* (1974) is an early foray into what Walter Benn Michaels will criticize (among both Jewish and African American writers) as a tendency to transform history into memory, as if one were less a reader or listener of someone else's story than a witness to or actual participant of the events. This is precisely the fantasy of a protagonist like Eve in Emily Prager's *Eve's Tattoo* (1992), who tattoos herself with a victim's number in order to experience vicariously that other woman's horror. Similarly invested in witnessing through imagination – what Gary Weissman labels fantasies of witnessing – are the characters in Norma Rosen's *Touching Evil* (1989). But Roth's novel is the work of literature that early and powerfully situates the problem of projection and of transforming memory into history front and center in the literary work.

Like his character Zuckerman, Roth in this book is no less haunted by the ghost of the Holocaust than the community. He might wish already to give Anne the stage direction he assigns to his last book in the Zuckerman series, *Exit, Ghost* (2007), but that ghost is not so easily exorcised, and she is still with him years later, as she is in the other novels that re-resurrect her, such as Nathan Englander's *What Do We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank?* (2013) and Shalom Auslander's *Hope: A Tragedy* (2012). Indeed, the title *Hope: A Tragedy* reinforces the allusion to Roth's *Ghost Writer* by recalling the name of the wife of Zuckerman's Jewish author mentor, E. I. Lonoff, through whom Roth's novel also introduces such other Jewish authors as Bernard Malamud and Isaac Babel. There are many ghosts and ghost writers in Roth's

novel. Just as Hope Lonoff provides no escape for her husband, or, for that matter, for Zuckerman, from the tragedies of Jewish history (Amy Bellete will not provide escape for Zuckerman either), so, Auslander realizes three and a half decades later, no amount of assimilation can save American Jewry from the ghosts of their troubled past. As the protagonist of Auslander's novel puts it vis-à-vis his discovery of a very old Anne Frank in the attic of the house, "[a] Jew can't throw Anne Frank out of his house."⁴ Nor, for that matter, we discover, can a German: "How could a German throw Anne Frank out of his attic?" the former (German) owner of the house remarks "Can you imagine the headlines? *Nazis Strike Again? Local Man Makes It Six Million and One?* We've all got our crosses to bear," says the German to the Jew.⁵

What we are talking about when we talk about Anne Frank, to allude to Nathan Englander's short story of that title in the volume of the same name, is Jewish vulnerability, the thought that at any moment a second Holocaust can occur, even in the United States of America or Israel. Who will hide us?, worry the protagonists of both Auslander's and Englander's stories. To use an extremely harsh image from another of the Zuckerman novels, the Holocaust is something like a cancer in the Jewish brain. When Zuckerman's terminally ill mother is asked her name, she "instead of 'Selma' wrote the word 'Holocaust' perfectly spelled. . . . She had a tumor in her head the size of a lemon, and it seemed to have forced out everything except the one word. That it couldn't dislodge."⁶ The grandmother in *Hope* also suffers from what Auslander calls "not-traumatic-enough-stress disorder"⁷: She includes in the family photo album pictures of Holocaust victims and survivors who are not relatives. The diasporist alter-Roth in *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993) unkindly labels this "Holocaustomania."⁸ The ghost of the Holocaust possesses American Jewry as powerfully as any other psychosis we might define.

By framing the problem of obsession, Roth's novels and its descendants to some significant degree exceed the obsessions that they depict. This is the way of fiction: By making the invisible visible, the texts to some degree free themselves from the dysfunctions of their characters. Yet, the texts nonetheless themselves have the same Jewish obsession with the Holocaust that they critique. Indeed, the texts are doubly obsessed: They obsess over the public's obsession with the ghosts of the past. They are also possessed by those same ghosts themselves. The ghosts of the Holocaust haunt much of Roth's fiction. In *The Counterlife* (1986), the Holocaust is shown to haunt Zionism and Israeli politics. In *Operation Shylock*, Roth deals with the Demjanjuk trials, the Israeli secret service, and a counter Philip Roth, who is the book's diasporist. *Diasporism* (the belief that Jews belong, not in Israel, but in their

countries of origin in Europe) becomes the equally problematical, because equally Holocaust-infected, counterlife (mirror reversal) of Zionism. Hence the subtitle of the novel: *A Confession*. The real Roth would confess the problematics of living in the diaspora after the Holocaust. Roth's two allohistories, *The Plot against America* (2004) and *Nemesis* (2010), also bear the imprint of the Holocaust. The first novel imagines the election of the philo-German, anti-Semitic Charles Lindbergh as president of the United States instead of FDR. The other fabricates a polio epidemic coinciding with the Second World War and the extermination of the Jews in Europe, as if even a virus might, after the Holocaust, seem to be anti-Semitic. As in Saul Bellow's *Bellarosa Connection* (1989), in which a European Jew is saved by the intervention of an American Jew, whose life thereafter remains completely detached from that of the survivor, American and European history, in Roth's novels, have very little to do with one another. Nonetheless, the Holocaust seems to Americans an event that occurred to them and not only to their European relatives. As a consequence, it is not to be dislodged from their brains, with paralytic effects (such as borne by Bucky in *Nemesis*). When, therefore, as in Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), the reality of America and the Holocaust do coincide, the consequences are anything but encouraging. The Holocaust is the single lens through which Jews, like the half-blind survivor Sammler, see the world. Sammler's daughter, Shula, and his crazed Israeli son-in-law are no better than Sammler. Shula flirts with Christianity and Far Eastern religions in order to find spiritual solace. Eisen, the new Israeli to an exaggerated T, is ready to use lethal force at the slightest provocation. Although Saul Bellow's *The Victim* (1947) is not overtly a Holocaust novel, it is a book on which the shadow of anti-Semitism falls so heavily that, given its year of publication, it is difficult to imagine that the text is not Holocaust inflected, suggesting, perhaps, how deep the cancer lodged in the Jewish brain may go and how far back.

Jewish characters, and to some degree Jewish authors, see through what Cynthia Ozick calls in *The Messiah of Stockholm* (1987) the "murdered eye" of the dead "father."⁹ In that novel the orphaned survivor Lars fantasizes himself the son of the murdered Polish Jewish writer Bruno Schulz, and he searches for his dead father's lost manuscript *The Messiah*. Nor is *The Messiah of Stockholm* the only novel in which a protagonist is haunted by the ghost of the writer who was murdered by the Nazis in 1942 and/or by his lost (perhaps apocryphal) text. Like the ghost of Anne Frank, the ghost of Bruno Schulz, as Ruth Wisse first noted, haunts several major works of Jewish fiction. Wisse cites David Grossman's *See Under: Love* (1989) alongside Ozick's novel. I would add to that list Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution: A Story of*

Detection (2004), Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* (2005), and the "art work" (rather than a novel per se) by Jonathan Safran Foer entitled *Tree of Codes* (2010), for which Foer took Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934) and cut out words so as to produce a new novel. Another work in this series is the epilogue to the Zuckerman trilogy, *The Prague Orgy* (1985). The trilogy, which begins with Zuckerman/Roth's resurrection of Anne Frank, ends with the resurrection of Bruno Schulz.

Although *The Prague Orgy* ostensibly deals with an Eastern European writer under communism, the dead author whose works Roth's Zuckerman is entrusted with smuggling out of Europe is clearly a reincarnation of Schulz. The historical context of *The Prague Orgy* is not the Holocaust but, rather, the "Writers from the Other Europe" project, in which Roth was personally involved. This was a project in which manuscripts of Eastern European writers were smuggled out of communist countries to be translated and published abroad. Nonetheless, despite its lack of Jewish and Holocaust focus, the Other Europe project had very direct links to the Holocaust: Tadeusz Borowski's Holocaust text *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1959) and Danilo Kiš's Schulzian *Hourglass* (1972), not to mention Schulz's own *Street of the Crocodiles*, were all published in this series. The project even has bearing on *The Ghost Writer*, since Roth was traveling back and forth to Europe at the moment when Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) was being attacked as a forgery. Roth's *Ghost Writer* is well aware of the fact that historical documents no more secure the "truth" of the Holocaust than do fictions, such as his own (Budick). It is not coincidental, then, that in *The Prague Orgy* Roth locates the Holocaust at the center of this otherwise non-Holocaust event. In parallel with his projections onto Anne in *The Ghost Writer*, Zuckerman in *The Prague Orgy* projects his needs and desires onto the story of the East European writer. "Why am I forcing the issue?" Zuckerman asks himself concerning his pursuit of the papers. "What's the motive here? Is this a passionate struggle for those marvelous stories or a renewal of the struggle toward self-caricature? Still the son, still the child, in strenuous pursuit of the father's loving response? (Even when the father is Sisovsky's?)." ¹⁰ Insofar as it is Roth, not Zuckerman, who constructs the senior Sisovsky as a thinly veiled version of a Holocaust victim, Roth too is implicated not only in the ways that writers are endlessly projecting their own concerns onto those of others, but in the Holocaust-haunted, Holocaust-obsessed way that Jewish writers see the world. Indeed, the Holocaust ambience of Sisovsky tends to create a comparison between the oppression of Eastern European writers and the murder of Jewish writers during the war, in which the Holocaust trumps Eastern European repression in the postwar period.

"On account of this father," *The Messiah of Stockholm* records, "Lars shrank himself. He felt he resembled his father: all the tales were about men shrinking more and more into the phantasmagoria of the mind."¹¹ In this way he acquires "the face of a foetus; it was as if he was waiting for his dead father to find him, and was determined to remain recognizable."¹² There is implied here a regressive trajectory to Lars's life that might also be applied to Ozick's fiction about Lars, not to mention others in this literary tradition. In resurrecting the murdered Polish writer the novels dwarf themselves, acknowledge that the great suffering and the great story belonged to other Jews, now dead, such as Franz Kafka, whom Roth resurrects in "'I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting'; or, Looking at Kafka" (1973). Kafka might well have been the repeating ghost in Holocaust literature that Schulz becomes were it not for the fact that, as Roth states it, Kafka "died too soon for the holocaust."¹³

In Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* the Bruno who is the resurrection or ghost of Bruno Schulz is an actual character in the story, twice over. In the pre-Holocaust past, before the major character Leo Gursky flees Poland and becomes a refugee in New York City, Bruno is Gursky's best friend, also a writer like Gursky, and in many ways Gursky's double since both of them love the same woman, Alma. Alma is the muse and major character of Gursky's lost manuscript *The History of Love*, and she herself is doubled in Krauss's other major protagonist, Alma Singer. Alma Singer is named by her parents for Gursky's character. But the most prominent appearance of Bruno in Krauss's novel is as Gursky's closest companion after the war, in New York, when suddenly Bruno appears to Gursky's great surprise and delight. This Bruno, the reader discovers at the novel's end, is only a figment of Gursky's imagination, a resurrection of his murdered best friend as a response to Gursky's inability to mourn the past and establish a new life in America. Indeed, the novel raises the possibility that Bruno never existed at all. He is, as Gursky says to Alma Singer, his "greatest character."¹⁴ Gursky's words self-reflexively implicate Krauss's novel in the manufacturing of Bruno Schulz as a character – a charge that can be leveled against Ozick's novel as well. Indeed, insofar as both Gursky and Bruno are replicated in their friend Zvi Litvinoff, who takes Gursky's Yiddish manuscript to South America, where it is translated into Spanish and published under Zvi's name, there are a multitude of Brunos inhabiting and haunting Krauss's text. The circulation of Gursky's text, which achieves a further round as Krauss's novel itself, picks up another feature of the Bruno Schulz story: the loss of his supposed masterpiece *The Messiah*, the name of which is directly hinted at in Krauss's *The History of Love* by the references

to Alma Singer's brother, Bird, as a messiah. Schulz is also directly cited in Krauss's text.

There is no assuaging Gursky's melancholy, or that of the novel itself, and the resurrected dead writer is evidence of this. Michael Chabon's Bruno would seem to work very differently from Krauss's, but the melancholic mood that hovers over Chabon's *The Final Solution* is as much a factor of his Bruno or, rather, Brunos, as the melancholy of *The History of Love* is of Krauss's. One of Chabon's Brunos is the father of the child survivor Linus Steinmann. Dr. Steinmann is a psychoanalyst, and his survival, before his ultimate deportation, echoes Schulz's story, as does the life story of Sisovsky in *The Prague Orgy*. That story, as told by Jonathan Safran Foer in *Tree of Codes*, goes as follows:

Felix Landau, a Gestapo officer in charge of the Jewish labor force in Drohobycz, became aware of Schulz's talents as a draughtsman, and directed Schulz to paint murals on the walls of his child's playroom. This relationship brought Schulz certain privileges, most importantly protection. Like a modern Scheherazade, he was kept alive for as long as his creation continued to please his captor.

But on November 19th, 1942, Landau killed a Jew favored by another Gestapo officer, Karl Günther. Soon after, Günther came upon Schulz, on the corner of Czacki and Mickiewicz Streets, and shot him in the head. "You killed my Jew," he is said to have later told Landau, "I killed yours."¹⁵

Like Schulz, Dr. Steinmann is kept alive by a Nazi who needs his services, in Steinmann's case his psychoanalytic expertise.

Chabon's other Bruno is a parrot who can only repeat verbatim numbers that make as little sense as the Holocaust transports that, the reader comes to realize at the end of the novel, they encode. The parrot Bruno tells the story that the child survivor Linus Steinmann cannot tell. Bruno's telling is obsessive, not to mention inarticulate, "a series of uncanny noises, savage avian utterances devoid of any sense."¹⁶ This language, however, is, as the text says of the language of bees, not without meaning. Bruno's avian language also evokes qualities inherent in Schulz's writings (where birds abound; Krauss's character Bird also produces this reminder of Schulz): the fragmentary, jumbled, virtually incomprehensible qualities of Schulz's discourse. According to Chabon's text, the bird voices the Holocaust narrative that neither Chabon's Sherlock Holmes-like detective nor his novel of detection can deduce but, rather, only faintly detect.

Although there is no Bruno Schulz per se in Chabon's other Holocaust novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), his escape artist Henry

Houdini is described in physical terms reminiscent of Schulz. Furthermore, the book itself, with its emphasis on graphic art (a feature of *The Final Solution* as well, which actually contains drawings), calls to mind Schulz's other career as an artist. In *Amazing Adventures*, Joe Kavalier suffers from the same psychological condition as the child Linus in *The Final Solution*, Lars in *The Messiah of Stockholm*, and both Gursky and Mrs. Singer in *The History of Love*, not to mention Rosa in Ozick's other and even more major Holocaust novel *The Shawl* (1989), Vladek and Anya in *Maus* (1991), Benjamin in Dara Horn's *The World to Come* (2006), and George Weisz in Krauss's *Great House* (2010). This psychological condition is known in psychoanalytic literature as complicated mourning. Complicated or, as it is sometimes referred to, blocked mourning involves the internalization (introjection) of a lost loved object, who cannot be properly mourned because of ambivalences and unresolved issues in the relationship between the bereaved individual and the deceased. Incapable of mourning properly, the mourner attempts, through various means, to keep the dead person alive. Therefore, the deceased person remains a virtual entity within the mourner (a ghost as it were), producing the condition that Freud defined in "Mourning and Melancholia" as melancholy. In *Great House*, for example, the character Weisz sets himself the task of reconstructing, piece by piece, his father's study as it existed before the Nazis destroyed it and annihilated the rest of his family.

Among the Holocaust texts here considered, Ozick's *The Shawl* is the best representation of the phenomenon of blocked mourning. Thus, the shawl of the baby Magda, who is murdered in the work camp where she and her mother have been taken, becomes for the mother the fetishistic object, the idol (as Rosa's niece unkindly labels it), which evidences the mother's inability to mourn in such a way as to lay the dead child to rest. Because of this complicated mourning Rosa persists in continuously conjuring her dead daughter and entering into conversation with what readers understand to be not the living child, but part of Rosa's own consciousness that preserves the child as a living presence within her. Rosa would finish her unfinished business with her daughter – a virtually impossible and highly exhausting psychological task. It is a task that prevents Rosa from getting on with her life, until her newfound friend Simon Persky becomes the listener who might finally hear Rosa's pain sympathetically and without judgment. Of course Ozick's own conjuring of the shawl in both the novella entitled *The Shawl* and the short story that opens the novella bearing the same name raises questions about Ozick's own relationship to the Holocaust similar to the questions I have been raising concerning the other writers' critique of obsession and fixation. The literary work

entitled *The Shawl* is, like its major protagonist, haunted by the ghost of the Holocaust. Ozick claims never to have wanted to write about the Holocaust. But the story, she explains in an interview, came to her unbidden. The name of Ozick's protagonist, Rosa, conjures Ozick's Hebrew name, Shoshana. These two women both partake of and engage in dialogue with the ghosts of the Holocaust.

In Chabon's *Amazing Adventures*, it is the Czech survivor Joe Kavalier who cannot come to terms with the deaths of his parents and especially of his younger brother, who remained in Prague after Joe fled. Himself an escape artist, Joe can escape everything but his entrapment in his own mourning until he begins to write his comic book fiction about the Golem of Prague. This same golem is, of course, at the center of his author Chabon's novel as well. One might say that the golem in Chabon's novel is the figure of repetition played by the Brunos in Krauss's, Ozick's, and Roth's novels, not to mention Chabon's other novel, *The Final Solution*. Chabon is hardly alone in his interest in golems. They figure prominently in another Holocaust novel, Thane Rosenberg's *Golems of Gotham* (2002), as they do in another set of Ozick books not directly about the Holocaust but nonetheless Holocaust inflected: *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997).

And as he [Joe] immersed himself ever deeper into its potent motifs of Prague and its Jews, of magic and murder, persecution and liberation, guilt that could not be expiated and innocence that never stood a chance – as he dreamed, night after night at his drawing table, the long and hallucinatory tale of a wayward, unnatural child, Josef Golem, that sacrificed itself to save and redeem the little lamplit world whose safety had been entrusted to it, Joe came to feel that the work – telling this story – was helping to heal him.¹⁷

This is the new, more literary role that the golem of old plays for the Jews, whose salvation is his one and only job. Yet, Chabon steers his story away from so simple a solution for trauma and guilt as the writing cure:

Something paradoxical had occurred in the five years he had worked on *The Golem*: the more of himself, of his heart and his sorrows, that he had poured into the strip, the more convincingly he demonstrated the power of the comic book as a vehicle of personal expression – the less willingness he felt to show it to other people, to expose what had become the secret record of mourning, of his guilt and retribution. . . . By 1953, when Tommy Clay had stumbled upon him in the magic shop, Joe's ability to heal himself had long since been exhausted. He needed Rosa – her love, her body, but above all, her forgiveness – to complete the work that his pencils had begun. The only trouble was that, by then . . . it was too late. He had waited too long.

The sixty miles of Long Island that separated him from Rosa seemed more impassable than the jagged jaw of one thousand between Kelvinator Station and Jotunheim, than the three blocks of London that lay between Wakefield and his loving wife.¹⁸

It is only after a visit to “Machpelah” (where Houdini is buried, the word *machpelah* referring in Hebrew to the cave where the patriarch Abraham is presumably buried) that Joe can mourn and go home to his wife and son. As soon as he associates Houdini’s tombstone with that of his parents, Joe has a vision in which he sees his mentor, Bernard Kornblum, who he also must accept is dead: “*Lieber meister*,” he addresses him; “what should I do? “Go home,” the ghost of Kornblum tells him, and he does, to the only home left to him: Tommy and Rosa.

The American-born son of Joe and Rosa, who is raised for the first part of his life by Joe’s American cousin, is not a survivor. Tommy promises to go forward in life unafflicted by the traumas of the Holocaust, even if his world will continue to be informed by the Holocaust-inflected comics of his father. The sons of survivors in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces* (1996), and Thane Rosenbaum’s *Golems of Gotham* and *Second Hand Smoke* (2000) are not so lucky. Children of survivors who suffer, like Joe, from complicated mourning, these second- and third-generation “second hand” victims of the Holocaust suffer from inherited trauma, the unsettling of one psyche by the distressing, even traumatic events that have occurred, not to the psyche now suffering distress, but to some other psyche altogether, as defined by the psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham, Maria Torok, and Nicholas Rand. In such a haunting, the individual has no primary access to the events that are producing his or her distress or anxiety or whatever the symptom of psychological disturbance is, since the events belong to someone else’s experience. These victims of inherited trauma (who include, in a more mediated way, most of the younger Jewish American writers, who are born into a Holocaust-inflected reality) must discover their own way out of their psychological distress. For Artie Spiegelman in *Maus* this means (like Joe) drawing his way to recovery (there are internal references in *Amazing Adventures* to *Maus*); in the case of Ben in *Fugitive Pieces* it is related to recovering the letters of a poet who himself suffered from incomplete mourning, until, like Joe, and like Duncan in *Second Hand Smoke*, he discovers the ways in which love of a woman can release him; and in the case of the son, Oliver Levin, in *The Golems of Gotham*, it is his daughter, Ariel – the granddaughter of his survivor parents – who conjures, confronts, and finally exorcises the Holocaust ghosts of the past, including the ghosts of such famous survivor/suicides (like her grandparents) as Primo

Levi, Jerzy Kosíński (who is himself the author of a rather sensationalistic Holocaust novel, *The Painted Bird* [1965]), Jean Améry, and Paul Celan.

The most extended and brilliant treatment of the child of survivors, who must deal with his traumatization by his parents' trauma, is Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. In this survivor narrative the child Artie is as much a "survivor" of his parents as they are of Auschwitz. A graphic novel, in which the Jews are depicted as mice, the Germans as cats, and the Poles as pigs, *Maus* ostensibly tells the parents' Holocaust story, from the days preceding the war until their release from the camps. Yet *Maus* is equally the son's narrative of his relationship to his parents, of the effects of their experiences on him, and finally of his coming to terms, through his art, with the parents' inability to free themselves of the traumas of the past. Of course, in recording that past, literally picturing it, Artie Spiegelman (Art's representation of himself) is as much caught in a repetition compulsion as is his father, Vladek, whom he repeatedly represents as riding nowhere on his exercise bicycle, popping pills, and obsessing over trivia. Indeed, it may well be the case that Artie is more obsessive-compulsive than his father. Vladek shows no desire whatsoever to communicate his story to his son, he functions quite well in the absence of any therapeutic recounting of his life, and he is far more loving to his son than his son is to him. Art Spiegelman shows Artie (and perhaps himself) "framing" Vladek's life in more ways than one, since the point of view that unwaveringly exposes Vladek to the graphic view of the reader is that of the angry son, at least until the end. In the final frames of the narrative Artie permits his father to call him by the name of Artie's dead brother, Richieu, who died during the war and whose photograph graces his parents' bureau throughout Artie's growing up. At the end of the book, Art (rather than Artie) signs the text, placing his signature under the drawing of his parents' tombstone. This might suggest, of course, that his parents' lives and deaths continue to weigh him down. But it might also (like Artie's allowing his father to call him Richieu) signal his acceptance that he is only the tail end of what his father, in their last conversation, refers to as the happy ending of the fairy tale that – despite the Holocaust – was his parents' life together.

Whether or not Art(ie) is justified in pressing his father to tell him his story so that he, the son, can release himself from his inheritance of his father's trauma, drawing (on) his father's story does seem to produce psychological recovery for the artist, as it does for Joe in *Amazing Adventures*. In *Fugitive Pieces* Ben's recovery of the poet Jakob Beer's papers serves similarly to produce a consciousness of the Holocaust story that liberates the son from the complicated mourning of the parent, even though in Ben's case the papers belong to

someone other than his father. Nonetheless, Beer, like Ben's father, is a victim of incomplete mourning, and his poetry finally releases Ben from his entrapment in the past. That the instrument of recovery is for Ben a manuscript recalls the circulation and recovery of lost / perhaps never written manuscripts in other Holocaust fictions: in Ozick's *The Messiah of Stockholm*, Krauss's *The History of Love* and her *Great House* (where a writing desk rather than a written document recalls the idea of the text), Roth's *The Prague Orgy*, Dara Horn's *The World to Come* (where the document is affixed to a painting), and Aryeh Lev Stollman's *The Illuminated Soul* (2002), which, like other of these Holocaust texts, brings Prague (and hence, at least by implication, golems) into the story of Jewish survival. In *The Illuminated Soul* the refugee who escapes in the 1930s with a medieval illuminated manuscript is fleeing Prague.

Textuality as central to Jewish self-definition and, therefore, as what most needs to be salvaged from the deaths of so many millions of Jews, is a dominant motif in both Krauss's *Great House* and Horn's *The World to Come*. *The World to Come* is not a Holocaust novel per se. Yet it is evocative of this genre. In Horn's book what circulates is an early Chagall painting, behind which is hidden a Yiddish manuscript by the writer Der Nister. Through recovering these texts the protagonist, Benjamin, is finally able to mourn the deaths of his parents and move past the traumas of their lives, which are related to Stalinism and the Vietnam War rather than the Holocaust: "Lately it had begun to seem to Benjamin Ziskind that the entire world was dead, that he was a citizen of a necropolis. While his parents were living, Ben had thought about them only when it made sense to think about them. . . . But now they were always here, reminding him of their presence at every moment."¹⁹ For Jonathan Safran Foer in *Everything is Illuminated* (2003), the grandchild (as in *Golems of Gotham*) is the person who seeks to recover the knowledge of the past that will release the present to achieve its own ends and purposes. Named for his author, the character Jonathan Safran Foer goes back to the Ukraine to discover what happened to the woman in the photograph bequeathed to him by his grandmother, which had belonged to his grandfather. Like Gursky's Alma in *The History of Love* this woman turns out to be the grandfather's first love (his Alma), a motif that Safran Foer picks up again in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) in the grandparents of that novel's child protagonist, whose father is killed on 9/11. In *Everything Is Illuminated* not only does the Safran Foer character discover the cruel facts of Holocaust history, and of the complicity of present persons in horrific past events, but what unravels in the novel is nothing less than a Jewish folk story about the origins of his grandparents' hometown, making Foer's novel

not about the end of Jews and Jewish writing, but in and of itself evidence of one of its new beginnings – an idea in Dara Horn’s novel as well: Ben Ziskind’s mother translates Yiddish folk literature into English. The recovery of the painting and the manuscript initiates a new cycle of translation into what Cynthia Ozick once dubbed the “new Yiddish”: English in an America that is, for Horn, “the world to come.”

The very title of Krauss’s *Great House* suggests that the continuity of the Jewish people (in America, Israel, and elsewhere) has less relation to keeping alive the dead of the past than to preserving the Jewish relationship to textuality. This is a feature all of these American Holocaust novels share, which aids in their escaping (at least to some degree) the obsessions of the past that the authors wish to transcend. *Great House* takes its title from the story of “the first-century rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai,” after he has fled Jerusalem following the destruction of the Temple. It is a story told to Weisz by his father, whose study Weisz is trying to reconstruct and whose desk is the last item on Weisz’s list:

In his agony, he thought: What is a Jew without Jerusalem? How can you be a Jew without a nation? How can you make a sacrifice to God if you don’t know where to find him? In the torn clothes of the mourner ben Zakkai returned to his school. He announced that the court of law that had burned in Jerusalem would be resurrected there, in the sleepy town of Yavne. That instead of making sacrifices to God, from then on Jews would pray to Him. He instructed his students to begin assembling more than a thousand years of oral law.

Day and night the scholars argued about the laws, and their arguments became the Talmud. . . . They became so absorbed in their work that sometimes they forgot the question their teacher had asked: What is a Jew without Jerusalem? Only later, after ben Zakkai died, did his answer slowly reveal itself. . . . Turn Jerusalem into an idea. Turn the Temple into a book, a book as vast and holy and intricate as the city itself. . . . Later his school became known as the Great House.²⁰

In producing her own *Great House*, Krauss attempts to mourn the victims of the Holocaust rather than remain obsessed with them. She produces on a grand scale an obituary for the Jewish dead, much like the obituary for Leo Gursky that concludes *The History of Love*, in which the operative features are love and reconciliation to fate: “Really, there isn’t much to say. He was a great writer. He fell in love. It was his life.” Krauss’s dedication in *The History of Love* is itself a gesture toward remembering the past without becoming obsessed with or locked in it. Krauss dedicates the book to her four grandparents, “who taught me the opposite of disappearing.” Krauss, Foer, Horn, Englander, and

others of these writers represent the grandchild generation, which is insistent on not disappearing.

The acceptance of life, in all of the imperfections of the individuals who have suffered or who have inherited such suffering or even, in some novels, have perpetrated that suffering, is an aspect of how the Holocaust texts reconcile themselves to the traumas of the past in order to proceed in the present. Such acceptance of life and love is meant, in these books, to provide a directive to the reader, who might, like these American writers, also exist in a Holocaust-inflected world, in which the Holocaust trauma might well launch itself (however secondarily) on us. Nor is the Holocaust an isolated trauma in contemporary human existence. Like Sam Clay in *Amazing Adventures* and several of the protagonists in Lev Raphael's *Dancing on Tisha B'Av* (1990), the major protagonist in Aryeh Lev Stollman's *The Far Euphrates* (1997) must contend, not only with the ghosts of the Holocaust, but also with his own more personal, non-Holocaust and only *potentially* traumatic suffering in the form of his homosexuality. Homosexuality also has its direct connections to the Holocaust, since the Nazis targeted homosexuals and the handicapped, not to mention Gypsies – all of whom figure in Stollman's novel. This feature of Stollman's book puts one in mind of Lesléa Newman's lovely short story "A Letter to Harvey Milk" (1998) in the short story volume by that name. It deals with a survivor who comes to accept the lesbianism of his art teacher, when he recalls his own homosexual experience with his bunkmate in Auschwitz. Stollman's character's homosexual identity is intended less as a reflection on the past than as a statement about the present and about the potential victimization of every one of us. Like many of Stollman's readers and perhaps like Stollman himself, the novel's Alexander Aryeh grows up in the shadow of the Holocaust, although (also perhaps like the reader) he does not, until near the end of the book, fully grasp its horrifying consequences for survivors. In the novel those survivors are two of the most important people in his life: his next-door neighbor, Cantor Seidengarn, and the cantor's twin sister, Hannalore, who is actually the cantor's identical male twin. In a moment of revelation, when Hannalore's biological sex is revealed through her tombstone inscription, the novel stages a moment of virtual trauma, not only for the character, but for the reader, who, until this moment, is as ignorant of Hannalore's biological gender as Alexander Aryeh: "'Hannalore Seidengarn . . . Elchanan ben David . . . Elchanan, son of David.'" ²¹ The tombstone contains both of Hannalore's names in utter contradiction to each other, and the effect is mind-boggling, to say the least. Is Hannalore a man or a woman? Are the cantor and his sister identical male twins, or not? How, then, do we picture

them, as doubles or as radically different individuals? What Stollman is doing in this scene is staging a moment of frightening revelation, in which we are not so much witnesses of as participants in the trauma. This is jarring at best, quasi-traumatizing at worst. Stollman would make his reader conscious of the degree to which the Holocaust inevitably produces secondary or inherited trauma, even when our relationship to the past is only one of reading – inscriptions on gravestones, memoirs, histories, or novels. That Hannalore’s particular injury is castration cannot but raise troubling questions in terms of the reader’s relation to Aryeh Alexander’s homosexuality. What, the reader must ask, is it that we picture or seem unable to picture concerning nonheterosexual sex? Do we persist in the prejudice that sees a homosexual male as a freak, something like a “castrated” male, which is how the Nazis saw them? Or do we recognize personhood and the choices involved for each of us in achieving personhood? That Hannalore and her brother are victims of the Mengele experiments on twins hints at the murderous extremes to which humans are willing to go to discover the secrets of human anatomy and sexuality. To Stollman’s great credit, he does not permit the reader to pry too much into Hannalore’s identity. She is, for the reader, simply a woman, hopefully even after the tombstone revelation. She is constructed by Stollman to be her own person.

How, Stollman’s novel asks, does any person survive the horrific legacy of suffering bequeathed by events such as the Holocaust? How does a society develop the tolerance the Nazis lacked, which led to the Holocaust in the first place? Such tolerance is central, not only to *The Far Euphrates* (in relation to both Hannalore and Aryeh Alexander) but to Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as well. Although *Extremely Loud* is about 9/11 and not the Holocaust, nonetheless it contains shadows of the Holocaust (as does Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* [2004]). In using the destruction of Dresden as the traumatic background for the family who suffers the more recent trauma of 9/11, Foer suggests the way in which the recursive aspects of trauma that affected Jews who did not themselves experience the Holocaust can explain the behavior of other groups as well. The non-Jewish Ukrainian grandfather in *Everything Is Illuminated* is also such a character sucked back into the past through the recursive experiencing of a trauma that he himself helped to produce: For the grandfather of Safran Foer’s Ukrainian guide turns out to have his own guilty Holocaust past. The grandfather in *Extremely Loud* is similarly not a Jew. Indeed, he is a German, who loses the woman he loves in the bombing of Dresden and who thereafter suffers the same condition of incomplete mourning that afflicts many of

the Jewish characters that circulate in contemporary Jewish American fiction and perhaps several of their authors as well. In *Extremely Loud* the German is a victim as well as a perpetrator, albeit not an active perpetrator, as is the grandfather in *Everything Is Illuminated*. Safran Foer raises the question that, perhaps, only the third generation of Jewish writers can raise: How can one accept the pain of those who were the victimizers? Those who themselves became victims rather than perpetrators? Those who remain perpetrators, even if they repent their actions?

By definition none of the American authors who write about the Holocaust are either victims or witnesses. The first serious texts to bring the Holocaust into general American awareness were translated works by survivors such as the Italian writer Primo Levi, whose *Se questo è un humo* [If This Is a Man] was first published in Italian in 1947 and appeared in English in 1958 as *Survival at Auschwitz*. Another such early figure is the Romanian author Elie Wiesel, whose *Night* was published in English in 1960. Even if these works function as a part of the American Holocaust canon, they are not themselves American fictions or memoirs. Especially because of the power and primacy of these survivor texts, it is quite logical that American writers will exercise respect and decorum and will take a more distanced and mediated view of the events of the Second World War. They will focus not on those events themselves, but on their consequences for survivors, like Sammler and Rosa, who flee to America, or their progeny (like Artie in *Maus*), or even just the next generation of American Jews (such as Alexander Aryeh in *The Far Euphrates*). Some American works, like Nathan Englander's short story "The Tumblers," which is a grotesque folk allegory, do try to capture the reality of the Holocaust experience in the form of what Michael Rothberg has called "traumatic realism" – the grotesque as a form of realistic representation of what is in its essence a grotesque reality. There are also, of course, glimpses in *The Shawl* and in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* of the murder and devastation that occurred in Europe. But these are brief, albeit powerful, moments in the literary texts. By and large, American Holocaust fiction is *American* fiction. Not only does it place itself geographically in the United States (or, in the cases of Anne Michaels and Aryeh Lev Stollman, in Canada), but it also incorporates the Holocaust experience into the legacy of Jewish American identity. The United States of America, these writers insist, will provide a creative future for American Jews, even if the ghosts of the Holocaust may still continue to haunt the Jewish imagination and, perhaps, even, create a post-Holocaust aesthetic that is specifically Jewish American.

Notes

- 1 Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 103–104.
- 2 Ibid., 171.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Shalom Auslander, *Hope: A Tragedy* (New York: Riverhead, 2012), 154.
- 5 Ibid., 152.
- 6 Philip Roth, *Zuckerman Bound: A Trilogy and an Epilogue* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985), 447–448.
- 7 Auslander, *Hope*, 173.
- 8 Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 253.
- 9 Cynthia Ozick, *The Messiah of Stockholm* (New York: Random House, 1987), 3.
- 10 Philip Roth, *The Prague Orgy* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985), 72.
- 11 Ozick, *The Messiah of Stockholm*, 5.
- 12 Ibid., 6.
- 13 Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1975), 89.
- 14 Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love* (New York: Norton, 2006), 382.
- 15 Jonathan Safran Foer, *Tree of Codes* (London: Visual Editions, 2010), 138.
- 16 Michael Chabon, *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 5.
- 17 Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (New York: Random House, 2000), 577.
- 18 Ibid., 577–578.
- 19 Dara Horn, *The World to Come* (New York: Norton, 2006), 9.
- 20 Nicole Krauss, *Great House* (New York: Norton, 2010), 278–9.
- 21 Aryeh Lev Stollman, *The Far Euphrates* (New York: Riverhead, 1997), 192. Italics added.

Israel in the Jewish American Imagination

NAOMI SOKOLOFF

Despite the centrality of Israel to the personal and collective identity of American Jews, Israel has remained a relatively minor topic in their imaginative writing.¹ Moreover, representations of Israel in this literature rarely correspond neatly to images of Israel in Jewish American public discourse or political debate. While authors have certainly responded to shifting social trends and historical events, they have done so in ways that range from direct to oblique, conventional to perplexing. Analysis of this literary corpus requires taking into account not only how the texts do or do not align with mainstream political opinion or the views of particular constituencies, but how they deal with three primary sets of tensions: 1) to what extent do the authors rely on preconception or idealizations of Israel and to what extent do they convey awareness of lived experience grounded in a geographical reality?; 2) where does this writing fall on an ideological spectrum from Zionist to diasporist inclinations?; 3) which genres have the authors developed, from highbrow art to lowbrow entertainment?

Zion has long carried tremendous symbolic value, both in Jewish tradition and in American culture. Within Judaism, Israel figures as sacred homeland, and exile implies not just geographical displacement but disturbance in the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people. In the United States, Christian perceptions of the Holy Land have their own unique history and have complicated and enriched Jewish engagement with Zion. Consequently, any reading of Israel as a Jewish American literary construction must assess the authors' understanding of home, belonging, and wandering in relation to both Jewish and non-Jewish religious conceptions of space, as well as to nationalism and ethnic identity.² It bears noting that tensions between figurations of a spiritual Zion and depictions of a material Zion persist well into the twenty-first century; even after more than fifty years of statehood, two-thirds of American Jews had never traveled to Israel. It also bears noting that Israel appears in some Jewish American writing more as an idea to be

denied or rejected than as an attachment to be cherished. Finally, it is crucial to consider where individual texts fit into the whole of literary production on this topic, for, while not a favored theme among major writers, Israel has featured prominently in mysteries and detective fiction, suspense thrillers, family sagas, popular historical novels, and comix. These works have contributed to widespread public perceptions; the ways they have imagined Israel have significantly influenced what Israel means to the American Jewish community.

Prior to World War II, a small minority of Jews in the United States supported Zionism. Assimilated Jews found the notion of a Jewish homeland incompatible with their self-definition as full-fledged Americans, and they feared accusations of dual loyalty. The Reform movement, for its part, defined Jewishness in terms of adherence to religious faith, rather than of ethnicity or peoplehood. At the same time, the Orthodox condemned Zionism for its largely secular orientation, while Marxists and socialists considered nationalism both reactionary and retrogressive. After the Holocaust, attitudes changed dramatically. Pro-Israel sentiment became a dominant, even unifying credo among American Jews, who deemed the survival of the Jewish people a moral imperative. The majority viewed a Jewish state as not only a necessary haven for persecuted Jews but also a justifiable, life-affirming, triumphant response to collective catastrophe. Enthusiasm for Israel crested in 1967, following victory in the Six Day War, and continued into the 1970s. Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, American Jewish attachments to and identification with Israel diminished. While support for Israel remained high, a series of controversial political events led to criticism and dissent. This process challenged earlier, idealized notions of Zionism and undermined the regnant image of Israeli Jews as admirable and heroic.

Not surprisingly, then, until the watershed era of the Holocaust and the establishment of statehood in 1948, many Jewish authors in the United States opposed Zionism, remained indifferent toward it, and/or were committed to other causes. Their silences on the topic of Israel stemmed largely from their view of the United States, and not Zion, as the land of promise. Mary Antin, for instance, referred to America in the title of her 1912 novel, *The Promised Land*, thereby expressing the outlook of Jews who wholeheartedly embraced the ideals of freedom, democracy, and opportunity that America offered. Such tropes identifying America as the new Zion held special power in the American imagination, for they drew on extensive cultural antecedent; the imagery dates back to the Puritans, who referred to New England in biblical terms as the site of a New Jerusalem. Nonetheless, it is surprising that in the second half of the twentieth century – when Israel's popularity rose

among American Jews and when the righteousness of Zionism served as a central tenet of Jewish communal thinking – imaginative writers still devoted so little energy to the subject of the Jewish state. Scholars have proposed various explanations. They note that some writers considered it presumptuous and unseemly to represent a culture remote from their direct, personal experience. Other authors hesitated to expose Israel to criticism or satiric scrutiny. Additional reluctance may have arisen from the fact that writers with Zionist persuasions generally found themselves relegated to the sidelines of American literature, unacknowledged by mainstream histories and ignored by anthologists. Accordingly, authors keen on avoiding parochialism or loath to jeopardize the universal appeal of their work may well have chosen not to write about Israel. Further compounding discouragement with the topic, some authors did write openly about Israel and met with huge popular success, but also critical opprobrium. Israel became associated, regrettably, with formulaic mass entertainment rather than with serious artistic vision.

The late 1980s ushered in a new era in the literary treatment of Israel. More titles began to appear. No doubt, the passage of time, greater ease of travel to Israel, and the availability of new publishing venues all contributed to this phenomenon. In addition, changing historical circumstances triggered a new set of responses and variable attitudes in relation to homeland and diaspora. Interestingly, alienation from Israel did not inhibit imaginative writing, and sometimes spurred it on. Naturally, throughout this period – as also in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century – writers perceived Israel through an American lens. The big question posed by this entire corpus of work, then, remains constant: As American texts construct perceptions of Israel, Zionism, and Jewish national identity, what do the general trends and major works reveal about specifically Jewish American cultural attitudes and self-conception? The following discussion considers these matters with a focus on prose fiction, autobiography, and poetry written and published in English.

Before Statehood

The first canonical Jewish American poet, and the most influential Jewish American literary figure of the nineteenth century, Emma Lazarus is known above all for her verses inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. However, she also played a remarkable role as a precursor of Zionist thinking in the United States. Years before Theodore Herzl galvanized Jewish nationalism in Europe and years before the World Zionist Congress met for the first time (in Basel, 1897), Lazarus began advocating the establishment of a Jewish homeland.

Born in 1849 into a wealthy and well-educated New York family of Sephardic and German descent, she felt profoundly rooted in American culture. Indeed, branches of her kin had lived in America since colonial times, and her relatives included highly distinguished individuals. Nonetheless, she eventually concluded that she would never be accepted fully as a writer by non-Jews. As a result, she turned deliberately to Jewish themes in her art and championed East European Jewish immigrants who were thronging to the United States in the 1880s. While providing them aid and helping them adjust to life in the United States, Lazarus also realized that America could not absorb all the Jews in search of refuge. In *Songs of a Semite* and a series of essays called "An Epistle to the Hebrews" (1882), she envisioned Zion as an option for the downtrodden and persecuted masses, even while she consistently lauded America as the authentic homeland of its Jewish citizens.

Lazarus did not arrive at these views in a vacuum. She followed ideas expressed by a number of Europeans, notably the proto-Zionist Leon Pinsker and the Christian writers Laurence Oliphant and George Eliot; Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876) served as a special source of inspiration. In the United States, Lazarus's writing found resonance at a time when Protestant theology increasingly saw restoration of Jews to the Holy Land as a prerequisite for messianic redemption. Furthermore, fascination with the Holy Land was rising in the nineteenth century thanks to new opportunities for travel, the invention of photography, the birth of cinema, and the development of archaeology. All of these made the land of the Bible feel more accessible to Americans. In turn, proliferating encounters with the Holy Land gave rise to an extensive travel literature – by Christians, including Mark Twain and Herman Melville, and by Jews, such as Louis Brandeis, Henrietta Szold, Horace Kallen, and others who became leaders of the Zionist movement in the early part of the twentieth century. To be sure, these writers took to the topic their own preconceptions about sacred places, their own emotional and intellectual investment in exploring sites of the Bible, and their own degrees of enthusiasm regarding future settlement of Palestine (at that time part of the Ottoman Empire), yet all contributed to a general period of ferment and growing interest in the land of Israel. From the end of the 1800s through the 1920s, Zion appeared as a favored topic in diverse forms of popular culture: stereopticons, tableaux vivants, pageants, plays, and musicals.³

Even as some Americans warmed to the notion of Jewish return to the Holy Land, many also harbored trepidations about surging numbers of immigrants on their shores and primarily wanted to deflect them to other destinations. The American public, inclined to find greenhorns foreign, uncouth, and

at times repellent, had little patience with impoverished Jewish newcomers. Lazarus's work commands attention in part because it speaks to all of these concerns.⁴ When her poems highlight idealized connections between a glorious, ancient past and Jews of the present, she at once strengthens Jewish claims to settle in the land of Israel and assuages American distaste for actual, contemporary Jews. Associating Zion with healthful vigor, vitality, and heroism, she makes the image of the Jew more agreeable to American readers. Although she lived only till 1887, Lazarus anticipates Zionist rhetoric of a later period in her critique of Jewish bodily weakness, her calls for Jewish engagement with manual labor, and her encouragement of a new masculine ideal of physical power. These ideas appeared well before the notion of the Muscle Jew, as propounded by Max Nordau, which took on currency in the 1890s and then held sway over Zionist values for many years. Altogether, Lazarus appears as a transitional figure. She served as an intermediary between the cultural contexts of the nineteenth century – with its anti-Semitism alongside its Christian-inspired love of Zion – and political programs of the twentieth century that sought pragmatic territorial solutions for Jews in distress. By and large, Zionism in America ever after followed convictions that Lazarus articulated, defining the land of Israel as a homeland for millions of Jews with no viable future elsewhere, but not for Jewish citizens of the United States. American Jews did not perceive their own lives as exile. Consequently, they committed themselves to political activism and philanthropy, rather than to *aliya* (the Hebrew word for immigration to Israel, meaning literally “ascent” and implying spiritual uplift). Most often, rather than leaving America for Zion, they hoped to inject American values into their Zionism. They envisioned a Jewish homeland dedicated to freedom, equality, pluralism, and technological and material progress in a modern society.

Zionist activities in the United States grew in the years before World War I, particularly among the immigrant communities of New York's Lower East Side. Nonetheless, the supporters of this movement remained a tiny minority. Its adherents numbered perhaps twenty thousand out of 2.5 million Jews in the United States. By the end of the war, the movement's ranks had swelled by a factor of 10, thanks in large measure to the leadership of the Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis. Among the writers with Zionist convictions, Ludwig Lewisohn stands out for his travelogue *Israel* (1925) and his novel, *The Island Within* (1928), in which he argued passionately that assimilation was doomed to failure. Himself an immigrant from Germany who converted to Christianity, Lewisohn eventually made an about-face, embraced Jewish identity, and voiced warnings against the rise of anti-Semitism. Another early

advocate for Zionism, Meyer Levin, in 1931 published a novel called *Yehuda*. This tale presents an admiring portrayal of life on a kibbutz, the kind of agrarian commune that strove for egalitarian socialism and that became emblematic of Jewish return to the land in its most palpable form: through physical agricultural labor and extensive contact with the soil. Levin's depictions of the Zionist enterprise promoted images of the Jewish pioneer as farmer, warrior, and redeemer of the land. During the 1930s, writers on the Left scorned and ostracized Levin, rejecting his politics and dismissing his fiction as sentimental and melodramatic. Nevertheless, he persevered with Israel-centered themes. When he authored a second novel, *My Father's House* (1947), and a film script "The Illegals" (1947) his views had become even more fervent; as a journalist covering the liberation of concentration camps in Europe at the end of World War II, he had witnessed firsthand some of the horrors wrought by the Nazis. By then, American support for Jewish statehood had grown, and an end to the British Mandate in Palestine (established after World War I) was in sight. More Jews had rallied to the cause, as evidenced by the huge popularity of pageants with Zionist themes, such as "We Will Never Die" and "A Flag Is Born" staged by Ben Hecht in New York in 1943 and 1946. Maurice Samuel, Hayim Greenberg, and Nachman Syrkin had also introduced the message of labor Zionism to the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century. Marie Syrkin made contributions as an essayist, as a speechwriter for and eventually biographer of Golda Meir (prime minister of Israel, 1969–1974), and as a translator of Hebrew and Yiddish poetry. Syrkin herself produced poetry and published scattered pieces throughout her life, but a collection of her work appeared only in 1979 under the title *Gleanings: A Diary in Verse*. These poems express predominant values of the Zionist movement, viewing Jewish nationalism as a necessary and redemptive force, the founding of Israel as a brave act of self-respect in response to unprecedented genocide, the Jewish state as an antidote to assimilation, and Zion as the setting for a vibrant revitalization of Jewish culture that would allow Jews to lead a complete Jewish life.

Israel's First Fifty Years: 1948–1998

During Israel's first decades of independence, popular fiction in the United States played an important role in boosting the image of the Jewish state. Leon Uris's *Exodus* (1958) remains unparalleled in its impact. The author wrote this novel with the intention of turning it into a film, and although the producer ultimately chose another scriptwriter for what became a blockbuster movie, Uris aimed from the start to capture hearts and minds with an idealized,

Hollywood-style story line of Israel's founding. With its biblical title, *Exodus* boldly matches current events to an ancient struggle for freedom, charting the establishment of the state as a simple progression from destruction to rebirth, from the catastrophe of the Holocaust to the renewal of the Jewish people in its own land. The plot is based loosely on actual events: the voyage of the ship, *Exodus 1947*, that took Holocaust survivors to Palestine as illegal immigrants and subsequent battles in Israel's War of Independence. Alternating historical materials with melodramatic romance between an Israeli man and an American gentile woman, this narrative inspired widespread audiences to identify with the Jewish people and their fledgling state. No less significantly, *Exodus* in both the book and film versions encouraged Americans to associate Jews with brave and handsome figures rather than with age-old negative stereotypes. Moreover, shot on location, the film mediated America's visual conceptions of the landscape, creating lasting impressions in the minds of viewers and setting off a new wave of tourism to Israel.⁵ Later, Uris's *QB VII* (1970) and popular novels by Herman Wouk further built stories of World War II, the Holocaust, and the birth of Israel that became the basis for successful film productions.⁶

Chaim Potok's novel *The Chosen* (1967) also eventually became a film. Neither a megahit nor high art, it nonetheless attained considerable acclaim as it effectively laid out in clear, expository prose some fundamental issues surrounding the foundation of the state. In the process, *The Chosen* delineated some sharp differences of opinion among American Jews. Potok presents two teenagers, one from a modern Orthodox home and one from a Hasidic family, who overcome rivalries to form a deep, though conflicted friendship. Much of the tension between their communities stems from the fact that the Orthodox support Zionism, while the Ultra-Orthodox vehemently oppose it on the grounds that Jewish sovereignty must be left in the hands of the Messiah.

In the 1970s, only scattered treatments of Israel appeared in works by major Jewish authors. Saul Bellow, one of the towering figures of American literature and later recipient of the Nobel Prize, did turn to Israel in his travelogue *To Jerusalem and Back* (1976).⁷ Israel emerges as a significant concern also in Bellow's novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, a text that struggles with ethical conundrums as it considers the use of violence and the need for Jewish self-defense in a post-Holocaust world. Hugh Nissenson, too, penned psychological fiction, moving past the clichés of pop culture and of ideologically charged potboilers. Focusing especially on kibbutz life, in *A Pile of Stones* (1965), *In the Reign of Peace* (1972), and *Notes from the Frontier* (1968), he delved into religious themes and the claims that Judaism might make on secular Israelis. Unquestionably, Philip Roth

provided the most ambitious and inventive treatments of Israel by a prominent Jewish writer in America. Extraordinarily prolific, Roth only occasionally wrote about Israel, but when he did – in *The Counterlife* (1986) and in *Operation Shylock* (1993) – he highlighted shortcomings of Israeli life alongside exuberant defenses of American Jewish experience. In *The Counterlife* he engaged in spectacular polemics on the multiple possibilities of Jewish self-invention in the twentieth century. This novel contrasts the values of an unabashedly secular American Jew, Nathan Zuckerman, with the newly adopted values of his brother, Henry, who has suddenly joined a religious settlement in Judea (disputed territory captured by Israel in the 1967 war). Each character defends the choices he has made as a Jew. Henry, renaming himself Hanoch, maintains that diaspora Jews live hyphenated lives and could realize themselves more fully in a Jewish land, observing Jewish custom and speaking a Jewish language. Nathan, averse to nationalism, to Jewish xenophobia, to religious practice, and to the settlers' infatuation with guns, insists that Jews enjoy more rights, security, freedom, and tolerance in the United States. The narrative then goes on to offer additional imaginings of Henry's and Nathan's lives, suggesting kaleidoscopic possibilities of Jewishness. *Operation Shylock* further questions the stability of identity. As it pits the voices of American Jews, Israelis, and Palestinians against one another, this novel offers contradictory interpretations of Israel, its history, and its redemptive possibilities. Adding to these complexities, a narrator named Philip Roth is joined by an impostor Philip Roth, who preaches that Ashkenazi Israelis should move en masse to Europe, their erstwhile homeland. Taking exaggerated, often outrageous or downright wacky positions, these various characters comically animate debates over Zion's importance or lack of importance as a Jewish center of gravity.

A surge of interest in spiritual quests led to a spate of new Israel-oriented writing in the 1980s and 1990s. A range of fiction – some poignant and tastefully rendered, some tawdry and forgettable – imagined young people on personal journeys to Israel. Generally, the American characters do not immigrate. They visit or spend some time studying in Israel and then go home to the United States. Often the plots intertwine romance with explorations of the country and with attention to religion. Perhaps the most lyrical example of this fiction is Nessa Rapaport's *Preparing for Sabbath* (1981), while Allegra Goodman provides amusing caricatures in her story, "Onionskin" (1991).⁸ It is predominantly women authors who stand out in this era. Many, indeed, distinguish themselves by introducing into their work the kind of feminist sensibilities that gained momentum in North America ten years or so before catching hold in Israel. Anne Roiphe's epistolary novel *Lovingkindness* (1987), for

example, sets up correspondence between a feminist activist in New York and her daughter, who has moved to Jerusalem to join an Ultra-Orthodox community. Through their letters the two argue passionately about the subordination of women in religious society and about the appeal of living in the Holy Land. In *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986), the poet Adrienne Rich likewise reflects on women's equality, while seeking to reconnect with her Jewish heritage. As a feminist, a lesbian, and a Jew, she finds no promised land; neither America nor Israel will nurture all aspects of her identity. Tova Reich's novel *Master of the Return* (1988) enters the world of Ultra-Orthodox sisterhood, even as it lampoons crazy talk of building a third temple in Jerusalem. Moving away from feminist concerns but venturing further into the realm of religion, in *The Jewish War* (1995) Reich satirizes the Orthodox settlers on the lunatic fringe. She imagines a Jew from Brooklyn who aspires to rule as king over Judea and Samaria and wrest this land from both Israeli and Palestinian control.⁹

A genre that exerts considerable appeal for Jewish American writers in the late twentieth century is the family saga. This kind of fiction provides panoramic views over several generations, indicating how individuals are swept up in historical events and how relatives disperse around the globe. Israel figures importantly in such novels. Marge Piercy's *Gone to Soldiers* (1987) emphasizes the founding of the state, and Mark Helprin's *Refiner's Fire* (1993) involves its main character in the 1973 war. Such tales often contrast the good fortune of the American branches of the family with the perils Israelis must face. In Piercy's novel, an Israeli sees danger as a given, "like the air," while her American cousin thinks, "Reality was America, college, a good job" and dismisses *aliya* as "a silly and dangerous fantasy."¹⁰ Similar values permeate pop culture versions of the family saga. In Gloria Goldenreich's *Leah's Journey* (1978), Belva Plain's *Evergreen* (1978), and Julie Ellis's *East Wind* (1983), Israel provides some of the key tragedies that keep the melodrama moving. These best-selling novels, geared to light entertainment, idealize Israel as a place where Jews experience belonging after two thousand years of wandering, where they discover a sense of purpose, come alive Jewishly, perform heroic deeds, drain swamps, and fight for freedom and dignity. Nonetheless, they do not stay in Israel for long. Mostly they meet a violent end, or, if they are indispensable to the plot, these characters conclude that *aliya* poses too deadly a choice and they move back to the States to prosper and raise children.

Interestingly, this kind of writing evolved at a time when American Jews were drifting away from unquestioning support of Israel. The Israeli victory of 1967 produced euphoria and generated an increase in American *aliya*.

However, after 1977, many Jewish Americans became troubled by the rightward swing in Israeli politics, by Orthodox control of the rabbinate in Israel, and by acrimonious debate about who is a Jew. Their distress increased after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Jonathan Pollard spy scandal, and the Israeli military's handling of the Palestinian uprising known as the First Intifada in 1987. As a result, Jews in the United States began to air more criticism of Israeli policy and to voice objections to Israel's ongoing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. It is in this era of growing alienation that Jewish American family sagas, with their adulation of Israel, are on the rise. Indeed, this pop fiction thrives as it provides escape reading that avoids contemporary issues and that declines to probe collective problems with depth or seriousness. Israel in this genre remains a place far away, not quite real, and safe to embrace in the imagination. Also in the category of escape fiction, detective stories and thrillers, too, put a spotlight on Israel in the 1980s–1990s – as they had for quite some time.¹¹ By design, though, these kinds of narrative often draw deliberately on topical issues and current events to launch suspenseful plots. Such narratives meet two primary needs: They excite and they reassure. Highly formulaic, convention ridden, and permeated with symbols of danger, this fiction provides novelty, mystery, and exhilaration, even as its predictability assuages anxiety. Readers enjoy hair-raising adventures in part because this fiction is so evidently contrived and the imagined worlds so imaginary, not too close to home and so not truly frightening.

Into the New Millennium

Violence, treated in a much more serious way, emerges as a prevalent theme in the following decades. In part, this trend arises in response to the years of suicide bombings and other attacks that Palestinians launched on Israelis during the Second Intifada. That uprising broke out in the year 2000 when the peace process – initiated in the 1990s and aiming for a two-state solution – stalled irreparably. Terrorist cruelties serve as the point of departure or as background elements for harrowing plots in a range of Jewish American fiction, perhaps none more gruesome than in Jon Papernick's "An Unwelcome Guest" (2003). At the same time, numerous authors render Israel as a setting for nightmarish extremism on the part of Jews as well as Arabs. For example, Michael Lavigne's novel *The Wanting* (2013) vividly recounts the aftermath of a bus explosion, following the otherworldly regrets of the Palestinian suicide bomber, the suffering of a Jewish victim, and the misadventures of the victim's teenaged daughter, who falls under the sway of a fanatic rabbi intent on

bombing Muslim holy sites. Similarly gravitating toward a dark or grotesque vision of Jewish extremists, Papernick's "The Ascent of Eli Israel" (in the collection of the same name, 2002) depicts unhinged, brutal settlers in the West Bank. Nathan Englander's "Sister Hills" (in the collection *What We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank*, 2012) imagines settlers motivated by outsized grief, spite, greed, and blindness to Arab perspectives. The nexus between violence and religious fanaticism – which Philip Roth and Tova Reich accorded comic depiction in the 1980s – turns out to be an abiding and earnest concern of Jewish American writers in the twenty-first century.

As these troubling plotlines suggest, American Jewish political disillusionment with Israel grew in the twenty-first century.¹² Despair over the continuing occupation increased, while the Second Lebanon War in 2006 and military incursions into Gaza in particular raised sympathy for Palestinians. Much literature since the turn of the millennium confirms a growing disenchantment with Israel. For example, Margot Singer's collection of thematically linked stories *The Pale of Settlement* (2007) tackles post-Zionist anxieties as it describes callous treatment of Palestinians by IDF soldiers and as it ponders a massacre committed by Jewish troops at the Arab village Deir Yassin in 1948. While Singer's narratives express deep attachment to Israel and highlight Jewish suffering, they also arrive at painful condemnations of Israeli policies and behavior. Other authors distance themselves much further from Zionism. The wacky diasporist in *Operation Shylock* who aimed to discredit Israel and send Jews back to Europe gives way to new characters and new texts that quite seriously celebrate diaspora Jewish identity, eschew Jewish nationalism, and disavow the notion of territorial solutions to Jewish problems. What had appeared extreme and parodic a few decades previously thus morphs into normative, or, at least, widely accepted opposition to the notion of a Jewish homeland.

It should be acknowledged that little work published during this period achieved either best seller status or aesthetic and creative pinnacles. Nonetheless, the representations of Israel in a wide range of less accomplished writing bear significance as they suggest changing Jewish-American views of Israel. For instance, disaffection and rejection of Israel appear as paramount themes of Harvey Pekar's fictionalized graphic memoir, *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me* (2012). The narrator recounts how he relinquished his youthful enthusiasm for Zionism and began to condemn Israel for militarism, oppression of Arabs, and religious fanaticism. Two aspects of this text merit special attention: One is that the narrator admits openly and proudly that he has never been to Israel. His critical stance toward the country, based as it is

on preconceptions and perceptions acquired at a great distance from Israel, presents a counterpart to, and inversion of, the idealizations of Zion prevalent in earlier American literature. The second distinguishing feature of this text is the use of comix, a genre aspiring to respectability as a literary form. Choosing this medium conveys the author's conviction that he has serious ideas to impart, even as he aims to popularize his message and reach a broad audience.¹³ Sarah Glidden also turned to graphic memoir in *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less* (2010), where she offers a further, though more ambivalent example of Jewish American distrust for Israel. This text conveys the perspective of a young woman from New York who takes a trip with Birthright, an organization that provides free excursions to Israel as a way to strengthen connections between Israel and Diaspora Jews.¹⁴ Intent on finding fault with Israel and its treatment of Palestinians, Glidden's character discovers that her personal experiences in the country confirm some of her suspicions, yet they temper her misgivings as well; she finds herself struggling against strong feelings of affinity with Israeli Jews and compassion for the dilemmas they face.¹⁵

In a broad literary development that reflects changing demographics in the Jewish American community, both Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox life emerge as important thematic factors in fiction published since the year 2000. Many of these texts feature American characters who make *aliya*. This phenomenon is congruent with what sociologists reported throughout the first decade of the new century – that American immigrants to Israel were preponderantly Orthodox and that, among Orthodox Jewish Americans, the percentage who had visited Israel was much higher than that among other Jews. Traveling to Israel, studying there, and moving there permanently were much more integral to life in Orthodox communities than in other segments of the American Jewish population. In keeping with that trend, Risa Miller's novel *Welcome to Heavenly Heights* (2003) archly though sympathetically portrays challenges facing American newcomers in a settlement near Jerusalem. Naama Goldstein's collection of linked stories *The Place Will Comfort You* (2004) focuses on girlhood in an American family adjusting to a religious neighborhood in Israel. Well informed about Judaic ritual and sacred texts, this narrative describes with learned detail the nitty-gritty of daily life in a traditional milieu.

Preoccupation with American *aliya* at times leads to depictions of Israel as the refuge of (religious) American misfits. This image arises in Aryeh Lev Stollman's title story from *The Dialogues of Time and Entropy* (2003), as well as in Joan Leegant's *Wherever You Go* (2010).¹⁶ A similar perception serves as a substrate in Joshua Henkin's award-winning *The World without You* (2012). Henkin's novel lovingly portrays an extended family of high achievers, gathered in

Michigan to mourn a death. The black sheep among them is Noelle, a newly observant young woman who now lives in Jerusalem. The text singles her out as the one sibling who failed academically growing up, who acted out as a teenager, and who will never live up to her relatives' ideas of accomplishment. Most of the American characters here simply cannot identify with her choices to make *aliya* and to become religious, positive as those experiences have been for her.

Other literary trends, too, reflect demographic shift. Toward the end of the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s, new fiction was developing out of the growing Israeli diaspora in North America. More Israeli Americans began writing about their dual identities and about feeling torn between two cultures. A case in point is Danit Brown's *Ask for a Convertible* (2008).¹⁷ Additional reflections on the two societies can be found in English language writing by American-born citizens of Israel. This work does not fall precisely into the category of Jewish American imagination, but it was published in the United States and read by Jewish American audiences. Since the 1990s, poetry by Shirley Kaufman, Karen Alkalay-Gut, Linda Zisquit, and others has provided a window onto Israeli life and inside views of historical events.¹⁸ A distinct phenomenon is that of writers who cannot be classified readily as American, Israeli, Israeli American, or American Israeli. Consider Shani Boianjiu, author of the novel *The People of Forever Are Not Afraid* (2012). Israeli born and raised, Boianjiu studied at Harvard and completed this book in English before she moved back to Israel. Though published first in the United States and only subsequently in Israel in Hebrew, this novel features a very Israeli setting, focusing on women soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces. Rutu Modan's graphic novel *Exit Wounds* (2008) presents another variation on transnationality. Though composed in Hebrew, this love story – told against the background of a terror attack in Hadera – was published first in English; only a year later did a Hebrew version come out. The author made this choice because comix, at the time, did not count in Israel as worthy literary endeavors. Modan rightly calculated that the prospects for gaining a wide audience were much greater in North America. Indeed, *Exit Wounds* won the Eisner Award for graphic fiction the year it appeared.¹⁹ The increasingly transnational cast of contemporary publishing prompts reconsideration of what exactly constitutes Jewish American literature and which perspectives shape it.

Literature by and for Ultra-Orthodox Jews likewise has reconfigured the boundaries between Israeli and American writing. Haredi magazines and presses operating out of New York or New Jersey often published work in

English, by authors living in Israel. A boom of such publication took place in the late 1990s and the 2000s as a result of the growth of the Ultra-Orthodox population, the advent of desktop publishing, and the decentralization of distribution. It should be acknowledged that men in the Ultra-Orthodox world generally busy themselves with sacred books, not secular ones, and so it is primarily women who publish fiction, poetry, children's literature, detective stories, self-help advice, and other commercial genres. Among these writers, the prominent American-born novelist Naomi Ragen presents an example of exceptional success and of crossover appeal; her stories of Haredi Jews have achieved popularity with religious and nonreligious readers, have been translated from English into Hebrew, and at times deal with specifically Israeli settings (for instance, her 2004 thriller, *The Covenant*).

Altogether, literary treatment of Israel has expanded significantly in twenty-first century Jewish American writing. Authors have moved in several key directions, particularly toward a preoccupation with religion and with extremist violence. None of the new developments, however, aligns exactly with the central concerns of contemporary Jewish American writers, nor, for that matter, with the current trends in Israeli literature.

In America, less attention was devoted to Israel during this period than to Holocaust memory, new waves of immigration to the United States (particularly from the former Soviet Union), family crises of an intimate nature, religion, and a mix of historical fiction, fantasy, and folklore.²⁰ Indeed, indicative of how Israel themes fall off-center in the American context is the way that Michael Chabon's masterful dystopia, *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* (2007), marginalizes Zion and Zionism. An alternative history that supposes that the Jewish state was destroyed in 1948, this novel primarily imagines the establishment of a Jewish settlement in Alaska. Tangentially, a subplot introduces a Jewish movement aimed at rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. Again, this narrative indicates a tendency in the Jewish American imagination to associate Israel with religious zealotry.

For their part, Hebrew writers in Israel have shared some of the same concerns as Jewish American authors, but not others. In the 1990s and beyond they did write at length about ongoing Arab-Jewish conflict and about life under the threat of terror attacks, but they did not limit themselves to these issues. Israeli authors were deeply invested in exploring diversity and multiculturalism in their own society. They directed much energy to discussing the second generation to the Holocaust, Mizrahi identity, immigrants from the former Soviet Union, women's dilemmas, LGBT issues, Ethiopian *aliya*, Palestinian Arab experience, and absurdities of everyday life. An avalanche of

autobiographical writing has revealed a tremendous interest in family roots and the complicated identities of wandering Jews. In addition, a new swell of writing on religion displayed sustained fascination with the allusive richness of the Hebrew language and the ways that a long tradition of prayer may enrich contemporary poetry and prose.

Jewish American writers largely bypassed all these matters – or, perhaps, these issues passed them by. For example, attention to Mizrahi characters appears only rarely in U.S. fiction, and generally as an indication of Israeli society's success as a melting pot.²¹ Exceptions can be found in the realm of memoir; for instance, Ariel Sabar's finely crafted account of his family's past, *My Father's Paradise* (2008), provides in-depth and detailed description of Jewish life in Kurdistan, the migration of the Iraqi community to Israel, and the sociopolitical challenges faced by Mizrahi Jews. The overarching truth remains, though, that few Jewish American writers have imagined Israel as Hebrew writers have. Few have taken a long view of Israel's history.²² Fewer still have brought to bear on their art a thorough knowledge of Hebrew and Judaic heritage. Most have gravitated instead toward constructing images of Israel that express their own outlook on contemporary issues.²³ As always, Jewish American writing juggles distance from Israel with a sense of connection or closeness to it. What is new in this recent era is that more American Jews write from firsthand experience of Israel. Furthermore, across a variety of genres, writers downplay the idealizations of Zion that were once an integral part of the Jewish American imagination. In effect, they reintroduce skepticism about Zionism that would have been familiar, in some ways, before World War II, but that also responds to the vastly changed circumstances of the new century. Literature about Israel has at once increased its reach, explored a relatively narrow scope of interests, adopted a new critical awareness, and established for itself a significant, though less than central place in Jewish American letters.

Notes

- 1 Critics who have discussed this paradox in American representation of Israel include Andrew Furman, *Israel through the Jewish-American Imagination: A Survey of Jewish-American Literature on Israel 1928–1995* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997); Alvin Rosenfeld, "Promised Land(s): Zion, America and American Jewish Writers," *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series 3:3 (1997): 111–131; Naomi Sokoloff, "Introduction: Israel and America: Cross-Cultural Encounters and the Literary Imagination," *Shofar* 16:2 (Winter 1998): 1–7; and Tresa Grauer, "'A Drastically Bifurcated Legacy': Homeland and Jewish Identity in Contemporary Jewish American Literature," in *Divergent Jewish*

- Cultures: Israel and America*, ed. Deborah Dash Moore and Ilan Troen (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 238–255. See these studies for reference to earlier commentary by Robert Alter, Harold Ribalow, and Harold Fisch.
- 2 Literary historians have conducted extensive discussion of homeland, exile, and Diaspora in modern Jewish literature. See, notably, Sidra Ezrahi, *Booking Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) and Ranen Omer-Sherman, *Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American Literature: Lazarus, Syrkin, Reznikoff, and Roth* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2002).
- 3 For discussion of Zion in nineteenth and early twentieth century American thinking, see Michael P. Kramer, “Beginnings and Ends: The Origins of Jewish American Literary History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Michael P. Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12–30; Hilton Obenzinger, “Americans in the Holy Land, Israel, and Palestine,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*, ed. Alfred Bendixen and Judith Hamera (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 145–164; Allon Gal, *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996); Jeffrey Shandler and Beth S. Wenger, *Encounters with the “Holy Land”: Place, Past and Future in American Jewish Culture* (New York: National Museum of American Jewish History and University of Pennsylvania, in association with Brandeis University Press, 1997). All acknowledge the pioneering work on America–Holy Land studies by Moshe Davis.
- 4 Ranen Omer-Sherman lays out these issues and provides detailed analysis of Lazarus’s Zion-related poems in *Diaspora and Zionism*, 15–67.
- 5 Deborah Dash Moore, “Exodus: Real to Reel to Real,” in *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies and Broadway*, ed. J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler (New York: Jewish Museum and JTSA; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 207–219.
- 6 Wouk’s *War and Remembrance* appeared in 1978; he continued writing in this heroic vein in *The Hope* (1993) and *The Glory* (1995). An early novel dealing with the 1948 war, Zelda Popkin’s *Quiet Street* (1951), eschewed heroics and did not attain much commercial success. It was republished in 2002, though, garnering new scholarly attention at that time. Israel’s popularity and American Jews’ love affair with Israel in the early decades of statehood are evident in the success of a Broadway musical from 1962, *Milk and Honey*. The plot revolves around a busload of American Jewish widows, touring Israel and hoping to find romance there.
- 7 On Bellow, in relation to early American imagining of Zion, see Emily Miller Budick, “The Place of Israel in American Writing: Reflections on Saul Bellow’s *To Jerusalem and Back*,” *South Central Review* 8:1 (Spring 1991): 59–70.
- 8 This story appeared first in the *New Yorker*, was included in Goodman’s 1998 collection, and later expanded into a novel, *Paradise Park* (2001). Other writers in this vein include Emily Bronner, Joanna Spiro, Carol Magun, Rachel Kadish, and, in the following decade, Aaron Hamburger.
- 9 For commentary on women writers in the 1980s see Furman, *Israel through the Jewish-American Imagination*, 153–196; Naomi Sokoloff, “Imagining Israel in American Jewish Fiction: Anne Roiphe’s *Lovingkindness* and Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife*,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 10:1 (Spring 1991): 65–80; and Wendy Zierler, “‘Your Promised Land, Your Life’ or ‘From Fatherland to Motherland’: Figurations of Zion

- in the (Autobiographical) Writings of Mary Antin, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Roiphe,” *Shofar* 16, 4 (Summer 1998): 96–107.
- 10 Marge Piercy, *Gone to Soldiers* (New York: Summit Books, 1987), 699.
 - 11 Reeva S. Simon discusses Israel at length in her book *The Middle East in Crime Fiction: Mysteries, Spy Novels, and Thrillers from 1916 to the 1980's* (New York: Lilian Barber Press, 1989).
 - 12 Steven T. Rosenthal, *Irreconcilable Differences? The Waning of the American Jewish Love Affair with Israel* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture and Life, 2001); Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism* (New York: Times Books, 2012); Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
 - 13 Miriam Libicki also chose to work in graphic memoir, producing *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army* (2008).
 - 14 As of 2011 some 260,000 Jews, ages eighteen to twenty-six, had participated in Birthright excursions.
 - 15 In contrast, a highly positive spin on Birthright appears in another recent publication, *What We Brought Back* (2010), a slim volume that contains short fiction, essays, and poetry written by participants.
 - 16 Critique of Judaism for its oppression of women, familiar from fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, continues into the 2000s. For example, Talia Carner's *Jerusalem Maiden* (2011) builds on the conventions of the romance genre to condemn the Ultra-Orthodox world for its narrowness, for violence against women, and for stifling artistic talent.
 - 17 An earlier, hilariously angst-ridden riff on Israelis in America can be found in Yoram Kolerstein's short story “Idolatry” (1996).
 - 18 An earlier collection, *Without a Single Answer* (1990), contains an assortment of poems by English-language Israeli poets together with translations from Hebrew poetry.
 - 19 Avner Mandelman, Israeli born but living and publishing in North America, published psychologically astute thrillers focusing on the Mossad.
 - 20 Mark Shechner, Thane Rosenbaum, and Victoria Aarons, “The New Jewish Literature,” *Zeek*, April 1, 2011, <http://zeek.forward.com/authors/mark-shechner>. Also see Josh Lambert's chapter, this volume, “Since 2000.”
 - 21 Jennifer Levin's *Shimoni's Lover* (1986), for instance, highlights the colorful diversity of its Israeli characters but downplays cultural difference.
 - 22 Those that do include Jonathan Wilson's *A Palestine Affair* (2003) and Hillel Halkin's *A Strange Death* (2010), both of which look back to the period of the British Mandate. Nomi Eve's *The Family Orchard* (2001), blending family saga with magic realism, traces developments in Jerusalem over several centuries.
 - 23 And their views differ markedly, as well, from those of Christian American writers who focus on Israel as a theme. See, especially, the Left Behind series of novels and films produced by evangelicals, which sold in multimillions and view Israel in end-of-days scenarios. The messianic fervor that predisposed non-Jewish Americans toward Zionism in the nineteenth century finds a new iteration in the twenty-first century.

BEYOND AMERICA

Their New York: Possessing the “Capital of Words”

MURRAY BAUMGARTEN

Jews took possession of New York as they wrote about their experiences in English. They asserted their rights as newly minted Americans in the English sentences they crafted. They extended their Yiddish explorations of New York City by also eliciting and assessing their experience in the hegemonic language of the United States of America. In the process they changed American English into a vernacular to express the complexities of their experiences and judgments. In their savvy urban writing of English novels, stories, poems, and memoirs, they expressed their impossible messianic hopes and tragic failures, grim tenacity, and awestruck wonder, naiveté, and street smarts – which were reshaping through language the city they were simultaneously constructing in real space-time. Consider, then, the language of achievement, of conquest even, possession, and dismay they devised.

A Doubled Beginning

Abraham Cahan’s English fiction is among the first of this American Jewish writing of New York City. Though most of his work as a journalist was conducted in Yiddish – he was the editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward* from 1903 to 1946, the largest and most important Yiddish newspaper in the country – he wrote and published fiction only in English. His *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* (1896) draws on the expected realist conventions of late Victorian writing but phrases and Yiddish words – “Yekl” and “ghetto,” for example – make the familiar strange. From its first pages, Cahan’s writing tells the story of a representative protagonist and situation: “The operatives of the cloak shop in which Jake was employed had been idle all the morning. It was after twelve o’clock and the ‘boss’ had not yet returned from Broadway, whither he had betaken himself two or three hours before in quest of work.”¹ Cahan’s readers are invited to hear the news of unfamiliar immigrant life. As Yiddish phrases break into the flow of the

English narration they mark the ethnic community that is Cahan’s subject. These Yiddish punctuations differentiate the world being described from the world of conventional English. The play between Yiddish as the inner speech of the immigrant and the broken English of their public experience drives Cahan’s writing.

It has often been assumed that with the abandonment of Yiddish and the dispersal of the Jews into geographical assimilation this ethnic writing would come to an end. Cahan’s narrative strategy of representing the “reported speech of characters ... in standard English when it is uttered in Yiddish, whereas English words, frequently interspersed in dialogue, are reproduced in italics to signify their foreignness” will then presumably no longer be useful. The “italicized words” usually marked by the characters’ accents that require translation “for the American reader,” since they “are rendered phonetically,” will, it is anticipated, no longer be a defining feature of the New York experience of this Jewish American writing.²

However, New York Jewish writing in English has also had another defining tradition – a second beginning, which built upon Cahan’s literary strategy. Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* (1934) launches New York Jewish writing into a new key by drawing on Cahan’s strategy and extending his formal reversal of a fundamental convention of immigrant fiction. In his novel Roth has Yiddish rendered in fluent English, while the broken English speech of immigrants is represented orthographically. While Yiddish phrases and intonations do enter the English his characters speak on the city streets, when Jews meet in the domestic space of their homes they speak Yiddish, and it is represented in a lyrical English.

The city of *Call It Sleep* is refracted through a young boy’s psychic experience. The Freudian primal scene, reinforced by a difficult father and a clinging mother, is projected onto the cityscape of his experience, generating a modernist novel of epic sweep with Joycean resonances. City and psyche both need working through in the world of *Call It Sleep*: They must join to provide a possible therapeutic redemption. The plot of *Call It Sleep* reaches from character to cityscape, and the sociosexual politics of immigrant possibility, to mythic dimensions.

Recall how *Call It Sleep* conducts David Schearl, its protagonist, his family, characters with whom he interacts, and the urban landscape – with its Statue of Liberty imagery, electrified train tracks, and industrial grime and clang – to a mythological and symbolic conclusion. Plot, scene, character, situation merge in a stream-of-consciousness resolution: “Over a statue of ...” the passage begins, referring to the Statue of Liberty, icon of American promise.

Then it continues to enact the sounds and gritty feel of the place and urban moment that will become the novel's climactic scene: "A jerkin'. Cod. Clang! Clang! Oy! Machine! Liberty! Revolt! Redeem!

Power

*Power! Power like a paw, titanic power,
ripped through the earth and slammed
against his body and shackled him
where he stood. Power! Incredible,
barbaric power! A blast, a siren of light
within him, rending, quaking, fusing his
brain and blood to a fountain of flame,
and rockets in a searing spray! Power!³*

Italics indicate here this moment of initiation that changes David, as it reframes what it means to be an immigrant New Yorker. Roth puts New York, the city of power, at the center of his fiction. Now, David is a citizen of New York, for he has discovered the city of power that at this moment has been inscribed on his brain and body.⁴

Reversing the conventions of the realist immigrant bildungsroman, Henry Roth embeds the Jewish response to the city of power in the stream-of-consciousness narrative of his novel. The originality of Henry Roth's conception is intertwined with its modernism and its deployment of American vernacular English. Together they define New York City as a place of mythic encounters.

The modernist, stream-of-consciousness narration elicits the many voices of the city and binds them together. Typical urban moments become ritual nodes that give voice to the power of this city.

"They'll betray us!" Into the Tenth Street Crosstown car, slowing down at Avenue A, the voice of the pale, gilt-spectacled, fanatic face rang out above all other sounds: above the oozy and yearning "Open the door to Jesus" of the Salvation Army singing in the park; above the words of the fat woman swaying in the car as she said, "So the doctor said cut out all meat if you don't want gall-stones. So I cut out all meat, but once in a while I fried a little boloney with eggs – how I love it!" Above the muttering of the old gray-bearded Jewish peddler (he rocked his baby carriage on which pretzels lay stacked like quoits on the upright sticks) "Founder of the universe, why have you tethered me to this machine? Founder of the universe, will I ever earn more than water for my buckwheat? Founder of the universe!" Above the even enthusiasm of the kindly faced American woman: "And do

you know, you can go all the way up inside her for twenty-five cents. For only twenty-five cents, mind you! Every American man, woman and child ought to go up inside her, it's a thrilling experience. The Statue of Liberty is — —.”⁵

Roth's prose generates a synesthesia of sound, sight, touch, and movement. Ever-changing, his New York City overflows with psychic, sexual, and urban encounters.

New York, city of power, offering possibilities of hope and misery to its immigrant Jews, also emerges as the premise of Cahan's writing but is not its dramatic center. Cahan focuses on the social conditions of immigrant experience and how they shape Jewish lives. Through the unique angle from which he represents them – the mixture of sympathy and distance inherent in his realist style – Cahan asks his reader to visualize what immigrants work at, and how that is connected to where and how they live. Cahan engages the ethical relationships among families, colleagues, and workers. His writing draws on Jewish sources and the world of progressive journalism – socialist and Yiddish – to articulate a discourse of justice that Roth also speaks for as he registers its dissonant voices.

The English fiction of Abraham Cahan and Henry Roth becomes in their successors a new American idiom. As Leslie Braverman, the central figure of Wallace Markfield's *To an Early Grave* (1964), says, ““By the time I hit the city, by the time I search the kiosks for the new quarterlies . . . Rankin will have a review, Pankin will have an article, Rifkin will have an excerpt from a novel in progress – and right away I'll eat myself up alive. What can I do, *nebbach*, am I more than a *nachshlepper* in the order of things? I'm not the owner, lady, I only work here!”⁶ His speech is direct, brimming with local detail, gritty. As with Philip Roth's Alexander Portnoy, assistant commissioner of human rights for the City of New York, the obligation to speak out and correct injustice has its ironies. These words perform an ironic gaze that looks out both at the city and at the narrator's situation as it zooms into an analysis of motivation.

Markfield gives voice to this multidimensional Jewish discourse of New York City. Many writers, among them Cynthia Ozick, Meyer Liben, Grace Paley, Alfred Kazin, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, E. L. Doctorow, Rebecca Goldstein, Michael Chabon, and Dara Horn, will help to elaborate this discourse. In modern American literature, written in English, their writing articulates a new ethnic stream and literary idiom.

An Ethnic Literature in the American Vernacular

In differing ways these writings echo that moment in “The Bintel Brief” – Cahan’s Yiddish column in the *Jewish Daily Forward* – when the anonymous letter writer tells us of his dire working conditions under the rule of “my boss, the blood-sucker,” in this “America, with its hurry-up life.” Note what this phrasing presumes – that there are other structures that could govern work, other ways of organizing everyday experience – alternatives that have justice on their side. The bite of the Yiddish phrases carries over into the English and keeps ethical concerns, which may have an abstract and general edge, local and practical.

New York Jewish English writing thus follows in the tradition of Yiddish literature and its embedded prophetic Jewish habit. It also draws on the expectation of fair play at the heart of American values that serve as a beacon to those Emma Lazarus called the “huddled masses yearning to be free.” It is a literature inspired by and speaking for justice in and to the city of power. Justice becomes a prescriptive organizing principle of society and a consistent theme and gesture of this writing, the signature of New York Jewish English writing. Speaking in the American vernacular, English, these writings articulate the experience of an ethnic group that *in its particularity* represents us all.

Urban Pathways of Understanding

The New York these Jewish writers construct in their writing generates common features across different genres, modes, and literary conventions in the context of the complex historical experience of these writers. The realist mode of Cahan and the modernist mode of Henry Roth define the poles of this justice discourse. Together they also set the stage for later writers such as Allen Hoffman, Dara Horn, Lara Vapnyar, and Shalom Auslander, for example, to carry forward the work of the call for justice.⁷

This multilingual discourse crosses cultural and literary registers and is connected to immigrant Yiddish culture and through that to two millennia of Jewish conversation. As the Yiddish writer Baal Makhshoves noted, this is one literature in more than one language.⁸ The responses to New York City that inform this urban Jewish writing chart different paths articulating a common discourse of justice in a shared idiom. Whether ghetto, shtetl, or metropolis, they are psychic as well as social and economic configurations. All three figure

in Cynthia Ozick's *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997) and in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000). How to negotiate among them drives the plot of these exemplary fictions.

More than sixty years after *Call It Sleep* Michael Chabon in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000) reminds us that the Jews have a history of devising "impossible solutions for insoluble problems."⁹ Having just arrived in New York on the eve of World War II, Joseph, a major figure in the novel, feels the pain of separation from his European family members. Out of their inability to defend themselves against the onslaught of Nazism, in New York City Joseph and his buddies invent the superheroes of the graphic novel. They are encouraged in their invention by the power of the city where they now live. Their fictional characters will succeed in rescuing the homeless and oppressed, thus doing what they could not achieve in real life, taking their place in Jewish fiction beside the golem of Prague. Set in more recent, more optimistic times, the grandfather and young narrator in Lara Vapnyar's story "The Mistress" take us through a renewed Brooklyn as she weighs the acculturation, the hopes, and fears, of a new wave of immigrants.

Another way to map the connections among these successive generations of writers is to locate them in the various population centers in which Jews have lived in New York City.¹⁰ These diverse locations include the Lower East Side of Manhattan that Abraham Cahan maps early in the twentieth century, the Brownsville of Henry Roth's explorations in 1934, Alfred Kazin's celebration of Manhattan's West Side in 1978, the Bronx of Kate Simon's nuanced representation of the experience of immigrant Jewish women in 1982, while Lynne Sharon Schwartz takes us back to Brooklyn in 1989 only to leave it – unlike Lara Vapnyar, who in 2003 shows its many contemporary faces for the new Russian Jewish immigrant neighborhoods. Vapnyar came to New York as a teenager, learning English in the city public schools. Her city offers possibilities unavailable to Chabon's characters. In contrast to their disillusionment, Vapnyar's Russian immigrants participate in the optimistic power of the city as they move from ghetto to shtetl to the freedom of the metropolis.

Sharing an ongoing ethnic and ethical subject matter, dealing with it in a multilingual literary idiom that grows from the common ground of Jewish culture and religion, as well as the promise of American life, these writers set their characters in motion. For them New York is dynamic: They roam through the city on the subway, on the bus, on the tram and train, to take possession of its possibilities as they escape from confining locations.

Paths of Justice – the Power of Urban Speech and Imagination

The personal lives and political experience of characters intertwine in these fictions. In Grace Paley's story "Politics," the heroine starts out to change the world and discovers the erotic dimensions of her political actions. They lead to an encounter with an Irish Tactical Patrol man, and the creation of a multiethnic family, one step toward change now rooted in personal and familial experience. The sentences breathe the rhythms of the city: They are quick, decisive, bursting with meanings that unfold through individual lives and draw them together. They turn the reader into a street-smart New Yorker.

In her *Puttermesser* stories Cynthia Ozick also points to the ways that the power of imagination, which New Yorkers put into play, has a political edge. Only a golem – the imaginary automaton of Prague Jewish legends of the seventeenth century – can effect justice in the chaos of bureaucracy and New York politics.¹¹ But the golem's actions surprise Mayor Ruth Puttermesser; her good intentions do not always generate satisfactory results. Eros, as in Paley's story, often intervenes; envy, jealousy, and resentment can lead to malicious acts that override the claim of compassion and the call for justice.

We can array these writers according to the New York they invent, for the city can have a ghetto or a shtetl in a neighborhood, and it can also be a cosmopolitan experience space with a diverse population going about many different purposes. This is the larger canvas Ozick visualizes – a city that encompasses ghetto and shtetl as it also offers the cosmopolitan experience of the metropolis. Their interrelationship is part of the diversity and vitality of the metropolis – the difference that generates its dynamism, adaptability, and resilience.

Bernard Malamud's New York does not have the same range as Ozick's city. The Jewbird in the story of that name prays, but his piousness does not save his life. The enclosing situations of the action – the Jewbird's arrival in the window, the small rooms, the intense dialogue, discussions, and quarrels, the Jewbird's role as tutor of the young boy, generate a centripetal force.

In contrast Doctorow's characters in *City of God* (2000) try to evade the lurking suspicions of the city's potential to harm the Jews, elicited by the stolen cross discovered on the synagogue roof. Stolen from St Timothy's altar, the cross is discovered on the roof of the Upper West Side synagogue of "Evolutionary Judaism," founded by Sarah and Joshua Gruen. Was it done by fascists? Sarah's father, the Holocaust survivor, wonders. Or is the city a stage set for the expression of self, identity, possibility, as a walking tour through Washington Square Park suggests – "in and out of the city's lightness and

darkness, each neighborhood its own truth, with another kind of life to give you.”¹²

The novel has a moment of hope as the narrator dwells on cross-cultural and intertwining religious traditions, yet the urban pessimism elicited by the plot echoes the darkness of Saul Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970) and the urban pessimism of the 1970s and 1980s. For Bellow as for Doctorow at this time, the decay of the metropolitan virtues of diversity, courtesy, and respect for the stranger indicates the difficult regression of the metropolitan city to the situation of the shtetl, which now reveals its history of pogroms and potential for continuing Jew hatred.

City of Exile, City of Diasporic Homeland

Against the notion insinuated in these novels that, as in Ozick’s *Puttermesser Papers*, metropolitan New York Jews are in danger of sliding back into the shtetl of exile – a situation central to Malamud’s earlier prize-winning novel *The Assistant* (1957) – many of these fictions of the city including those of a younger generation – Jonathan Rosen, Grace Paley, Rebecca Goldstein, Allen Hoffman, Dara Horn, and Lara Vapnyar come to mind – claim the city can fulfill its promise as a diasporic homeland.¹³ For the metropolis offers economic, cultural, political, and personal opportunities. In it, Jews can be anonymous but they can also be proud claimants of their historic heritage.

Yet these tales also make the reader question whether the city that contains ghetto and shtetl neighborhoods can make up for the homelessness of exile that has been the Jewish fate for centuries. Is it possible to imagine New York as a modern Zion? Is there a way of making a home, in the city or in the suburb¹⁴ – in the ghetto or shtetl of the different New York neighborhoods, or even in a New Jersey small town? Can it rival Jerusalem? Or is the reality only that image of the modern suburb as shtetl, which angers Sasha in Rebecca Goldstein’s *Mazel* (1995), when her heroine skewers her son-in-law’s family with the comment that the suburb, Lipton, is the shtetl, Shluftchev, from which they have emigrated, “with a designer label.” Caught dancing at two weddings, unable to abandon either world, these Jews find themselves stuck between exile and urban diaspora.¹⁵

Character, Ritual, and Urban Identity

Allen Hoffman explores the ways in which New York City draws secular and traditional Jewish life into conversation in his story “Building Blocks.”¹⁶ How

pious Jews commemorate the destruction of Zion on Shivah Asar be-Tammuz, in the midst of the three weeks of mourning and fasting that culminate in Tisha b'Av – the ninth of the month of Av when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed – becomes a way of sorting out the injustices suffered by Jews during their millennia of exile. The narrator is caught up in a story told by his fellow congregant Mr. Isaacson, of his experience in the Fourth Russian Army on a Romanian battlefield during World War I. Isaacson's experience becomes a weighing of injustices, against the compassion of the nurse – “ugly as sin” – who saves his life. Aesthetic questions pale before these life-and-death events, the narrator realizes.

Here, in the relative safety of New York City, communal values have a fragile hold: One of Mr. Isaacson's roles is to corral passersby to make up the required minyan, the ten men of the Orthodox worship quorum. The narrator learns how to honor Isaacson and his colleague, Steimatzky, for they maintain not only the community but, as the story reveals, the universe through their steadfastness in daily public prayer. “The day of affliction is over, but what about Mr. Isaacson? We have left him *probal* – finished. I see him lying in a Rumanian ditch on a Russian battlefield, as the day turns into evening, a new day.” The events of Isaacson's battlefield saga will intertwine with the ritual of prayer and the mourning for Zion. Together, they will lead to the narrator's further reflections. “Sorrows are never as discrete as the fasts that follow. How can they be, you can't fast forever. The service halts. No one intones the mourner's *kaddish*.”¹⁷

The demands of prayer merit response. “Everyone looks around. Are you a mourner? Are you a mourner? No familial mourners. A voice calls to the leader, ‘*Zugt kaddish*.’ A dispassionate *kaddish* pours forth.”

And with the narrator, the reader discovers a greater meaning: “The rhythm tumbles forth – the building blocks of the universe rumbling against one another as their names are called. The roll call of cornerstones – granite of existence. So fleeting the call, so light the touch in this hurried, famished *kaddish*, yet they remain granite and radiate their power when called.”¹⁸

The story ends with Isaacson rescued, his wound healing, having finished his story by walking with the narrator on the way home. Then the narrator encounters Steimatzky, who lives in the same building and has offered him a bag of nectarines to break his fast. “‘The Three Weeks, a very difficult period,’ I explain.” But they agree, “we'll make it, and not to would be . . . ugly as sin.”¹⁹

Jonathan Rosen's *Joy Comes in the Morning* (2004)²⁰ also plays aesthetic expectations against the inner beauty the Psalmist praises²¹ as its protagonist, Lev,

walks in Central Park before his wedding. “Deborah had more to do than he did – *mikveh*, hair, makeup,” he thinks. “Lev had laid out his dark blue suit and starched shirt, his shined shoes and festive tie. He did not need much more.” As he walks, the city’s built environment becomes his intersubjective experience, and the meanings to which he is committing by marrying Rabbi Deborah arise before him like a slide show. Perhaps, he thinks, “he should have fasted.”²² This city also contains Jewish ritual experiences. The world of its synagogues, despite the travails of decisions of lay leadership that lead to the ending of Deborah’s contract, also connect men and women into families. They recall – as does the ritual scene in “Building Blocks” – that New York, the center of the American Jewish universe, links to the land of Israel through the space-time of Jewish history. The moment of ritual encounter also informs Dara Horn’s *The World to Come* (2006): In both novels characters caught up in the indeterminacy of their lives gain the courage to commit themselves to each other. For at once physical space and moral arena, this city is also home to the community where the building blocks of the universe radiate their power.

As they left the European ghetto and the shtetl of the Pale of Settlement, in which they were insiders, modern Jews entered the modern city, in which they were strangers. The Jews went from the external dislocations of exile to a potentially empowering diasporic urban homeland. That led New York Jewish writers to engage the hyphen-bridge dividing Jewish from American.

Offering amazing possibilities, New York City remains a conundrum, made by the actions of millions of human beings. Yael Goldstein Love’s story, “When Skeptics Die” (2004), reminds us that – echoing the opening scene of Doctorow’s novel – God is watching. We can ask whether New York could possibly be a Jewish homeland, or whether the only Jewish homeland is the text.

Justice, Memory, and the “Capital of Words”

In his memoir, *New York Jew* (1978), Alfred Kazin echoes Henry Roth’s evocation of the city of power. His is a more muted blending of lyrical and realist tones that also echoes Cahan’s practice. Through Kazin’s evocative register, we gain a further insight into what the city of power means for character, scene, and situation.

Note how Kazin invokes New York’s global force at the conclusion of *New York Jew* as he names the “culture industry, the television event, the ballet, the opera, the new movie houses on Third Avenue, the newspapers that tell you how to live, what to think, where to shop.” And he carries the power of

the city from overarching global reach to the intimacies of personal relationships, as he acknowledges “the sexy shops and caressing little restaurants – the New York that is still most enchanting at dusk, when all the lights seem to go on at once, when the spurt of release that comes at the cocktail hour creates one more vibration in the excited exiting from those lighted skyscrapers of so many clever men, so many stirringly liberated women.”

For this observer what counts is “the other New York, the capital of words, the chosen city, that is even more splendid, chic, glittery, and excessive now than when I dreamed of entering it – the New York of the great museums, of Madison Avenue galleries on sparkling Sunday afternoons in the fall, of Fifth Avenue in the glow of lunchtime and the cocktail hour.” Kazin’s phrases bear the wonder of the young initiate encountering the metropolis – this immigrant too has entered the city of power to mark his presence there. Kazin, Cahan, and Roth acknowledge that part of what defines New York as the city of power is the role that it plays as the “capital of words.”²³

Kazin concludes *New York Jew* looking out over the city. It is a moment of discovery: “I feel I am dreaming aloud as I look at the rooftops, at the sky, at the massed white skyline of New York. The view just across the rooftops is as charged as the indented black words on the white page.” The city is his text, on which like so many newly arrived immigrants he would inscribe his meanings. But he cannot leave it at that, for “the mass and pressure of the bulging skyline are wild . . . the secret of New York is raw power, mass and volume, money and power.”

Across the river, in New Jersey, “a great fire is burning on the piers.” What Kazin sees is “a screen of fire” that echoes the epic heroes of antiquity. Like them he too talks to the dead, “in my dreams – our dead.” Looking out “from the party high over Lincoln Center,” Kazin turns to the presence that would make justice prevail: “O Lord who made Himself known as fire, where are you? ‘Return, O Lord, have Pity on Thy Servants!’ Sweet Loves! Absent friends! Mama, Papa! Where are you?” And this anguished looking concludes as a wish for the city: “I want to love again. I want my God back. I will never give up until it is too late to expect you.”²⁴

Encountering the anomie of the metropolis, where everyone is a stranger, Kazin invokes the face-to-face world of the ghetto where he grew up. The Brooklyn of his earlier memoir, *Walker in the City* (1951), charts the transformation of ghetto habits of intense domestic familial life and political argument into the wider life of CCNY, the uptown college in Manhattan he attended – a shtetl experience for him and earlier generations of Jews. And now, living in Lincoln Center – at the center of the metropolis – in 1978 he imagines

himself as postethnic and yet looks back longingly to his ethnic marking and Brooklyn roots.

Two Jews Talking

New York Jewish writers continue to draw on the cultural capital of Yiddish, not least in their narrative stances. When Abraham Cahan devised “The Bintel Brief” he introduced into journalism and popular culture the conversational mode Sholem Aleichem had deployed. Two Jews talking – a literary convention and a narrative position – informs many of the New York Jewish writers.²⁵

Art Spiegelman makes significant use of this conversational style in his 2004 book *In the Shadow of No Towers*, as does Ben Katchor in his *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer* (1988–). What works for these graphic novelists is also a stylistic convention Jonathan Safran Foer turns to in his 2005 evocation of the 9/11 terrorist attack on New York City, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. And Nicole Krauss works with it in her *History of Love* (2005). These fictions map traumatic space, both inner and outer, and, as their characters confront the pain of this defining twenty-first century terrorist attack, this trauma that has wounded their city becomes part of the Jewish metropolitan map constructed by second-generation children of Holocaust survivors.²⁶

For these writers imagine New York as a palimpsest that – interrogated and engaged in conversation – reveals the past in the present. Their writing is often archaeological as it delves through layers of experience. The city of memory is everywhere – thus Safran Foer asks in *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) how a pin that pricks you remembers. The present turns into the past and the past becomes the present at the moment of dialogue – of the talking of the two Jews engaged in the story, like the narrator and Mr. Isaacson in Allen Hoffman’s tale.

It is in and against and for the city of power that these writers engage the justice theme. And if the Jewish immigrants who rush to the ship’s deck as they sight the Statue of Liberty jettison their prayer shawls and phylacteries to liberate themselves from the yoke of ritual practice in Dara Horn’s first novel, *In the Image* (2002), her second novel, *The World to Come*, draws prophetic and American calls for justice together to articulate a new understanding of Jewish and American culture. For justice is foundational to both cultures, embedded in constitutive texts – in the Declaration of Independence, the Pledge of Allegiance, and the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible, and the Torah.

The boroughs of imagination Dara Horn charts range from the Manhattan of the Modern Art Museum to Marc Chagall’s and Der Nister’s²⁷ school

for Soviet children, to the “police action” of Korea and material from Itzik Manger’s *Gan Eden* (1965). Her vernacular, like Henry Roth’s, elicits the lyrical qualities of Yiddish. As it does for Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, the sweep of her fiction results from the power and nuance of her vernacular American idiom. What Cahan invented and practiced in his Yiddish writing became central to New York Jewish writers of English. They too understand literature as “two Jews talking.” That presented dialogue invites the reader into the conversation and welcomes her, the reader, to the ensuing discussion and, even, the argument that inevitably follows. And that central gesture of Yiddish literature, transposed into an English register, leads to a fuller understanding of psychological experience in the work of these writers. They express an understanding of identity as the cause and effect of relatedness: Talking to each other, they articulate the identity of the self *and* the other.

Dara Horn’s sentences swoop through decades of Jewish history to make a point about the experience of this very moment. Allen Hoffman’s narrator speaks with that lilt: “When *Shiva Asar be-Tammuz* comes and you mourn your head off, who is it for? The whole world? A pretty tall order. Who even knows the name of the world?... Did you ever try and mourn for the whole world the week Hank Aaron hit his 700th home run? It is a confusing experience.”

The narrator cannot stop there, for Jewish history crowds in. “And if the Temple had not been destroyed, what would Einstein have been, a camel driver in Beersheba? The Budapest String Quartet, olive pickers in the Galilee? It’s true. Yes, and if the Temple had not been destroyed, we would not have been around for Hitler and his ovens. That’s true, too.”

This narrator is always arguing with Jewish history, with God even – that is, with himself. “If only the Jews had been good. If only we hadn’t hated without cause. If only we hadn’t transgressed His Sabbath – our Sabbath.” What it comes down to is clear: “If only we had minded our own business like the Italians and Greeks and all the other short, swarthy races of antiquity. What can you do? Mourn – from *Shiva Asar be-Tammuz* through *Tisha b’Av*, and who can be so certain Sandy Koufax is happy anyway? But the man did pitch four no-hitters, so is it any wonder that I was late for *minchah*, the afternoon prayer?”²⁸ The *nigun* – the lilt – of these sentences becomes the central gesture – the *nusach* – think of it as the melody – of these texts. The city’s built environment and the vivid inner life of character play into each other to create intersubjective experiences.

Justice here is not the badge of a clan but an organizing principle of society and a consistent theme and gesture – the signature – of urban Jewish writing. It is the driving force that generates the critical voice of this urban writing,

which also thus becomes urban critique. Not only were these writers thus true in this way to their biblical heritage, but their interest in writing for justice was also fueled by their immigrant experiences.

For as outsiders, these Jews were experts in the discrepancies of the modern promise. While they might embrace the values of democracy and capitalism in a new land of opportunity, they also quickly became aware of its shortcomings.²⁹

As the narrator of Meyer Liben's *Justice Hunger* (1968)³⁰ meditates on what it is to be "a liberal, maybe even a libertarian, a professed enemy of dogma, a young man seeking freedom, justice for strangers,"³¹ he is reminded of the poetry of Kenneth Fearing. "I thought of the lines of the poet who brought to life the snarling moralities, the justice hunger of the metropolitan radicalism of the time, and clearly delineated the mood, sometimes the nature, of the surrounding horror, in long artful lines (the length of 13th Street) compounded of cynicism, sense of personal outrage, tendentious, or selective objectivity, and special prayer."³² The list here – cynicism, sense of personal outrage, selective objectivity, and special prayer – tells us of the range of tonalities this American Jewish English New York writing reaches for, and the power of its speaking of justice to the city of power.

We hear this intimate speech in Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel* when she tells us what Jewish emancipation has meant for the newly liberated Jews as they enter the city of their imagination of possibility. "From scattered little places ... tucked away in ritual and folklore, untouched for centuries, there now came young people so hungry for the world at large that, no matter how much they took in, they still felt themselves famished. It was a hunger that would be felt unto the seventh generation: *This is mine! I am here and this is mine!*"³³ The hunger for reaching into the larger world, and making a difference in and for it, here becomes a literary trope: "How could there be time enough to touch it all, absorb it all, and then – yes – contribute something of one's own? A piece of melody, an equation, a theory, a canvas – something of one's own that will make a difference. It doesn't have to be big, though all the better if it is. But *something* to show that one is there, *there*, inhabiting the text itself."³⁴

Now language has become discourse, for in this modern world, this text, these "pages" are "filled with the poetry of the anguished spirit, words stretching to enclose the impossible predicament of being human." No longer more or less oppressed or almost tolerated aliens, the Jews are free. Yet in the anguish of their history and the sneers of their neighbors they rush to prove themselves. Her characters obsess over the possibility of participation in the city of

possibility. “No wonder so many we passed on the street had the feverish look of consumptives.”³⁵

The city as text speaks to the experiential possibilities of the individual and the community. The reader has been invited to enter the text, which maps the discovery and possession of the city of power. We have become empowered by the conversation in this “capital of words.” Now we are the citizens calling for justice – into and through the English writing of Jewish New Yorkers.

Notes

- 1 Abraham Cahan, “Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto,” in *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* (New York: Dover, 1970), 1.
- 2 Hana Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 33–34. Also see chapter 1, “Accent Marks.” Also see Joshua Miller, *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011). My thanks to Joanna Meadvin for this reference; also see her essay “Deathless Hope: Anzia Yesierska and Alberto Gerchunoff Write Themselves American,” in *American Literary History*, in press.
- 3 Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Avon Books, 1964), 419.
- 4 See my *City Scriptures: Modern Jewish Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), chapter 8, “City Premises.” Also see Hana Wirth-Nesher, *New Essays on Call It Sleep* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 5 Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 415.
- 6 Wallace Markfield, *To an Early Grave* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964), 59.
- 7 Even Herman Wouk’s novel *City Boy* (1948), a coming of age story that dwells on the demand for fairness in the face of bullying of a young boy, sounds this theme, which he will further articulate in *The Caine Mutiny* (1952).
- 8 Hana Wirth-Nesher, ed., *What Is Jewish Literature?* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994).
- 9 Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (New York: Random House, 2001), epigraph.
- 10 Their formidable number is available as a subset of Lee Jaffe’s bibliography of Jewish writers, available in <http://bit.ly/1bzTDr4>. Inspection of this Web site also suggests how New York Jewish writing is a paradigm for much American Jewish writing.
- 11 Cynthia Ozick, “Mayor Puttermesser,” in *The Jewish Street*, ed. Murray Baumgarten and Lee David Jaffe (Charleston, SC: Create Space, 2013), 219–224.
- 12 E. L. Doctorow, *City of God* (New York: Plume, 2000), 150.
- 13 Even as American Jews moved to the suburbs, some New York Jewish writers kept the city at the center of their fictions. Even as Ezra Slavin, the rebellious intellectual protagonist of Kaplan’s novel *O My America* (1980), leaves New York City for a pastoral existence in rural New England, he must insist on its centrality: “What this city is! The life that it has! I forget it, and I’m away from it, but God almighty, there is nothing like it! That smell – the grit and electricity of the subways? One breath and it’s like the rush of euphoria mountain climbers are supposed to feel when they reach the top. It’s

the energy, and I love it. My God, I love it” (Johanna Kaplan, *O My America* [Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1980], 140.) Like Ezra Slavin, these younger writers concur with Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford that the city is “where the issues of civilization are focused.”

- 14 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961); Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1938), 3. Also see Eli Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950–1970* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001).
- 15 See my essay, “Dancing at Two Weddings: Mazel between Exile and Diaspora,” in *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity*, ed. Howard Wettstein (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 78–112.
- 16 Allen Hoffman, “Building Blocks,” originally published in *Commentary*, May 1974, and then included in Hoffman’s *Kagan’s Superfecta* (1982), now available in *The Jewish Street*, 201–214.
- 17 Hoffman, “Building Blocks,” in *The Jewish Street*, 205.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid., 214.
- 20 Jonathan Rosen, *Joy Comes in the Morning* (New York: Picador, 2004).
- 21 Hoffman also references Proverbs 31:10–31, recited on Friday evenings by pious Jews as they praise the inner beauty of their wives.
- 22 Rosen, “Bird Watching in Central Park,” excerpted from *Joy Comes in the Morning*, in *The Jewish Street*, 226–227.
- 23 Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew* (New York: Knopf, 1978), 294–295.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 See Ruth Wisse, “Two Jews Talking,” *Prooftexts* 4:1 (January 1984): 35–48. Also my “Community and Modernity: Sholem Aleichem,” in *City Scriptures: Modern Jewish Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 72–94.
- 26 Jonathan Rosen, “The Uncomfortable Question of Anti-Semitism,” *New York Times Magazine* (November 4, 2001), 48–51.
- 27 Der Nister (Yiddish: דער נסתר “the hidden one”; November 1, 1884–June 4, 1950) was the pseudonym of Pinchus Kahanovich (פֿנחס כהנאוויטש), a Yiddish author, philosopher, translator, and critic. Israel Joshua Singer, another famous Yiddish novelist, once said of Der Nister that “had writers of the whole world been given a chance to read [his] work, they would have broken their pens.”
- 28 Hoffman, “Building Blocks,” in *The Jewish Street*, 201.
- 29 In “The Bintel Brief” Abraham Cahan invented a literary genre that highlighted the discrepancies, and it changed American journalism and Jewish literary history.
- 30 Meyer Liben, *Justice Hunger: A Short Novel and Nine Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1986).
- 31 Ibid., 124.
- 32 Ibid., 115.
- 33 Rebecca Goldstein, *Mazel* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 201.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid., 202.

Spaces of *Yidishkayt*: New York in American Yiddish Prose

MIKHAIL KRUTIKOV

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, thanks to the combined forces of mass immigration and rapid economic growth, New York became home to the largest and most culturally diverse Jewish community in the world. Yiddish, the vernacular of Jewish immigrants from the Russian empire and the Austrian province of Galicia, was the most prominent language in this cultural mosaic. Henry James, who returned to America after many years in Europe, was so much impressed and terrified by the energy and vitality of Yiddish in New York that he famously called it “the accent of the future.”

During the early period of mass emigration, American Yiddish culture developed in closer contact and interaction with other immigrant groups than with the “real” Americans. With some of these peoples, such as Poles, Ukrainians, Germans, Hungarians, Yiddish-speaking Jews had a long and uneasy history of cohabitation, while others, such as Irish and Italians, were new to them. Another important group was the *yahudim*, the German-speaking Jews from Central Europe who immigrated to America in the mid-nineteenth century. By 1900 they had already established themselves in business and professions and assumed the leading roles in the American Jewish community. Their attitude to the newly arrived Eastern European *yidn*, whom they perceived as backward, was patronizing and restrained.

Most (but not all) Yiddish speakers were from the *shtetlekh*, small urban settlements in the western parts of the Russian empire (including Poland) and Austrian Galicia, where they had resided since the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. They had advantages over other immigrants because they were better skilled, educated, and accustomed to the urban ways of life. Most of them immigrated to America to stay rather than to earn money and go back, and for the vast majority New York was not merely the port of entry but a new home for them and their children. They quickly domesticated certain areas of the city, while the rest of the country remained foreign to them.

"New York is certainly not America; New York is Brisk, Kovno, Berdichev, Lemberg, Yehupetz – anything you please – but I want to go to America,"¹ exclaims a character in a humorist story by Avrom Reisen, but remains stuck forever in Brownsville. "Hard, it is hard, brother, to reach America, once you fall into New York."²

America's unparalleled freedom of Yiddish cultural expression attracted even those authors who "were averse to the use of Yiddish as a literary instrument" to resort to this language "as a matter of expediency," that is, for commercial or political reasons.³ Moreover, in some respects Yiddish writers had even more freedom than their English colleagues because their work was not subject to censorship by the vigilantes of Christian morality. As the translator Isaac Goldman observed in 1918, "the theme of sex . . . is treated by Yiddish writers with far greater freedom than would be permitted to their American confrères. . . . The Yiddish public will listen to and read, without hiding it, much of what the American public would affect not to care for, only to read surreptitiously."⁴ By the early twentieth century American Yiddish cultural production became popular in Eastern Europe as well: According to library statistics from Bobruisk, the second most popular books (after those by Sholem Aleichem) were potboilers by the American Yiddish author Avner Tanenboym.⁵ During the interwar period, works of American Yiddish writers were published and distributed in Austria, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, and the Soviet Union.

From the Shtetl to the Ghetto

Motl, the young and cheerful eponymous hero of Sholem Aleichem's series of stories, was excited to discover upon his arrival in New York that his native shtetl of Kasrilevke had moved to America. But unlike the East European shtetl, whose Jewish population spoke the same local dialect of Yiddish and followed the same local customs, the Lower East Side "ghetto," as it was commonly referred to by both Jewish and non-Jewish writers, became a melting pot of different subethnic groups of the Yiddish-speaking world, from Slovakia in the west to Belorussia in the east, and from Lithuania in the north to Romania in the south. Each group introduced its own dialect, folklore, and cuisine and initially tended to settle in a separate area of the neighborhood. These intraethnic distinctions played an important role in everyday life and were carefully registered by the realist writers, but they rapidly dissolved under the impact of the economy that produced new divisions along class lines. The old shtetl remained a shared sentimental memory, often associated

with the lost authentic Yidishkayt (traditional Jewish way of life), and its after-life in the institution of *landsmanshaft* (hometown society).

Not every immigrant, even a young one, felt as comfortable in America as Motl. Yosele, the hero of Sholem Asch's novella *Keyn amerike* ("To America," 1910), died as a result of his separation from the Old World Yidishkayt, while his brothers turned into complete gentiles and stopped speaking Yiddish. Yet the predominant mood of early American Yiddish fiction was more optimistic. Following their characters, Yiddish authors explored the opportunities offered by the new and rapidly expanding city, venturing sometimes outside the confines of the "ghetto." The popular early Yiddish author Tashtrak (the pen name of Israel Yosef Zevin) chronicled with soft irony and a sharp eye Jewish social and spatial mobility in his numerous sketches published in the conservative newspaper *Tageblatt*. "*Tashlikh* in Central Park" depicts the ancient religious custom of throwing crumbs from one's pockets into water in a symbolic gesture of casting away sins on the day of Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) as a social event of upcoming Jews from Madison Avenue and Harlem. Their gathering at the Harlem Meer in Central Park's northeast corner is an occasion to show off new outfits and exchange gossip. "In Crotona Park" (1904) captures the ethnic dynamics in the Bronx neighborhood as Jews move in and dislocate previous residents: "the Germans are cleverer than the Irish and they know that a fight against the Jews is a lost one. Jews are stubborn."⁶

A keen and witty observer of the New York Jewish social scene, Tashtrak was not a radical social critic, whereas the majority of Yiddish writers shared one of the left-wing ideologies of the time, from radical anarchism to evolutionary socialism, and regarded literary work as part of their political and ideological commitment. Leon Kobrin, who immigrated to America in 1892, was already so impressed by the state of literature in the despised "jargon" that he decided to become a "serious" realist Yiddish writer. His short stories recreate the everyday atmosphere of the tenements, giving voice to the "mute tragedies of the uprooted refugees who find in America a measure of material comfort but who are agonized by new customs deeply offensive to their traditions."⁷ The tenement, the basic housing unit on the Lower East Side, becomes in his stories a condensed metaphor of the immigrant condition: "On every floor, behind every door, a different past, a separate present, a different life-experience, an isolated existence – one sorrowful, beaten, wounded, hopeless, and another cheerful, sunny, triumphant, filled with hope and expectation."⁸ Kobrin deserves credit for producing the first critical realist novel in Yiddish, *The Immigrants, A Novel from the Life of Russian Jews in America* (1909). It tells a story of a middle-class immigrant family from

Kiev who flee Russia in the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution and pogroms. Kobrin introduces tropes that would become common in American Yiddish fiction: the conflict between the older generation of immigrants who try and fail to maintain the high moral standards of their old country and the opportunistic youngsters who succeed by unscrupulous machinations; the predicament of a young Jewish woman torn between love for her parents and their values and desire to prosper and marry a successful Americanized young man; the failure of the revolutionary ideals under the magic spell of the American dream about wealth and success; as well as the sad state of Yiddish culture in America. Kobrin's second novel, titled *Ore the Beard, a Novel from the Life of Jewish Immigrants Who Built a New City in America* (1913), is set during the 1903 real estate boom in Brownsville. It can be read as a mock- Yiddish version of the "foundation myth" of American territorial conquest by the forces of capitalism, which transform the "frontier" village of Brownsville, portrayed in the beginning as a typical shtetl, into a modern metropolitan suburb and one of the first East European Jewish enclaves outside Manhattan. The magic power of commercial speculation turns the pastoral rural landscape into a valuable commodity. This sudden enrichment brings about moral problems, which become the main issue of the novel written according to the convention of European critical realism of the nineteenth century.

Writers Intoxicated and Sober

While realist writers like Tashrak and Kobrin dominated the Yiddish literary scene during the 1900s, a modernist rebellion was prepared by a small group of young poets and novelists who set themselves apart from the mainstream culture dominated by commercial interests and ideological commitments. For them America was not a station on the endless travel of Jewish exile, but its final destination. Today mostly remembered for their modernist poetry, Di yunge were no less interested in creating new artistic prose. The driving force behind the group was Dovid Ignatov, an ambitious writer and enterprising editor who sought to integrate modernist literature and visual art in his publications. The protagonist of most of his works was a young charismatic immigrant seeking to rescue Jewish people from the trap of American materialism and consumerism. The ambitions and scope of this utopian project grew from Ignatov's earlier novellas of the 1910s to his three-volume magnum opus *Oyf vayte vegn* (1932), but the protagonist inevitably fails in his endeavors, defeated by the combined forces of capitalism, women, and general lack of interest on the part of the Jews.

New York emerges in Ignatov's imagination as an antihuman monster of giant rectangular proportions, which casts a powerful magic spell over its residents. Unlike Kobrin, Ignatov had little interest in the wretched conditions of the Lower East Side tenements, moving action to the more spacious and modern areas of the outer boroughs. His early symbolist novella *Fibi* (1913) opens with the male protagonist taking a bicycle ride at breathtaking speed along the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. The newly opened modern thoroughway entices him to "experience a long and smooth way to his own self" [*langn un glaykhn veg tsu zikh*] with a group of young cyclists who race toward the sun "like birds, and even more beautiful and stronger than birds."⁹ The brightness of the sunlit urban vistas associated with the vigor of young male bodies is contrasted by the forces of darkness hidden in the sporty, young, beautiful, and even Jewish-looking Fibi, a champion of integration of Jews into American society – "we are American, free American citizens, members of the great and free American nation."¹⁰ Fearing her seductive charms, the protagonist runs away from New York to a faraway farm in Vermont, only to meet her there again as the daughter of the cruel Irish landlord. Fibi's true nature as a modern-day American Lilith is finally revealed by a big cross on her neck, likened by the narrator to a poisonous snake.

Ignatov's first novel, *In keshgrub* (*In the Whirlpool*, 1914), portrays a group of young immigrants aiming toward a new meaningful and productive life in America. Their charismatic leader, Borekh, envisions "free villages" in the far West, away from the "iron giant" of New York, where genuine Yidishkayt is substituted by formal ritualism. Yet, like other Ignatov protagonists, Borekh fails to fulfill his spiritual quest. After destroying his relationship by helping his beloved abort her child, he ends up lonely and mad in the New Jersey woods across the Hudson, where he eventually kills himself by setting his little cabin on fire. Berman, the protagonist of Ignatov's *Oyf vaye vegn*, appears to approach closer to the realization of his dream of escaping New York for a new life in the Midwest. But instead of "free villages," he encounters hostile farmers. Returning to New York, where he tries to build a big *besmedresh* (traditional Jewish house of study) in the middle of a booming Brooklyn development to promote his radical anticapitalist neo-Hasidic teaching. The developers capitalize on his project by attracting religious Jews who want to live near the synagogue. Defeated once again by the victorious forces of capitalism, Berman is severely beaten by zealous Orthodox Jews, who suspect him of preaching Christianity, and dies in a private hospital owned by a former radical socialist turned successful entrepreneur. With all its artistic shortcomings, *Oyf vaye vegn* remains the most ambitious attempt to write a "great American

novel” in Yiddish as a master narrative of transformation of the former revolutionary Russian Jewish intelligentsia into successful middle-class Americans.

Ignatov’s lofty concept of new Yiddish literature as secular scripture was rejected by Joseph Opatoshu, the other major prose writer of the *Di yunge* group. Opatoshu was more interested in the mundane reality of the “ghetto” life than in creating a new symbolist vision of America. He attributed the split among *Di yunge* to the “natural difference” between the “neorealists” like him and the “abstract romantics” like Ignatov, two groups whom the critic Borekh Rivkin succinctly labeled the *nikhtere* and the *shikere* (the sober and the intoxicated ones).¹¹ For Rivkin, who envisioned the mission of American Yiddish literature as an artistic conquest of space through the creation of a literary “quasi-territory” [*kmoy-teritorye*], Opatoshu was the first writer who succeeded in creating an American “literary territory” in Yiddish. Opatoshu viewed the urban space from among the midst of the street crowd, moving among shops, apartments, and saloons. He followed his depressed and alienated characters in their endless and aimless wandering across the city in search of home and security. His spaces were dark, tense, permeated with lust, envy, hatred, and greed. Space is always contested in constant struggle between men and women, employers and workers, Jews and gentiles, old and young. This Darwinian struggle produced a new urban kind of American Yiddishkayt that Opatoshu carefully tested for strength and sustainability. He occasionally contrasted Jews to the Italians, who appeared to be able to preserve their ethnic identity better in America: “Disheveled Italian women in kerchiefs looking like Jewish women from a small *shtetl*, surrounded with little Italian kids holding their clothes, were walking from one pushcart to another, haggling, waving their hands, snatching bargains.”¹² Ethnic diversity is the essence of Opatoshu’s New York, as the author’s mouthpiece, the Hebrew school teacher Grin, explains to his girlfriend: “there are only *shtetlekh*: Galician, Hungarian, Slavic, Chinese. . . . The Jewish Hester Street is more American than Fifth Avenue.” Yet at the end of *Hebrew* (1920), a novel about the gloomy state of the Jewish intelligentsia, Grin comes to realize that for an aspiring intellectual this ethnic vision is too narrow. He begins to hear the new language of New York, which he, a *griner* (newcomer), still has to learn if he wants to have a future:

For the first time in many years did he feel the rhythm of boisterous New York . . . He was certain that the rows of giants bursting to the clouds were talking in their own language. This language was foreign to him, and although he could not understand anything, he felt that his place was here, in this turmoil, and he had to merge with the two streams of people on both sides of the street.¹³

Remarkably, despite their differences in style and ideology, Opatoshu and Ignatov reach similar conclusions: Yiddish-based Yidishkayt can survive only in small ethnic pockets of the city and is too weak to conquer new space outside the Lower East Side “ghetto” and its smaller outposts in Brooklyn and the Bronx.

In Opatoshu’s last and most ambitious New York novel, *Di tentserin* (*The Female Dancer*, also titled *Around Grand Street*, 1929–1930), set in 1910–1911, the “ghetto” buildings have “grey, crumbling bricks” and “plaster peeling off the walls like sick skin,” and their “wide whitewashed windows look dull.”¹⁴ The main locus of Yidishkayt is the dingy *tshiken-market*, a kosher slaughterhouse near the East River bank where elderly religious Jews could find underpaid jobs as ritual slaughterers and indulge in nostalgic reminiscing with their fellows. The gloom and decay of the “ghetto” are contrasted to the grandeur of the newly built Williamsburg Bridge, where “trains and cars are climbing over the houses, . . . sparks are flashing in the dirty windows across the street.”¹⁵ The bridge leads up to the wholesome future of the new open spaces, while the life underneath is decomposing into meaningless fragments: “From under the bridge rise the smells of rotten cellars, fish, stale fruits, and slaughtered chicken. It is swarming with eyes, hands, open mouths with Polish and Galician speech.”¹⁶ *Di tentserin* looks back into the pre–World War I period from a very different historical situation on the eve of the Depression. Opatoshu examines a range of varieties of Yidishkayt, which are personified by different characters. One is Reb Shabse, a self-styled *tzaddik* (righteous man) with messianic ambitions, who, not unlike Ignatov’s Borekh, escapes from the ungodly atmosphere of the city into a cave in the woods of New Jersey, only to be run over by a train in a delirious attempt to defeat Satan. He is contrasted by the quietly pious Reb Avreml, who maintains a Jewish way of life in a dismal little prayer house in the midst of the bustling Lower East Side. The dichotomy of the two types of commitments is replayed in the characters of their daughters. Shabse’s daughter, who as a child was subjected to intense religious education, rebelled and embraced Christian Science, preserving her father’s mysticism but not his Judaism. The daughter of Reb Avreml carries out his humanistic mission as a social worker on the Lower East Side but cares little about religion. In Opatoshu’s analysis, American Jewish children inherit certain psychological and spiritual patterns from their parents, only to adapt them to the new sociocultural environment. Yidishkayt does not die away in America, but it mutates into forms that are often unrecognizable for traditional East European Jews.

The title *Di tentserin*, which Opatoshu gave to the second (Vilna) edition of the novel, suggests a female main character. But Regina, a former circus dancer from Warsaw and the object of desire for a number of younger male characters, did not live up to the expectations of the critics, who unanimously dismissed her as a failure. Opatoshu's inability to create strong and convincing female characters was not unusual for American Yiddish male writers regardless of their stylistic orientation. Women in their works were auxiliary figures who existed primarily as objects of the male gaze. At the same time, America opened new opportunities for women writers, who by the early twentieth century began to occupy a significant place in Yiddish letters. Newspaper editors of different ideological persuasions welcomed women as contributors of short topical fiction that attracted female readers. This fiction was modern in themes and concerns but not modernist in form and style. As a rule, Yiddish women writers had received a secular education in Europe and were well read in world literature. In their Yiddish works they often used stylistic devices and plot constructions from contemporary European literature but rarely ventured into modernist experimentation given their dependence on the taste of their editors and readers.

Miriam Karpilove, one of the most popular women writers, actively used the innovative forms of intimate diary entries (*Tagebuekh fun an elender meydle oder der kamf gegn fraye libe* [Diary of a lonely girl, or the battle against free love], 1918) and letters (*Yudis*, 1911), which enabled her to convey a woman's voice directly, unmediated by the conventional omniscient voice, presumably male. Her stories often look back to the old country from a New York vantage point, exploring both continuity and change in the immigrant experience. The recent past also informs Yente Serdatsky's series of subtle psychological portraits of modern intelligent young women who immigrated to America with the revolutionary sensibility they had taken with them from the big city (in her case, Warsaw) and were now trying to find a place for themselves in the new country. They inhabit small private spaces and talk endlessly about their glorious past in Europe in contrast to their dull present on the margins of the American metropolis, presenting sober counterpoints to Ignatov's enthusiastic male visionaries. One of the most original (and completely forgotten) writers was Rachel Luria, whose collection *Modne mentshn* (1918) contains stories narrated in both female and male voices. Luria was a fine stylist particularly attuned to the smallest nuances in the usage of Yiddish and English. Describing the protagonist of her story "Mayne," she remarks: "In the whole of America there was not a single object or a living creature that Lifshe could have rightly called 'my'."¹⁷ Lifshe's rejection of the first-person possessive

pronoun conveys the sense of alienation and dispossession of the immigrant woman in America, a culture where it is common to refer to things as one's own: "s'iz mayn 'groseri', mayn 'butsher', mayn 'doktor' un mayn 'border'."¹⁸ The use of English words in the Yiddish text stresses the foreignness of the possessive pronouns in cases where Yiddish would typically have a definite article. In the end, Lifshe's modest American dream of ownership collapses when her newly arrived brother-in-law, the husband of her deceased sister whom she hopes to marry, is snatched from her by the predatory landlady. Lifshe is forced to move out of her room in the tenement house, the only space in New York that she hoped to "own."

The problem of possession, in the economic, ideological, and sexual sense, is central to Sholem Asch's novel *Uncle Moses* (1921), a melodramatic tale of the elderly paternalistic sweatshop boss Moses, who falls in love with Masha, a pretty daughter of one of his poor workers whom he literally buys from her parents, eventually to lose not only her, but their child and his business as well. The novel opens with an image of the Williamsburg Bridge that seems to be lifted from one of Ignatov's novels:

The Williamsburg bridge was like a living giant of iron that had stretched across the East River clutching at either bank with his hands and feet while over his back, like wild iron creatures with flaming heads, flew one train after the other. And these wild creatures had devoured thousands and thousands of people.¹⁹

The lofty symbolist tone gives way to sober realism, with most of the novel's action taking place in Uncle Moses's sweatshop and the tenement apartments of his workers, sites that belong to Opatoshu's rather than Ignatov's New York. But at certain critical junctions of the narrative Asch utilizes the symbolist imagery that was introduced into Yiddish literature by Di yunge, such as the sun and sea. Such is Coney Island, where Masha goes with her young cousin, Charlie, on a hot summer day: "A multitude of persons swarmed upon the beach, which looked like a continuation of the ocean. And often the multitude rivaled the ocean, seeming more active, more numerous than its waves . . . the multitude it seemed, had gathered to celebrate a great holiday. All were naked, eating, bathing, swimming. On this holiday everything was permissible."²⁰ Enthralled by this mass celebration of American optimism, Charlie fails to pay attention to Masha's predicament, which leaves her no other choice but to give herself to Uncle Moses as a sacrificial victim for her family. The cheerful and bright Coney Island is juxtaposed to the ghastly and dark Blue Room that Uncle Moses has prepared for his married life in the

newly decorated house in middle-class Harlem. The raised bed in the middle looks “as if it were a scaffold being shown to a man condemned to die upon it.”²¹ But instead of sacrificial death, the marriage transforms the tender and compassionate girl into a cold egoistic vamp who exploits her aging husband. Having run him into the ground, she leaves for Europe, taking their baby with her. By carefully arranging the locations of the decisive moments in Masha’s life in different parts of New York, Asch demonstrates the progressively alienating effect of the modern city on her character. Initially, Masha stages her act of rebellion against Uncle Moses’s patriarchal rule in front of his employees in the shtetl-like atmosphere of his sweatshop. Yet, feeling insecure and lost amid the crowds in Coney Island, she concludes that she has no choice but to submit to Uncle Moses’s lust. Eventually, life with him in the luxurious Harlem apartment transforms her into a cruel dominatrix. Thus, all the differences in style and worldview notwithstanding, the three major Yiddish novelists of the 1910s–1930s shared the widespread misogynist prejudice that exposure to modern urban life beyond the confines of the home and the “ghetto” had a corrupting effect on young Jewish women, turning them from innocent victims of the patriarchal order into dangerous and destructive predators who ruin men’s lives.

Politics and Americanization

The restrictive immigration quotas that were introduced in the United States in the early 1920s undermined the hopes of Yiddish-speaking intellectuals, writers, and artists to develop an authentic American variety of Yiddish culture. The problem of assimilation was exacerbated by the upward migration of Jews from the Lower East Side “ghetto” with its dense network of Jewish institutions into more affluent but less “Jewish” areas of the Bronx and Brooklyn. The urban imagination of Yiddish writers followed this migration process, reflecting its ideological, political, and aesthetic aspects. In the gangster novel *Klinton strit* (1937) by Chaver Paver (pseudonym of Gershon Einbinder), New York space is contested by rival gangs of Jewish, Italian, and Irish racketeers. This dynamic and suspenseful novel follows the career of a Jewish gangster named Mike Efron from the slums of the Bowery to a luxurious suite in a Midtown hotel overlooking the citywide operation of his mixed Jewish-Italian gang. Blinded by his success, he misses the moment when his rival outbids him, losing his criminal franchise with the city administration. In a flash Mike is kidnapped and brutally murdered, his dead body dumped into the waste disposal area in faraway Brooklyn. As a communist

sympathizer, Chaver Paver leaves no doubt that organized crime is a natural product of the corrupt capitalist system, but his open ideological engagement does not diminish the artistic sharpness and freshness of his portrayal of the Jewish underworld, a theme that for many years would remain off limits for American Jewish literature in English.

Lamed Shapiro, another sharp critic of interwar America, established his literary fame early with his terrifying pogrom stories set in imaginary Eastern European *shtetlekh* (but actually written in America). For the rest of his life, he regarded this reputation as a burden and tried to reinvent himself as an American urban modernist. A realist writer, according to Shapiro, ought to depict reality as a cinematic close-up, preserving the minutest details. He used this method in his collection *Nyu-yorkish* (1931), which examines the condition of the immigrant as an existential stranger in the metropolis through meticulous rendering of everyday reality as experienced by loners roaming the city. A good illustration of this artistic method is the story “The Chair” (1932), set in New York on August 23, 1927, the day of Sacco and Vanzetti’s execution, its organizing event. Written as a series of flashlike episodes, the story follows the movement of Jake Bereza through the city from the protest rally on Union Square to his room on Eldridge Street. Overwhelmed by the emotions of the mass protest but unable to comprehend its meaning or articulate his response, Jake directs his wrath at the bedbugs in his room. This key image refers to the epigraph: “‘Bedbugs also have a right to life,’” as declared by one of Mendele Moykher Sforim’s characters. But Jake Bereza disagrees,²² highlighting the discontinuity between the old compassionate world of the “grandfather of Yiddish literature” and the brutal fragmented reality of New York, where people treat each other like bedbugs.

Facing the Holocaust

The rise of fascism in Europe, World War II, and the Holocaust put hard questions before the American Yiddish intelligentsia. How could one respond to the tragedy in Europe from the safety and comfort of America? Could one still believe in the progress of humanity in general and in the American dream in particular? And, perhaps most urgently, who would read Yiddish when its European readers were dead and American ones were switching to English? In the short story “Ven poyln iz gefaln” (1943) Opatoshu imagines the response to the unfolding European tragedy of three former Warsaw residents, among them a successful Jewish manufacturer and his writer friend. Devastated by the newspaper headlines about the fall of Warsaw,

they set off from their comfortable Midtown environment to seek comfort from an old Hasidic rebbe, who resides “somewhere in a Gerer shtibl on Henry Street.”²³ Twenty years earlier that *shtibl* was a busy hub where newly arrived Gerer Hasidim could sleep, eat, and learn the basics of the peddling profession. They “were shown where to buy and where to sell” by the more experienced immigrants so that they could start their own business. Only Reb Itche stayed in the *shtibl* for good, uninterested in material goods and comfort and living off charity. Now he wandered the streets of New York “like a hungry wounded wolf” driven by the sole desire “to get into the Warsaw ghetto, into the Lublin ghetto.”²⁴ When the three well-off visitors pull up to the decrepit house lit by an old gas bracket in a luxurious Packard, the space suddenly collapses and they find themselves in the Ger prayer house on Warsaw’s Iron Street. It seems that only the imaginary power of Yidishkayt, which unites New York’s Henry Street, Warsaw’s Iron Street, and the Hasidic *shtetl* of Kotsk in one “quasi-territory,” could offer some consolation at the time of the catastrophe. Speaking at the YIVO Institute in New York a few months before his death in 1954, Opatoshu still sounded optimistic about the future of Yiddish in America: “This Jewish tragedy in Europe must be our rallying cry to continue the work of the previous generations.”²⁵

Despite the decline of some branches of Yiddish culture such as theater and film after the war, New York remained strong as the world’s center of Yiddish literature. Subtle and nuanced portraits of New York Jewish mores can be found in the series of sketches that Kadya Molodowsky published in the Yiddish daily *Der tog*, which, along with the *Forverts*, was the primary venue for literary publications. Molodowsky revisited small intimate settings where Yiddish was still the main language of communication: family homes, weddings and holiday celebrations, gatherings in synagogues and *landsmanshaft* events, and casual encounters and conversations in subways, parks, shops, and restaurants in Jewish neighborhoods such as a Brownsville *kretchma*, an American outpost of the Polish shtetl of Zaritchke. A keen and sympathetic observer, Molodowsky was attentive to the social dynamics of New York Jews as they made it into the middle class and consequently moved from dense ethnic enclaves to mixed neighborhoods. She favored energetic heroines who asserted their independence against the still-powerful conventions of the *landsmanshaft* culture. But America was generous not only to the young: When Mr. Rabinovitch, an elderly and lonely book peddler, proposes to Chaye-Eydl in the subway, she responds, “perhaps it was meant to be that I came to New York.”²⁶

Between *East River* and the Hudson: Sholem Asch and Bashevis Singer

Prolific and talented writers, Asch and Singer realized that to achieve fame and success they had to bypass the shrinking and not always friendly Yiddish audience. Both were not averse to creating provocations and scandals, which ultimately contributed to their popularity among non-Yiddish readers. *Onkl moses*, with its captivating English-sounding title, was a resounding success, the first American Yiddish novel to be translated into English immediately after its publication. It was performed on stage and adapted into the first Yiddish talkie by Maurice Schwartz, the star of “serious” Yiddish theater. Revisiting the second decade of the twentieth century nearly a quarter of a century later in *East River* (1946), Asch chose as its location the “poor neighborhood populated by a mixture of Jewish, Polish, Italian, German and Irish immigrants” at the eastern end of 48th Street.²⁷ Reading *East River* as a critical rewrite of *Uncle Moses*, Dan Miron interprets it as an articulation of Asch’s ecumenical vision of America as a new promised land. The overpopulated tenement block on the East Side is synecdoche of America in the making, a site where immigrants from different parts of Europe learn how to live together by overcoming their inherited ethnic and religious prejudice. Europe, which in *Uncle Moses* served as the place of escape and ultimate rest, is reduced in this post-Holocaust novel to a distant fading memory. Unlike the majority of Yiddish writers, Asch did not perceive Americanization as a danger for Yidishkayt, which for him was not contingent on Yiddish and an Eastern European legacy. According to his ecumenical, progressivist vision, represented by the young intellectual activist Nathan Davidowsky, Judaism will undergo a profound transformation in America while remaining true to its ethical and spiritual core, the foundation of Judeo-Christian civilization. Yet the truthfulness of this message, excessively articulated by the author and his mouthpiece Nathan, is somewhat undermined by the spatial dynamics of the novel. The Midtown immigrant neighborhood retains its Americanizing transformative energy only as long as it remains a relatively isolated and backward “shtetl,” but it has no future in the modern metropolis. Urban modernization kills the communitarian dream: “they’re tearing down the buildings and they’re getting ready to put up big apartment houses for the rich. The Republicans are moving in.”²⁸ In a similar fashion, B. Demblin’s 1937 novel *West Side* chronicles the demise of a self-styled community of homeless unemployed immigrants of the Depression era in Riverside Park as a result of Robert Moses’s ambitious

Westside Improvement Project. In Asch's symbolic topography, the modern fashionable settlements on the West Side offer no meaningful Jewish alternative to the old East Side. Nathan's father, the old-time Jew Moshe Wolf Davidowsky, refuses to move into his son's luxurious apartment on Riverside Drive. Instead he goes back, like old pious Jews in *Uncle Moses*, to die in peace in his "Old Country" – which in his case is not the shtetl of Kuzmin but Norfolk Street on the Lower East Side.

"‘Hudson?’ Moshe Wolf looked doubtful, and then made a contemptuous motion with his hand. ‘What kind of a river is that! How can you compare it?’"²⁹ An extended response to this question was offered ten years later by Isaac Bashevis Singer in the novel *Shadows on the Hudson* (1957).³⁰ As David Roskies points out, Singer "produced his best work in fierce dialogue with Asch."³¹ In this dialogue Singer frames his argument by shifting the location a few miles north-west, from East Side to Upper West Side, and by moving action forward thirty years, situating his novel in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Europe, which featured in Asch's novel as a distant nostalgic memory, had been turned into hell, but its grip on Singer's characters is stronger than in Asch's novel. Singer's New York is split into two different spaces, the contemporary American reality and the past European imaginary. This dichotomy is set in the novel's opening lines:

The apartment building into which Boris has just moved reminded him of Warsaw. Built around an enormous courtyard, it faced Broadway on one side and West End Avenue on the other. The study . . . had a window overlooking the courtyard, and whenever Boris glanced out he could almost imagine he was back in Warsaw. . . . Whenever Boris gazed into the courtyard and listened to its silence, the bustle of America evaporated and he thought European thoughts – leisurely, meandering, full of youthful longing. He had only to go to his salon – the living room – to hear the din of Broadway reverberating even here on the fourteenth floor.³²

The unique facility of New York to harbor a European past as its "spatial unconscious" is contrasted with other parts of the United States, from Maine to Florida. When Singer's characters (indeed, as a majority of characters in American Yiddish literature) attempt to escape from the eerie atmosphere of New York, they immediately realize that they can never live a "normal" life like that of Americanized Jews or Christian gentiles. The haunting presence of a destroyed Europe is especially strong in private locations, sometimes taking macabre forms. Thus, the depressed former Warsaw lawyer Stanislaw Luria dies during a séance in a Manhattan apartment where the ghost of his

murdered wife appears in an impersonation by a Polish Jewish actress. To escape their haunted rooms, Singer's characters set off on long and often purposeless journeys across the city by subway, bus, or taxi, hopelessly trying to come to terms with their past.

Like Asch, Singer revisited a period portrayed in an earlier work in a novel written ten years later, *Enemies: A Love Story* (1966). He moved the protagonist's base away from the cosmopolitan Upper West Side to solidly immigrant Jewish Brooklyn. From his apartment where he lives with his Polish peasant wife, Yadviga, who saved him during the Holocaust, Herman Broder makes sorties to see an American Reform rabbi in Manhattan, for whom he ghost-writes sermons and articles, and his lover, Masha, in the Bronx. By creatively reusing motifs from *Shadows on the Hudson*, Singer brings back from Europe (now for real) Broder's wife, Tamara, turning the conventional love triangle into a tetrahedron generating a stream of sensational episodes. Broder's life may be haphazard and unpredictable, but it has a clearly defined spatial structure, in which, as Roskies observes, "each borough represents a distinctly different realm of desire."³³ The oceanfront Jewish area of Brooklyn is portrayed as a Coney Island-style East European theme park, while the Bronx, the up-and-coming borough at the time of Opatoshu and Ignatov, is depicted as suffering a decline that reflects, somewhat anachronistically, the situation of the late 1960s. The contrast between the two outer boroughs is highlighted by the birth of Yadviga's healthy baby in Brooklyn, as opposed to Masha's fake pregnancy in the Bronx. In Manhattan, Tamara's Lower East Side location firmly sets her in the role of the European ghost in the flesh, contrasted by the rabbi's Upper West Side apartment, site of decadent American pandemonium. To complete the picture, one can add the fourth woman (purged from the English version by the editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux),³⁴ who offered Herman refuge in her Maine farm.

New York occupies a unique place in American Yiddish literature as the only American city with a European "spatial unconscious." European *shtetlekh*, cities, ghettos, and camps constantly haunt Yiddish-speaking New Yorkers, particularly in the older, unreconstructed areas of the city. Yiddishkayt lives in the streets of the Lower East Side and in other ethnic pockets of Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. But even the aggressive urban development projects do not completely eliminate the European past; they merely remove it from a new glamorous surface to private rooms, little shops and cafeterias, to lonely subway stations. Yiddish New York is the only place where a European past and American present coexist, but this coexistence is only discernible to those who can understand its idiomatic language.

Notes

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- 2 Ibid., 42.
- 3 "§38. Yiddish Journalism, XXXI Non-English Writings I, Later National Literature, Part III," in *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, Vol. XVIII (New York: Putnam, 1907–1921), <http://www.bartleby.com/228/0838.html>.
- 4 Josh Lambert, "Opatoshu's Eroticism, American Obscenity" in *Joseph Opatoshu: A Yiddish Writer between Europe and America*, ed. Sabine Koller, Gennady Estraiakh and Mikhail Krutikov (London: Legenda, 2013), 174.
- 5 Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 101.
- 6 Yisroel Y. Zevin, *Tashraks beste dertseylungen*, Vol. 1: *Dos goldene land* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1929), 20.
- 7 "§47. Leon Kobrin, XXXI Non-English Writings I, Later National Literature, Part III," in *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, Vol. XVIII. <http://www.bartleby.com/228/0847.html>.
- 8 Leon Kobrin, "The Tenement House," in *The New Country*, 5.
- 9 Dovid Ignatov, *Tsvishn tsvey zunen* (New York: Farlag Amerike, n.d.), 5.
- 10 Ibid., 12.
- 11 Quoted in Nakhmen Mayzil, *Tsurikblikn un perspektivn* (Tel Aviv: Y. L. Peretz-farlag, 1962), 315.
- 12 Yoysef Opatoshu, *Hibru* (New York: Mayzel, 1920), 86. My translation.
- 13 Ibid., 269. My translation.
- 14 Yoysef Opatoshu, *Di tentserin (Arum grend-strit)* (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1930), 88. My translation.
- 15 Ibid.
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- 17 Rokhl Luria, *Modne mentsshn* (New York: 1918), 33. My translation.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Sholem Asch, *Uncle Moses*, trans. Isaac Goldberg (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1920), 2.
- 20 Ibid., 125.
- 21 Ibid., 170.
- 22 Lamed Shapiro, "The Chair," trans. Reuben Bercovitch in *The Cross and Other Jewish Stories*, ed. Leah Garrett (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 183.
- 23 Joseph Opatoshu, "Ven poyln iz gefaln," *Zamlbikher*, 5 (1943), 28.
- 24 Ibid., 45–46.
- 25 Joseph Opatoshu, "50 Years of Yiddish Literature in the US," in *IIVO Annual for Social Science* 9 (1954): 81.
- 26 Kadia Molodowsky, *A House with Seven Windows: Short Stories*, trans. Leah Schoolnik (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 187.
- 27 Sholem Asch, *East River*, trans. A. H. Gross (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1946), 189.
- 28 Ibid., 423.

- 29 Ibid., 465.
- 30 The novel was serialized in the Yiddish *Forverts* in 1957–1958 and translated into English in 1998.
- 31 David Roskies, “Found in America: Sholem Asch and I. B. Singer,” in *Sholem Asch Reconsidered*, ed. Nanette Stahl (New Haven, CT: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 2004), 240.
- 32 Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Shadows on the Hudson*, trans. Joseph Sherman (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1998), 3.
- 33 Roskies, “Found in America: Sholem Asch and I. B. Singer,” 246.
- 34 Personal communication with the translator of the novel, Mrs. Aliza Shevrin.

Landscapes: America and the Americas

SARAH PHILLIPS CASTEEL

In 2013, the Jewish American Literature Discussion Group of the Modern Languages Association issued a call for a panel entitled “Jewish American or Jewish Americas?” The call solicited papers “examining/expanding the location of ‘America’ in Jewish American literary study to include the Caribbean, Central/South America, or Canada.” This new direction in Jewish American literary scholarship reflects a broader hemispheric turn in American Studies, which has reoriented itself over the past two decades along comparative, inter-American lines. It also follows on an Atlanticist and transnational trend in Jewish American historiography and reflects the increasing visibility of Jewish Latin American scholarship. Against the backdrop of these disciplinary realignments, Jewish American literary studies are poised to consider how the field might extend its purview beyond the borders of the United States. What would it mean to reimagine the study of Jewish American literature as the study of Jewish literatures of the *Americas*? What kinds of conceptual as well as geographical and linguistic shifts would a hemispheric reframing of the field entail?

In this essay, I want to suggest that landscape offers an especially productive lens through which to reenvision Jewish American literary studies in hemispheric terms. Although landscape has at various moments been used to establish the national difference of particular New World literatures – for example, a Canadian wilderness aesthetic defined against a U.S. pastoralism – the theme of nature as a source of American identity is one that cuts across New World writing. (Accordingly, I use the term “America” in the broad sense throughout this essay.) The centrality of nature to American poetics is a legacy of the so-called discovery of the Americas and the European vision of the New World as a space of nature rather than history. Eighteenth and nineteenth century New World artists ranging from the Venezuelan poet Andrés Bello to the painters of the Hudson River school converted a perceived negative (the absence of history and culture) into a positive (the celebration

of American nature). In the early and middle twentieth century, modernist painters and writers including the Group of Seven in Canada and Alejo Carpentier in Cuba looked to the natural environment to anchor a specifically American poetics. Postcolonial critiques of New World landscape representation articulated by contemporary visual artists such as Kent Monkman, Jin-me Yoon, and Roseàngela Rennó continue to foreground landscape as a site of New World identity formation even as they present those identities as contested.¹

Twentieth century Jewish North American culture is not usually associated with this tradition except in contrastive terms. Instead, it is typically perceived as urban in its orientation.² Irving Howe, for example, recalled that the Emersonian celebration of nature had little resonance for Jewish immigrant children of his generation: "Nature was something about which poets wrote and therefore it merited esteem, but we could not really suppose it was as estimable as reality – the reality which we knew to be social. Americans were said to love Nature, though there wasn't much evidence of this that our eyes could take in. Our own tradition, long rutted in *shtetl* mud and urban smoke, made little allowance for nature as presence or refreshment."³ Accordingly in a North American context, when we think of Jewish literature we think of Henry Roth's Lower East Side, Saul Bellow's Chicago, Mordecai Richler's Montreal. But, in fact, as becomes particularly apparent when we situate Jewish North American writing in relation to the broader hemisphere, landscape is an important topos in Jewish writing. Jewish literatures of the Americas offer significant evidence of an attraction to rural and wilderness spaces. This emphasis on landscape bespeaks the (now largely forgotten) agrarian past of a number of New World Jewish communities as well as the desire of Jews to participate in – sometimes admiringly and sometimes critically – the discourses about land and belonging that have been foundational for New World settler societies as well as for Zionism.⁴

Jewish North American writers engage landscape and nature as a gesture of emplacement in American space. Chava Rosenfarb identifies the importance of landscape, for example, for early twentieth century Canadian Yiddish poets:

How then did these poets assume a new coloration, becoming Canadian Yiddish poets with a literature of their own? They achieved this, I would argue, first of all by opening their eyes, not to the Canadian people, and not to Canadian culture, but to the immensity and magnificence of the Canadian landscape. . . . It was this wild beauty, this power concealed in a vast,

unexplored land that spoke to the heart of the Canadian Yiddish poet. For this reason, it finds its expression in the hundreds of nature poems they wrote in praise of the Canadian landscape.⁵

In this same period in the United States, Jewish writers exhibited a marked attraction to landscape. In their ghetto pastorals, gritty scenes of tenement life are interspersed with pastoral interludes in which the protagonists escape the city for more pleasant vistas. Thus in Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925), the heroine departs the city for a "town of quiet streets, shaded with green trees," where she encounters "the real Americans."⁶ In Mike Gold's *Jews without Money* (1930), a family trip to Bronx Park enables the mother to reconnect with her Hungarian past and with a knowledge of nature for which she has had little use since her arrival in New York. Lingering memories of an Old World rural landscape are also suggested by images such as the photograph of the cornfield that hangs in the family's Brownsville apartment in Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep* (1934). Although isolated and brief, such pastoral motifs signal both the persistence of Old World Jewish rural memory and a desire to connect more deeply with America.⁷

In the postwar period, as Jews gained greater access to spaces outside the urban metropolis, a more fully fledged Jewish American literary pastoral began to emerge. In Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959), Simcha tends his urban Montreal garden while his grandson, Duddy, feverishly acquires land in the French Canadian countryside, heeding Simcha's maxim "A man without land is nobody."⁸ When Simcha ultimately rejects the farm plot that Duddy secures for him, Duddy accuses his immigrant grandfather of being "scared stiff of the country"⁹ – an anxiety that Duddy himself rebuffs through his resort development scheme. The eponymous hero of Bellow's *Herzog* (1961) similarly draws inspiration from his Russian-born father's "devotion to his garden,"¹⁰ using his inheritance to purchase a country house. Although "a big-city Jew," Herzog is "peculiarly devoted to country life,"¹¹ his Berkshires house a defiant "symbol of his Jewish struggle for a solid footing in White Anglo-Saxon Protestant America."¹² By laying claim to the landscape, Duddy and Herzog assert their American belonging. Simultaneously, by introducing rural motifs, Richler and Bellow inserted themselves into national literary canons that had traditionally privileged pastoral and wilderness narratives. The body of literature discussed in the following will demonstrate not only that American pastoral and wilderness myths inform Jewish writing, however, but also that Jewish writers' appropriations of them ultimately put pressure on the myths themselves.

Jewishness and Territoriality

Eric Zakim has argued that in the Israeli context, literature played a crucial part in making land central to Jewish identity. He reminds us that in the early history of Zionism, the relationship between the Jewish people and the soil “was not automatically self-evident” but rather needed to be formulated through cultural vehicles such as literature.¹³ In Jewish writing across the Americas, we can identify a related project of “bringing the Jew into a landscape”¹⁴ – of constructing a territorialized Jewish identity and sense of belonging to the land. For like Israeli literature, Jewish writing of the Americas confronts “the problems of a deterritorialized nation searching for environmental appropriateness and belonging.”¹⁵ The literary project of Jewish American territorialization in turn echoes and ironically reproduces that of the dominant Euro-American settler society, which seeks to assert its autochthony and belonging to the land.

This territorializing dimension of Jewish American literary expression, which as we will see is still more pronounced in Latin America, has been obscured not only by the urban orientation of Jewish studies but also by its lack of attention to space more generally. The editors of the volume *Jewish Topographies* observe that the spatial turn has been slow to make its mark on Jewish studies, which suffers from a “spatial ‘blind-spot’.”¹⁶ With the exception of Israeli academia, where a spatial emphasis preceded the rise of critical space theory in the 1980s, Jewish studies’ focus has largely been on the temporal axis of Jewish identity (Jews as people of the book, not of the land) and on Jewish deterritorialization rather than territoriality (the “wandering Jew”). Those spaces that do figure in Jewish studies scholarship tend to be ones of death and mourning or of commemoration. The editors conclude that the focus on Eretz Israel as the exclusive locus of Jewish attachment to land “conceals the importance that other places and spaces held and still hold for Jews throughout the world.”¹⁷ I would argue that the Americas, where space and nature historically have occupied such a central place in the cultural imagination, offer a particularly rich vantage point from which to examine this lacuna.

The perception of Jewish American life as exclusively urban in character is inaccurate, particularly when we extend the reach of our analysis across the hemisphere as well as back into the colonial period and into the Sephardic dimension of early Jewish American life. While early modern Jewish historiography has highlighted the networks of port Jews who circulated across geographical, cultural, and political boundaries in the Atlantic and Mediterranean, more recently, plantation Jews who led “more settled and exploitative lives”¹⁸

have emerged as a focus of scholarship. Literary portrayals of Sephardic planters recover this lost chapter of Jewish history while also raising the question of Jewish coloniality.

Jewish plantation life in the antebellum U.S. South features, for example, in Alan Cheuse's *Song of Slaves in the Desert* (2011). Cheuse's novel, which is organized around an opposition between the innocent, enlightened northern Jew and the decadent, morally corrupt South Carolina Jewish planter, advances a rather formulaic and exoticizing vision of the landscape of the plantation as at once seductive and nightmarish. This gothic vision is challenged by the Surinamese author Cynthia McLeod's *The Cost of Sugar* (*How duur was de suiker?* 1987).¹⁹ In McLeod's historical novel, members of an eighteenth century Sephardic planter family circulate between the Protestant-dominated capital of Paramaribo and the Jewish world of the Jodensavanne, or "Jews' Savannah," which was the largest Jewish agricultural community of its time. Drawing on Jewish historical sources such as David de Isaac Cohen Nassy's *Historical Essay on the Colony of Surinam* (1788), *The Cost of Sugar* details the layout and design of the village of Jodensavanne and the town of Paramaribo, maps the location of various Jewish-owned plantations, and incorporates detailed descriptions of the synagogue and other colonial architecture. At the same time as memorializing the Jewish contribution to the history of the Caribbean colony, McLeod foregrounds the Jewish planters' dependency on their slaves:

It now occurred to Elza that her family was in fact a model for all Suriname society. Wasn't everyone and everything totally dependent on the slaves? Just as she felt so completely lost without Maisa, so the colony would be totally lost without its slaves. They did everything and knew everything, and the whites knew nothing and were incapable of anything. The whites needed the negroes, but the negroes didn't need a single white person: look how the Maroons had managed to create a complete society in the jungle, knowing how to put everything to good use.²⁰

McLeod's revisionary presentation challenges not only gothic slavery narratives such as Cheuse's but also colonial picturesque works such as the landscape paintings of the nineteenth century Sephardic Jamaican artist Isaac Mendes Belisario, which naturalized the social order of the plantation.²¹

Jewish agricultural life in the Americas was confined neither to the colonial period nor to the Sephardic presence. Instead, it continued with the later wave of Ashkenazi Jewish emigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries thanks in large part to the efforts of Baron Maurice de Hirsch and his Jewish Colonization Association (JCA). According to its charter, the JCA's

purpose was “to assist and promote the emigration of Jews from any part of Europe or Asia, and principally from countries in which they were being subjected to special taxes or political or other disabilities, to any other parts of the world, and to form and establish colonies in various parts of North and South America and other countries for agricultural, commercial and other purposes.”²² Founding Jewish agricultural settlements in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, the United States, and elsewhere, the JCA and its literary legacy link together a variety of sites across the hemisphere from Entre Ríos and Rio Grande do Sul in the pampas of South America to the Canadian prairies and New Jersey.

The JCA’s influence on Jewish literary production has been most pronounced in South America and especially Argentina, where many Jews first settled in agricultural colonies and only later moved to cities. This agricultural past is reflected in the literary tradition of the *gaucho judío*, whose founding text is Alberto Gerchunoff’s *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas* (*Los gauchos judíos*, 1910). Dedicated to Baron de Hirsch, Gerchunoff’s story collection is composed of a series of sketches of Jewish life in the agricultural colonies. What unifies Gerchunoff’s vignettes is the locale in which the Jewish *colonos* find themselves, a bucolic landscape of farmland and milkmaids. The collection interweaves Jewish and gaucho landscapes and traditions as it moves between the Old World shtetl past and the New World rural present.

In one of Gerchunoff’s stories, the figure of the Jewish gaucho as embodied in Reb Favel Duglach is a study in contradictions: “He was an original-looking man. A hooked nose dominated his face, and his long beard was balanced by long locks of hair at the back of his head. He wore the loose gaucho trousers, the *bombachas*, under his traditional Jewish cassock, that was belted in his case. It was a fantastic getup, but Favel explained the absurdities by stating: ‘I’m a Jewish Gaucho’.”²³ In *Jewish Gauchos*, Gerchunoff attempts to reconcile these incongruities by identifying the agricultural colonies with a biblical Jewish way of life. Viewed through this lens, the Jewish colonists are transformed into ancient Israelites: “Raquel, I see the majestic women of ancient Scriptures in you! In the peace of the Argentine plain, you suggest the Biblical heroines who tended gentle flocks in the flat lands of Judea.”²⁴ Gerchunoff advances an optimistic vision of Argentina as a Promised Land, a space of renewal and rejuvenation as well as Jewish integration into Latin American life: “All felt a fervent love for this country, however new and unknown it seemed. The hope they felt was as fresh as the new black earth their plows turned; the new hope and the new earth made their own selves feel new, their bodies young.”²⁵ Such

passages reflect Gerchunoff's view that in the freer atmosphere of Argentina, Jews could assimilate and remake themselves as a people.

Gerchunoff was followed by a series of South American successors who alternately extended and revised the idealized vision of Jewish agricultural life that he presented. Samuel Eichelbaum's 1926 play *Aarón the Jew* (*El judío Aarón*), for example, focuses on labor strife and interracial tensions in the colony of Entre Ríos. Eichelbaum's Jewish farmer Aarón Leibovich puts forward a proposal for social reform and communal agriculture, attacking the evils of the class system as well as inequities between the Jewish colonists and the native peasants. "It's better to sow than to make others sow," declares Don Aarón to his fellow Jewish colonists, citing the Talmud, but his proposal is soundly rejected.²⁶ Gerchunoff's romanticized view of rural Jewish integration in Argentina is also challenged by later works such as Nora Glickman's "The Last Emigrant" ("El último de los colonos," 1983), which portrays the Jewish colonists' failure to assimilate to their rural environs and the persistence of haunting Old World memories. At the end of Glickman's story, the Russian emigrant Baruch Leiserman is killed on his farm by a tornado, his plants uprooted in an evocative botanical image that suggests his failure to implant himself in his adoptive landscape: "The farmhand just happened to be in town that day. When he returned the following morning, he found Baruch among the wreckage, a hundred yards from the barn, in the middle of a huge puddle left by the storm. Baruch rolled into the mud, dragging with him all the plants he ever seeded during his life there."²⁷ In Moacyr Scliar's *The Centaur in the Garden* (*O Centauro no jardim*, 1980), the challenges of rural Jewish assimilation are expressed in magical realist terms. The Russian Jewish colonist Leon Tartakovsky, a devotee of Baron Hirsch, is horrified to discover that his wife has given birth to a centaur – a vivid metaphor for the doubleness of Brazilian Jewish identity that simultaneously evokes the gaucho or "centaur of the Pampas."

The JCA colonies that were established in North America in New Jersey, Oregon, Saskatchewan, and elsewhere feature in a number of memoirs²⁸ as well as in *Land of Hope* (1960), Clara Hoffer and her daughter, F. H. Kahan's, creative nonfiction account of Jewish homesteading in the Canadian prairies. The major literary work that evokes the JCA experiment in Canada is Eli Mandel's *Out of Place* (1977), a collection of poems that traces "the Jewish exodus from shtetl to the plains."²⁹ In *Out of Place*, the prairies of the poet's childhood are rendered as a profoundly Jewish landscape through arresting images such as "the mouse runs through passover and the harvest of matzoh."³⁰ A collaboration with his wife, Ann Mandel, whose photographs are

interspersed with the poems, *Out of Place* revisits the Jewish agricultural colonies of Hirsch (named for the baron) and Hoffer, Saskatchewan. The ghostly character of the landscape of Mandel's poems is reinforced by the depopulated and derelict rural settings that the black and white photographs present.

An underlying theme of many New World exploration narratives is that the discovered place has no preexisting history, that it is *terra nullius* and therefore available for settlement. In Mandel's *Out of Place*, by contrast, the land is steeped in time:

our history is in motion curved
like straight correction lines
earth-measured on a western grid
place known through time time
measuring place.³¹

At first glance, *Out of Place* appears to aim to recover the lost history of this site of Jewish Canadian rural memory. The poem performs an archival function, incorporating a variety of materials relating to the history of the Jewish colonies in an apparent effort to restore order to the vault of community records that the poet and his wife discover. Yet the materials that the poem archives only serve to cast doubt on the poet's ability to reclaim this lost history and to read the landscape. Like some of Gerchunoff's Latin American successors, Mandel casts a more critical eye on life in the JCA colonies, raising questions about nostalgia for a rural Jewish past and about the act of memorialization itself. Norman Ravvin's travelogue *Hidden Canada* (2001) similarly takes up the theme of vanished histories that lie buried in the landscape. Ravvin's chapter on Hirsch describes a series of missed attempts to locate synagogues and other architectural traces of the now disappeared Saskatchewan Jewish colonies: "We found the Hirsch Jewish Community Cemetery. But everything else had vanished. Houses, schools, the frame synagogue where my grandfather taught Yiddish and led the farmers in prayer. The little train platform was nowhere in sight. Even the grain elevator had been removed. I took pictures of the cemetery, but when I had them developed, they came back blank."³² *Out of Place* also bears comparison with the Cuban American anthropologist and poet Ruth Behar's *An Island Called Home* (2007). Like Mandel and Ravvin, Behar is a memory tourist who revisits her childhood landscape in an attempt to recapture a marginal, ghostly Jewish past.

Sites of memory that are omitted from the official registries are also the subjects of the Jewish Canadian playwright Jason Sherman's *An Acre in Time* (2001).

The play's central character is Julia, a surveyor who is assigned the LeBreton Flats, an apparently empty, weed-filled site in downtown Ottawa that has been slated for redevelopment. Her survey work unexpectedly uncovers the layered history of the site. Noted by Samuel de Champlain in 1613, it was surveyed by the British at the turn of the nineteenth century, served as a hunting grounds for an Algonquin chief who petitioned Queen Victoria to restore ownership to him, and subsequently became a vibrant neighborhood of mostly French and Irish only to be razed to make way for government offices that were never built. By recalling this forgotten past, Sherman advances a powerful critique of the modern nation state's vision of the land as empty of history and as available for development. Countering this vision, in Sherman's rendering space is imbued with time and memory. In order to assess the site, Julia must travel through history to encounter its various inhabitants. Among these are two Russian Jewish brothers and junk-shop owners, Louis and Jankov, who relate their story of strife and of escape from the pogroms: "After all what we been through, we finally build a home in a free land, and now they're gonna take it from us. Why must they always chase after the Jews?"³³

As Sherman's play and Mandel's poems variously signal through allusions to Algonquin and Assiniboine histories of dispossession, the vanished rural Jewish past is not the only one to haunt the New World landscape. Similarly in the Argentinean novelist Mario Goloboff's *The Dove Keeper* (*Criador de palomas*, 1984), the Jewish Indian gaucho figure El Tío Negro points out that the Jewish colonists' cemetery is situated on the site of a Puelche Indian graveyard so that "at the end we are all mixed together."³⁴ The indigenous presence and questions of sovereignty are addressed more directly in Eichelbaum's *Aarón the Jew*, in which Aaron advocates that the Jewish *colonos* share the land with the Guaraní Indians. By contrast, while Sherman exposes how the settler colonial nation empties the land of its history in order to legitimize its authority over its territory, his sympathetic portrayal of the Russian Jewish brothers elides the relationship of minor settler populations to that process of settlement.

Unsettled Settlers

A hemispheric approach not only foregrounds the presence of landscape as a topos in Jewish writing but also invites us to consider the difficult ethics and politics of territoriality. Gestures of emplacement in Jewish writing of the Americas inevitably become imbricated in the European colonial legacy of conquest, raising the question, How do Jewish writers alternately perpetuate,

ironize, or challenge ideologies and discourses of settlement? In her essay “Are People of Colour Settlers Too?” Malissa Phung observes that there are different kinds of settler with varying degrees of access to power. While Phung usefully questions whether settlers of color are “settlers in the same way,” she maintains an overly neat distinction between “settlers of colour” and “white settlers.”³⁵ As Jewish Studies scholars are well aware, whiteness is itself an unstable category that requires nuancing and historicizing. In the late nineteenth century, for example, American nations such as those of the Southern Cone encouraged Jewish emigration in an effort, as Scliar puts it, “To populate [their territory] with Europeans . . . who could ‘whiten’ the Latin American populations.”³⁶ With their dubious whiteness, Jews were not the first choice of American governments and often were ambivalently received. Yet these Jewish colonists nonetheless joined in the process of settlement that shaped New World nations.

Jewish participation in the civilizing mission of empire was in turn connected to the territorialist movement that developed in tandem with Zionism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Before the rejection of the Uganda Proposal at the Seventh Zionist Congress in 1905, it was far from clear that the Jewish homeland would be located in Palestine. Instead, Jewish territorialists considered a host of alternative sites, including such New World locales as Suriname and Argentina. It is in this context that Baron de Hirsch sought to resettle Eastern European Jews in a variety of places but particularly in North and South America. We need, then, to attend to the complexities and contradictions surrounding the deployment of narratives of settlement by what Phung calls “unsettled settlers”³⁷ – to consider the self-indigenizing strategies that minor settler populations have adopted and how such strategies relate to those of the dominant settler society. Yet I would argue that even when Jewish writers reproduce narratives of settlement and indigenization uncritically, they do so with a difference, producing an ironic excess that destabilizes these narratives.

The influence of settlement and pioneer narratives can be seen not only in the Jewish Latin American and Canadian contexts but also in works of U.S. popular culture and literature ranging from the Marx Brothers’ *Go West* (1940) and Mel Brooks’s *Blazing Saddles* (1974) to Harriet Rochlin’s western trilogy *The Desert Dwellers* (1996–2001). One important example from postwar U.S. literature is *A New Life* (1961), in which Bernard Malamud’s protagonist S. Levin journeys to the Pacific Northwest to take up a teaching post. Captivated by the myth of self-reinvention in the West, Levin hopes to exchange his old life for a new one and to achieve a more fully American identity. Instead, he finds that

his new surroundings only render him more acutely aware of his foreignness. Yet he remains enraptured by them: “never before had he lived where inside was so close to out. In a tenement, each descent to the street was an expedition through dank caves and dreary tunnels. He enjoyed the cherry tree reaching its knotty, mildewed branches to his back window.”³⁸ At the same time, Levin comes to question the American pastoral myth, his keen observation of nature revealing not only rebirth but also the persistence of the past. While digging up a weedy flower garden for his landlady, he finds “last season’s walnuts and acorns, six varieties of worms, a soggy doll, and thickly-rusted screw-driver from yesteryear. The past hides but is present.”³⁹

Malamud’s Levin envisions himself as a new brand of pioneer reenacting the settlers’ journey from East to West: “My God, the West, Levin thought. He imagined the pioneers in covered wagons entering this valley for the first time, and found it a moving thought.”⁴⁰ Similarly in Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* (1997), “Swede” Levov, who abandons Newark for the rural environs of Old Rimrock, sees himself as a frontiersman, conquering new territory by pushing his way into rural America. If for the generation of the Swede’s father, Keer Avenue in Newark was where Jews “la[id] claim like audacious pioneers to the normalizing American amenities,”⁴¹ the Swede seeks a new frontier, “commuting every morning . . . out past the suburbs – a short-range pioneer living on a hundred-acre farm on a back road in the sparsely inhabited hills beyond Morristown, in wealthy, rural Old Rimrock, New Jersey, a long way from the tannery floor where Grandfather Levov had begun in America.”⁴² The Swede’s rural property represents a claim to a kind of American belonging that even his family’s economic successes in America have not achieved. Just as pastoral is linked to an assimilationist desire to inhabit the “real America” in Bellow’s *Herzog* and Malamud’s *A New Life*, so in *American Pastoral* the Swede’s pastoralism marks the increasing Americanization of the postimmigrant generation. Yet like Malamud, Roth gives new depth and complexity to the American pastoral myth by putting it into contact with a Jewish history of dislocation and persecution.

Malamud and Roth’s heavy use of irony in *A New Life* and *American Pastoral* deflates heroic settlement and pioneer narratives. Despite their concern with exclusionary aspects of American pastoral myths, however, indigenous claims on the land are unacknowledged in their novels. By contrast, indigenous peoples figure prominently in Malamud’s posthumously published novel *The People* (1989), whose Russian Jewish antihero joins a Native American tribe. In *The People*, Malamud recasts the nineteenth century American West as a multiethnic space of cultural contact in which Jewish exile is both associated with

and distinguished from the dislocations to which Native Americans historically have been subjected. Jews who “go Indian” also feature in Ben Katchor’s graphic novel *The Jew of New York* (1998), which recounts the true history of Mordecai Noah’s failed attempt to found the Jewish settlement of Ararat on Grand Island near Buffalo in 1825. In his retelling of Noah’s effort to establish a New World Jewish refuge, Katchor foregrounds the figure of the indigene and the lost tribes myth, affiliating Jews and Indians as displaced peoples. Yet he also implicates Jews in the very settlement narratives that are the cause of Native American displacement.

This counterpoint between Jewish and Native American experiences of deterritorialization is also fundamental to two Jewish appropriations of northern frontiers. Richler’s *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989) and Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* (2007) insert Jewish presences into the highly charged spaces of the Canadian Arctic and the Alaskan panhandle, respectively.⁴³ In Richler’s novel, an English Jewish con artist joins the 1845 arctic expedition of the explorer Sir John Franklin. With this inventive premise, Richler claims a Jewish space in the Canadian nation, liberating Jewishness from the urban ghetto and locating it at the heart of the national narrative and territory. Richler’s Ephraim Gursky displays classic survival skills in the frozen wilderness that are associated with the national myth of a rugged Canadian masculinity, his exploits in the North authenticating his and his descendants’ claim to Canadian belonging. When asked where he is from, Ephraim replies simply, “The North”⁴⁴ – an emphatic gesture toward the symbolic origins of the Canadian nation. By going Indian and especially through having sexual contact with the female indigene, Ephraim further establishes the legitimacy of his presence in the New World, symbolically appropriating the indigene’s connection to the land.

In *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union*, Chabon’s counterfactual account of the post-Holocaust era, two million European Jews are granted temporary refuge in Alaska. The promised agricultural settlements fail to materialize, and the Jews settle in Sitka, the former capital of the Russian Alaska colony, where they find themselves in cramped conditions not unlike those they had left behind in Europe. By the end of the novel, Chabon’s protagonist, Meyer Landsman, has rejected any dream of territorial belonging, declaring: “My homeland is in my hat. It’s in my ex-wife’s tote bag.”⁴⁵ Writing eighteen years after Richler, Chabon in his emphasis on the struggle for Native sovereignty reflects the shift in public consciousness surrounding First Nations peoples in Canada and the United States that took place during the intervening years. In keeping with this heightened public sensitivity to sovereignty claims and the historical abuses of

the First Nations, Chabon presents the fantasy of Jewish indigenization and territorialization in the North as destined to fail.

Postcolonial Critiques

A powerful challenge to idealized visions of the American landscape and to the ideologies of settler colonialism and neocolonialism that such a vision masks may be found in the title poem of Adrienne Rich's *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991). The poet's project in "Atlas" is to draw a "map of our country."⁴⁶ But what vision of the landscape will the poet offer? Rather than engaging in a dehistoricized, sanitized celebration of the beauty of nature, Rich addresses a much grittier, more "difficult" reality that coexists with that beauty:

... I don't want to know
wreckage, dreck and waste, but these are the materials
and so are the slow lift of the moon's belly
over wreckage, dreck, and waste, wild treefrogs calling in
another season, light and music still pouring over
our fissured, cracked terrain.⁴⁷

Rich's poem offers a profoundly antiromantic portrait of the United States from West Coast to East. California, for example, is transformed by agribusiness into a landscape of labor and poverty, of rupture and violence: "each berry picked by a hand / in close communion, strawberry blood on the wrist."⁴⁸ In "Atlas," the topographical features of the land are imbued with sociological meaning and pathos: "the Sea of Indifference, glazed with salt / ... the haunted river."⁴⁹ In this landscape, the poet uncovers marginal, unmemorialized spaces:

North and east of the romantic headlands there are roads into tule
fog
places where life is cheap poor quick unmonumented⁵⁰

Although Jewishness does not figure as prominently in "Atlas" as elsewhere in Rich's writing, it contributes significantly to her antipastoral reimagining of the meaning of American place. In the poem's nostalgic third section, which conjures up childhood summers in Vermont, the speaker recalls a teapot given to her grandmother by a German Jewish refugee who later committed suicide. Objects such as the teapot that circulate across Rich's landscape signal a history of displacement and death that unsettles the pastoralism of the Vermont scene. Vermont is revealed in the poem to be no childhood idyll but

instead “the landscape / of the rural working poor.”⁵¹ Alongside other historical traumas that the poem references (including Wounded Knee and Selma), Rich’s allusion to the Holocaust suggests the anguish of human experience that make a naïve pastoral vision untenable.

Romantic visions of the American landscape are also challenged in the Argentinean writer Germán Rozenmacher’s play *Simón Brumelstein, Knight of the Indies* (*Simón Brumelstein, el caballero de Indias*, 1970), in which a forty-year-old assimilated Ashkenazi Jewish jeweler fantasizes that he is a Spanish conquistador who has discovered a land called Chantania. The mentally unstable Brumelstein dons a black doublet with gold braid and brandishes a sword, the humble room that he inhabits transformed in his fantasy into El Dorado. Adding to the romance of this narrative of Jewish participation in the *conquista* is Brumelstein’s belief that he is the descendant of Marranos. Brumelstein’s hallucinatory fantasy of being a Marrano conquistador is one of being connected to the land: “Haven’t I told you already that I have a country? Chantania is my country.”⁵² Yet just as El Dorado proves an empty myth, so Brumelstein’s grand assertions only serve to reveal his lack of belonging in “a strange country which isn’t yours and which you’ll never be a real part of.”⁵³ The cross that is prominently displayed on one wall of the jeweler’s room reminds him that he is nothing but a “Jew, just a temporary tenant.”⁵⁴ And yet Brumelstein’s conquistadorial fantasy is in some sense no more outlandish than that of a Pizarro or a Cortés. Accordingly, at the end of the play, the “*vulgar, fantastic map of the Americas*”⁵⁵ that had hung in Brumelstein’s room is taken down. The play’s juxtaposition of a romantic idea of conquest with inquisitorial motifs and a Jewish history of displacement thus produces an ironic and critical perspective on the narrative of discovery.

If Rich offers a portrait of the United States from coast to coast while also reaching across the border to Canada,⁵⁶ and Rozenmacher evokes what Edmundo O’Gorman called the European “invention” of the New World, still more expansive in its geography is Aurora Levins Morales’s *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas* (1998). The daughter of a Puerto Rican mother and an Ashkenazi Jewish American father, Levins Morales locates herself at the crossroads of the Americas as well as of multiple diasporas:

I am a child of the Americas,
a light-skinned mestiza of the Caribbean,
a child of many diaspora, born into this continent at a crossroads.⁵⁷

In *Remedios*, Levins Morales offers a model for redrawing the map of Jewish American literature by situating Jewishness in the contact zone of the

Americas as well as at a global crossroads. *Remedios* crisscrosses continents, cultures, and periods as well as personal and collective histories in order to investigate Puerto Rico's heritage. Among the many historical narratives that it interweaves are those of Columbus's landfall, African slavery, and the Sephardic expulsion. Although Levins Morales addresses her Ashkenazi ancestry in *Remedios*, she gives particular emphasis to Sephardic history, the early presence of Marranos and New Christians in the New World helping to connect the various geographies that she addresses while also underscoring the work's central themes of dispossession and displacement.

In *Remedios*, Levins Morales, who has studied herbal medicine and identifies herself as part of a "Jewish feminist earth-based spiritual community,"⁵⁸ reconceptualizes the role of the historian as that of a *curandera* who heals through the telling of stories. Reenvisioning conventional historiography from a feminist and decolonizing perspective, Levins Morales's curative history unfolds a complex, multilayered structure. *Remedios* is organized simultaneously according to chronology, matrilineal generation, and species of plants. A catalog of plants, including potatoes, tobacco, calendula, and ginger, is interspersed with a female-centered chronology of world history. In Levins Morales's botanical catalog, the two plants that become particularly associated with Jewishness are the pomegranate and rosemary. In a section that records a series of key moments in the history of medieval and early modern anti-Judaism, Levins Morales likens the Jewish dispersion from Spain to the scattering of pomegranate seeds. In a subsequent section entitled "1492: Lamento serfardita – Spain," she recounts the uprooting of the Jews by linking the preservation of memory to the herb rosemary:

As the Jews pull away, roots twelve hundred years deep tear from the soil, and great clumps of earth go with them. . . . In Constantinople and Amsterdam, in Salonika and Antwerp, Venice and Ferara, Alexandria and Dubrovnik, Cairo and Marrakech they will transplant the cuttings of romero they took from gardens now owned by others. They will pass on to their children, and their children's children, the treasures of memory, the hope of return.⁵⁹

This botanical counternarrative is a key strategy through which *Remedios* resists and disrupts colonialist historiography.

Conclusion

In Levins Morales's *Remedios* and other examples of exurban Jewish writing that I have surveyed here, the Americas emerge as a space of cultural contact,

a global crossroads in which Jewish trajectories of dislocation intersect and overlap with those of other New World populations. These works support the assertion of the editors of *Jewish Topographies* that “Jewish spaces are characterized by deep seated translocality and transculturality.”⁶⁰ Yet the landscapes of Jewish writing in the Americas are not only transcultural but also transtemporal. Indeed, what we see more broadly across Jewish literatures of the Americas is an emphasis on the idea of “place known through time,” as Mandel characterizes it.⁶¹ Jewish writers of the Americas operate at the intersection of spatial and temporal axes, excavating historical landscapes rather than discovering edenic ones. Investigating “the history of this earth and the bones within it,”⁶² they uncover landscape as the site of disappeared or forgotten histories. Moreover, many of their works perform not only an archaeological function but also an archival one, unearthing the discursive history of literary and pictorial representations of the land and disturbing the representational regimes of the settler society.

The American landscape is not only the site of cultural contact and solidarity among the various dispossessed peoples whose histories haunt the landscape, however, but also of Jewish integration into the settler society. Indeed, I have argued that landscape plays a key role in the process of Jewish assimilation and Americanization. Many of the texts discussed here reproduce foundational myths of the Americas such as those of El Dorado, the gaucho, the American West, and the Canadian North, thereby illustrating the appeal of fantasies of discovery, conquest, and indigenization for Jewish writers. By appropriating these spatially oriented myths, Jewish writers of the Americas stake out a larger and more ambitious territory for Jewish writing. At the same time, they also unsettle such myths by exposing them to the profoundly historicist orientation of Jewish diasporic consciousness. Yet by engaging rural and wilderness settings where ghostly Jewish pasts mingle with other histories of New World dispossession, Jewish writers not only draw attention to but also become implicated in the dynamics of conquest and settlement that have produced the landscapes of the Americas.

Notes

- 1 See Monkman's *The Fourth of March* (2004), Yoon's *A Group of Sixty-Seven* (1996), and Rennó's "Vera Cruz" (2000/2004), among other works.
- 2 Baumgarten, for example, declares that to imagine Jews as rural people is an impossibility in the modern era (1993), (395). Relatedly in "No Trees Please, We're Jewish,"

- Furman identifies a "Judaic hostility to the natural realm" (120) and regrets that he is unable to reconcile his work in Jewish American studies with his environmentalism.
- 3 Irving Howe, "Strangers," in *Celebrations and Attacks: Thirty Years of Literary and Cultural Commentary* (New York: Horizon Press, 1979), 16.
- 4 To register this pattern of identification with the land as one that carries across the hemisphere is not to underplay important national distinctions among these literatures. Nor is it to subsume other Jewish American literatures within an expansionist U.S.-Jewish literary discourse. As Gil cautions, the Jewish American literary model cannot simply be universalized to encompass Latin American – we might add Caribbean and Canadian – Jewish writing. Instead, as Latin Americanists and Canadianists are acutely aware, the United States needs to be decentered in hemispheric discussions. Yet recognizing national and regional differences such as the predominance of magical realist representations of nature in Jewish Latin American writing ought not to preclude identifying continuities in Jewish writers of the Americas' responses to dominant discourses regarding nature, land, and settlement in their respective societies.
- 5 Chava Rosenfarb, "Canadian Yiddish Writers," in *New Readings of Yiddish Montreal*, ed. Pierre Anctil, Norman Ravvin, and Sherry Simon (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2007), 22.
- 6 Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (New York: Persea Books, 1975), 210.
- 7 For a more detailed discussion of pastoralism in Jewish American literature, see Casteel (2007, ch. 2).
- 8 Mordecai Richler, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 48.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 312.
- 10 Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 242.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 118–119.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 309.
- 13 Eric Zakim, *To Build and Be Built: Landscape, Literature, and the Construction of Zionist Identity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 2.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt, and Alexandra Nocke, "Exploring Jewish Space: An Approach," in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, ed. Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt, and Alexandra Nocke (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 5.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 18 Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan, "Preface," in *Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500–1800*, ed. Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), x.
- 19 Although not normally discussed in the context of Jewish literature, McLeod, who is of mixed descent, acknowledges Jewish ancestry.
- 20 Cynthia McLeod, *The Cost of Sugar*, trans. Gerald R. Mettam (Paramaribo, Suriname: Waterfront Press, 2010), 286.
- 21 Stuart Hall, "Afterword: The Legacies of Anglo-Caribbean Culture: A Diasporic Perspective," in *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds*,

- ed. T. J. Barringer, Gillian Forrester, and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 179–180.
- 22 Theodore Norman, *An Outstretched Arm: A History of the Jewish Colonization Association* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 21.
- 23 Alberto Gerchunoff, *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*, trans. Prudencio de Pereda (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 6.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 26 Samuel Eichelbaum, “Aarón the Jew,” in *Argentine Jewish Theatre: A Critical Anthology*, ed. and trans. Nora Glickman and Gloria F. Waldman (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1996), 42.
- 27 Nora Glickman, “The Last Emigrant,” in *Tropical Synagogues: Short Stories by Jewish-Latin American Writers*, ed. Ilan Stavans, trans. John Benson (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1994), 94.
- 28 See, for example, Michael Usiskin’s *Uncle Mike’s Edenbridge: Memoirs of a Jewish Pioneer Farmer*, trans. Marcia Usiskin Basman (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers Ltd., 1983) and Uri Herscher’s translation of the memoir of the farmer Sidney Bailey, a resident of the Alliance, New Jersey, colony, in his *Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America, 1880–1910* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981).
- 29 Eli Mandel, *Out of Place* (Erin, Ontario: Porcépic, 1977), 15.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 32 Norman Ravvin, *Hidden Canada: An Intimate Travelogue* (Markham, Ontario: Red Deer Press, 2002), 128.
- 33 Jason Sherman, *An Acre of Time* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2001), 79.
- 34 Mario Goloboff, *The Algorrobos Quartet*, trans. Stephen A. Sadow (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 14.
- 35 Malissa Phung, “Are People of Colour Settlers Too?” in *Cultivating Canada: Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity*, ed. Ashok Mathur, Jonathan Dewar, and Mike DiGagne (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2011), 292.
- 36 Moacyr Scliar, “A Centaur in the Garden,” in *King David’s Harp: Autobiographical Essays by Jewish Latin American Writers*, ed. Stephen A. Sadow (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 62.
- 37 Phung, “Are People of Colour Settlers Too?” 295.
- 38 Bernard Malamud, *A New Life* (London: Penguin, 1968), 54.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 52–53.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 41 Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 10.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 43 For a more detailed discussion of the treatment of land and indigeneity in Richler and Chabon’s novels, see Casteel (2009).
- 44 Mordecai Richler, *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin, 1989), 6.
- 45 Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 368.
- 46 Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988–1991* (New York: Norton, 1991), 6.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 4.

- 48 Ibid., 3.
49 Ibid., 6.
50 Ibid., 13.
51 Ibid., 8.
52 Germán Rozenmacher, *Simón Brumestein, Knight of the Indies in Argentine Jewish Theatre: A Critical Anthology*, ed. and trans. Nora Glickman and Gloria F. Waldman (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1996), 121.
53 Ibid., 125.
54 Ibid., 116.
55 Ibid., 110.
56 Rich's counterhegemonic perspective draws energy from the "borderless streams" and sunflowers that "lac[e] the roadsides from Vermont to California" (11) and defy geopolitical "grids of states" (22) as well as from the pine trees that stretch from Vermont across the U.S./Canada border into Quebec.
57 Aurora Levins Morales, *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1998), 50.
58 Ibid., 214.
59 Ibid., 66.
60 Brauch et al., *Jewish Topographies*, 3.
61 Mandel, *Out of Place*, 15.
62 Rich, *Atlas of the Difficult World*, 22.

Across the Border: Canadian Jewish Writing

REBECCA MARGOLIS

Canadian Jewish literature has often been compared to its U.S. counterpart, for both geographic and cultural reasons. The two countries share a vast border, are former English colonies with a continual use of that language, and have significant immigrant populations. The two countries absorbed significant numbers of Jewish immigrants, including a mass Eastern European immigration that was Yiddish speaking and working class. The comparison between the two countries should be natural, at least from a Canadian perspective. However, rather than being a mini-United States, Canada has produced a literature that has evolved its own very distinctive set of defining characteristics. Further, the dominating presence of the United States and its overshadowing influence on Canada in terms of literature, theater, film, and music are indisputable, and Canadian culture is oft subsumed into the larger category of "American." Canada's Jewish writers are conflated with U.S. writers or neglected altogether. Michael Greenstein's study *Third Solitudes* suggests marginality as a key feature of Jewish Canadian literature.¹

Intertwining historical realities have informed Canada's cultural identity and the literature that its Jewish writers have produced. The ideological foundation of the country is a French-English bilingualism that dates to its roots as a European colony, and the dynamics of that uneasy duality have permeated the country's cultural development. Unlike the United States, Canada was not born out of revolution and rejection of the British Empire that dominated it. Rather, British culture continued to exert a significant influence on the country. As a former Commonwealth country, Canada arguably has far more in common with Great Britain or Australia culturally than it does with the United States: Like Canada, these countries have Jewish populations with high degrees of institutionalization and maintenance of Jewish traditions and limited influence of liberal Jewish movements.

The mass immigration of Canada's Jews, which took place after 1905, was composed of Eastern European Jews who spoke Yiddish and were, on the

whole, traditional as well as Zionist, socialist, or a combination. This stands in sharp contrast to the U.S. mass immigration of the 1880s and its earlier German immigration, which promoted acculturation and cosmopolitan values until the turn of the nineteenth century. Further, Canada did not develop its identity as a nation of immigrants until the third quarter of the twentieth century, with the advent of policies of multiculturalism. Rather, the mass Jewish immigration to Canada was dictated by government policies set in place to serve the economic needs of the country. The Jewish immigrants were met with ambivalence, in particular in comparison with the experience of new arrivals in the United States. As Greenstein writes, whereas newcomers to Ellis Island were welcomed into the melting pot, "later arrivals to the Port of Montreal, however, received no such welcome, having to wait for recognition in a conservative Canadian mosaic that did not force quick abandoning of Yiddish roots."² In an atmosphere of exclusion from a Christian mainstream, the new arrivals created a vast infrastructure to promote and maintain their Jewish culture in both Yiddish and Hebrew, notably a system of all-day schools. Without a recognizable Canadian literary tradition, Yiddish writers who emerged out of this community in the first half of the twentieth century looked to European and U.S. models for their writing. The first generation of English-language Jewish writers emerged from this immigrant community. In the 1980s, the country's new official government policies of multiculturalism created a place for Canada's Jews to promote their distinctive culture, in particular in the realm of the arts. Ethnic culture was promoted and supported by government programs that encouraged Jewish voices. Meanwhile, in the 1970s, in Quebec, separatist politics that aggressively valorized the French language excluded a majority of the province's Jewish population, which comprised immigrants from Eastern Europe who had acculturated from Yiddish into the historically dominant English-speaking minority. Meanwhile, a significant French-speaking immigrant population primarily from northern Africa forged its own distinct culture.

In addition to evolving under very different circumstances and influences than writing in the United States, Canadian Jewish literature has been strongly influenced by the relatively later development of a distinct national identity. Confederation in 1867 rendered Canada a dominion in the British Commonwealth rather than an independent country, and English Canada remained strongly identified with British culture. The country continued to fly the British Union Jack until its own national flag, the maple leaf, was adopted in 1965. Until well into the twentieth century, writers in Canada oriented themselves toward England rather than forging a distinct Canadian

literary tradition. Likewise, French Canada, which remained largely agrarian and dominated by the Catholic Church until the “Quiet Revolution” of the 1960s, had looked to France in the development of its modern culture in the late nineteenth century. The mass immigration of Jews to the country in the early twentieth century, which swelled the population from several thousand in the 1880s to more than 100,000 by the 1920s, rapidly acculturated into the economically and culturally dominant English milieu. This immigrant community produced a number of major writers who participated in the founding of their country’s literary tradition in English before it had an entrenched literary establishment. Likewise, the later Sephardi/Mizrahi Jewish immigration of the post-1950s era has participated in the development of a distinct French literary culture in Canada. The evolution of Canada’s national identity in the second half of the twentieth century – and its influence on the country’s literary tradition – has thus had a significant impact on the development of Jewish Canadian writing. The lack of a long-standing literary tradition in Canada’s official languages has historically allowed the country’s Jews the freedom to make significant contributions to Canadian literature and form an integral part of the country’s literary tradition, even as they write on Jewish themes. At the same time, the lack of a strong Canadian ethos encouraged the maintenance of a coherent Yiddish culture that produced its own lasting literary life.

Jewish Canadian literature emerged out of three distinct generations: Yiddish in the 1910s, English in the 1940s, and French in the 1960s. Each of these literary strands has had its own characteristics that stem from the interplay between its authors and the Canadian context in which they wrote. This essay will examine two pioneering authors in each language who achieved critical success in Canada: J. I. Segal and Chava Rosenfarb in Yiddish, A. M. Klein and Adele Wiseman in English, and Naim Kattan and Régine Robin in French. Each of these writers experienced isolation as the first Jewish or Jewish/female author in his or her respective languages in Canada, or, in the case of Chava Rosenfarb, the last. The study will discuss the ways in which these writers were formed by their Canadian landscape and the impact they have had on wider Canadian culture.

Yiddish

Within a relatively small and new Jewish immigrant center, Canadian Yiddish literature emerged in the shadow of larger and more established literary centers in Europe and the United States (notably New York) and produced largely minor writers until the Second World War. Concentrated in the immigrant

center of Montreal, these writers formed a cohesive literary community that was involved with literary organizations such as the Jewish Public Library (Yidishe folksbibliotek) and published widely in the daily newspaper, the *Keneder adler* (founded in 1907), as well as a series of local short-lived literary journals. At the same time, they understood themselves as an integral part of a transnational literary venture that spanned Yiddish hubs across the world. They published abroad and hosted visiting Yiddish writers from across the world. Because of these contacts, Canada's Yiddish writers introduced new, modernist literary trends to the country as early as the 1920s, some two decades before these would appear in English. However, because they were writing in Yiddish, the impact did not extend beyond a Jewish readership.

J. I. Segal was the most renowned Canadian Jewish writer of the early immigrant period. Born in the Ukraine and raised in the Hasidic town of Koretz, Segal settled in Montreal at the age of fifteen and found work in a garment factory. With the encouragement of local Yiddish literati, he published his first poem in the *Keneder adler* in 1915. A poet who briefly resided in New York City and associated with Mani Leib and other members of the modernist Yiddish literary collective *Di yunge*, Segal forged new paths in his verse and in the publication of avowedly modernist literary journals that were, in turn, influenced by avant-garde American and European cultural movements. Among his subjects was the Montreal cityscape; one of the most well known of these poems, "Late Autumn in Montreal," captures the Jewish neighborhood along "the Main" (St. Laurent Boulevard) where Segal, along with the city's Yiddish immigrant population, resided:

Our churchy city becomes even more pious
on Sundays, the golden crosses shine and gleam
while the big bells ring with loud
hallelujahs and the little bells answer
their low amens; the tidy peaceful streets
lie dreaming in broad daylight murmuring
endearments to me who am such a Yiddish Jew
that even in my footsteps they must hear
how the music of my Yiddish song sounds
through the rhythm of my Hebrew prayer.³

During a time when English and French poetic traditions favored pastoral landscapes, Segal was one of the very first poets in any language to depict the cityscapes of Montreal. However, while these poems capture the physical landscapes of an ordinarily bustling street, they are devoid of people

to identify the landscape as recognizably Canadian. As Shari Cooperman Friedman suggests, poems such as this one hearken back to Segal's home of Koretz, which, like Catholic Montreal, was a "churchy" city.⁴ This feature of Segal's verse points to a broader feature of the Canadian Jewish experience in the first half of the twentieth century: The Jewish population formed a distinct minority within a Christian country that maintained its strongly Catholic and Protestant characters and lacked mechanisms to integrate its immigrant population. In Montreal in particular – the largest Jewish immigrant center at the time – the city's Jews maintained a separate infrastructure to parallel the French Catholic and English Protestant ones already in place, including libraries, schools, philanthropic organizations, and others. As a special volume dedicated to Canada in the *Musterverk* series of Yiddish literature indicates, there is a corpus of Yiddish poetry that describes the physical environment of Canada: in it but separate from wider Canadian society and its inhabitants.⁵ Segal himself was acutely aware of the absence of a distinctive Canadian literary voice, a situation he attempted to address by publishing Canadian Yiddish literary journals such as *Nyuansn* (1921), whose introduction reads:

Our motivation is not to strive for pioneering literary activity here in Canada, which is cold, vast, and of limited Jewishness. We cannot hope for any kind of distinct Yiddish cultural center here. . . . Our literary center is New York, whether we have expectations from it or not, and whether we seek inspiration there or not. The fact that we are *here* in Canada makes us a distinct element that is seeking expression and cannot remain silent.⁶

This lack of engagement with the Canadian cultural mainstream and the absence of a distinct Canadian literary tradition allowed the country's Yiddish literati to forge their own literary voice rather than be influenced by contemporary Canadian writing. Their writing thus integrates avant-garde literary trends that would not enter mainstream Canadian writing for another generation. The lack of a specific Canadian Yiddish literary tradition likewise imbued that literature with fluidity. In his study of the Yiddish poet Ida Maze, a contemporary of Segal, the scholar Irving Massey characterizes the Montreal Yiddish milieu of the Depression era as deeply communitarian, with art a product of the community and "no clear standards, and none to impose them if there had been."⁷ Although this was a period of ideological extremes and Yiddish literati, like their counterparts abroad, had their rivalries along political lines, in particular with the advent of extreme left-wing movements, virtually all of the country's writers published in a wide array of journals and other collective publications that spanned the ideological spectrum. This can

be attributed to the country's relatively small population of writers and readers and corresponding lack of resources, as well as to the lack of a Canadian literary establishment in any language. This fluidity has remained a lasting characteristic of Canadian Yiddish writing.

Canada transitioned from a minor into a major center of Yiddish literature after the Holocaust, which sent world-renowned Yiddish writers to Canada. Chava Rosenfarb joined a vibrant cultural community in Montreal in 1950. A survivor of the Lodz Ghetto and several concentration camps, Rosenfarb authored a series of novels set in her native Lodz. She continued to write in the Yiddish language even as its readership dwindled out of fidelity to a community destroyed in the Holocaust.⁸

Rosenfarb formed part of a tight-knit Yiddish literary community that comprised dozens of writers in Montreal as well as internationally. She maintained correspondence with many Yiddish writers, notably those who wrote for the prestigious Israel-based publication *Di goldene keyt* (1949–1995). By the 1980s, when many of these writers and their audiences were no longer living and Yiddish audiences were not replenishing themselves, Yiddish writing was buoyed by Canadian policies of multiculturalism that supported literary projects in minority languages. Rosenfarb applied for several writing grants, albeit unsuccessfully, while writers such as Sholem Shtern received funding for projects to translate and promote Yiddish.⁹ Further, the language was taught in secular Jewish day schools that were heavily subsidized by the provincial government. With this state support, it remained viable to publish in Yiddish even as the number of fluent native speakers in the secular world dwindled.

Rosenfarb received international acclaim for her novels, including the prestigious Manger Prize, and became one of the world's last remaining secular Yiddish writers. Like many other Yiddish writers in Canada, she was closely involved in the translation of her own works into English in order to reach a wider readership. These efforts date to 1971, when she prepared a selection of her own English translations of her poetry for publication, which, for reasons unknown, never appeared during her lifetime.¹⁰ In her introduction to this volume, published posthumously, Rosenfarb identifies the rationale behind her project of self-translation: "It is an attempt to reach out, to remove the linguistic chains I was born in, chains that are uncomfortable to any writer; because, basically, language is an inadequate and limited instrument."¹¹ She sought to transcend ethnic barriers and communicate with a broad audience. Rosenfarb continued these efforts: Translations of all of her novels and a selection of short stories, which she was closely involved with, did appear during

her lifetime. At the same time, she remained committed to the language until the end of her life.

Rosenfarb had a complex relationship with Canada, which allowed her freedom to write but also filled her with a profound sense of isolation rooted in her identity as a displaced post-Holocaust Diaspora Jew. She expressed these conflicting feelings in an essay she wrote two decades after settling in Montreal:

For twenty-one years I have lived in Canada, the country of promise. There is a magnificent air of freedom about this country, a freedom which the winds of all seasons, sweeping through the breadth of the continent seem to carry on their wings – an ideal place of escape for those who have been oppressed and enslaved elsewhere, for those who wish to turn over a new leaf, who hope for change, for betterment, who want to live their lives as they please.

However I do not feel at home in this country. Here, in Montreal, in the Province of Quebec, I have lived for two decades between the two solitudes – in my own solitude.¹²

As a Yiddish writer, Rosenfarb's primary point of engagement was with a transnational Yiddish literary community rather than the Canadian context in which she wrote most of her works. Her main influence was European literature, and she only became familiar with Canadian literature late in life. Canada, however, features prominently in her short stories, originally published in *Di goldene keyt* in the 1980s. According to Goldie Morgentaler, "She has done this by effecting a synthesis between her primary theme of the holocaust and the Canadian milieu in which she finds herself, so that Canada becomes in these stories the land of the postscript, the country in which the survivors of the holocaust play out the tragedy's last act."¹³

English

Canada's Anglo-Jewish authors and poets of the twentieth century played a formative role in the creation of a tradition of Canadian literature and are some of the country's leading writers. They have received critical recognition locally and internationally, including Canada's top literary prize, the Governor General's Award. They integrated the Jewish immigrant experience into an evolving Canadian literary mainstream, which includes a significant component of immigrant literature. As such, they were able to find their place within an evolving literary tradition that lacked an entrenched establishment.

The poet A. M. Klein bridged two worlds: Eastern European Jewish tradition and the Canadian modernist literature that he played a role in forging

in the 1940s. Born in Ratno, Poland, Klein arrived in Montreal as a child and grew up in the Jewish immigrant neighborhood, where he received both a traditional Jewish and secular education. As a community activist, Klein was devoted to Jewish and leftist causes: He served as president of Canada's Zionist Young Judaea movement in the 1930s and unsuccessfully ran for federal office for the leftist CCF Party in 1949. He served as long-term editor of the Anglo-Jewish newspaper the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* (1938–1955). Klein was at the forefront of a distinctively Canadian modern literary tradition and was involved with various literary schools that sought to forge a new voice in Canadian literature: the "Montreal Group" of poets at McGill University, which included A. J. M. Smith, F. R. Scott, Leo Kennedy, and Leon Edel; the Preview Group of poets, which included F. R. Scott, P. K. Page, and Patrick Anderson; as well as the rival First Statement poets, which included John Sutherland, Louis Dudek, and Irving Layton. His poetry integrates diverse literary traditions and forms: biblical verse, medieval and modern Hebrew literature, Yiddish literature, Shakespeare, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce. The themes of his highly complex writing constitute a wide array, Jewish and non-Jewish. For example, he published *The Rocking Chair* (1945), a series of poems that depicts French Canadian life, and a novel titled *The Second Scroll* (1951) that deals with the search for meaning in a post-Holocaust world. His position as one of the country's first modern Canadian poets allowed him great freedom to experiment with forms and content. For example, his ode to his city, "Montreal," originally published in *Preview* in 1944 and reprinted in *The Rocking Chair*, integrates linguistic elements of Canada's two official languages:

O city metropole, isle riverain!
 Your ancient pavages and routs
 Traverse my spirit's conjured avenues!
 Splendor erabic of your promenades
 Foliates there, and there your maisonry
 Of pendent balcon and escalier'd march
 Unique midst English habitat
 Is vivid Normandy!¹⁴

The effect, as one scholar posits, is that the poem upon which it draws, Ezra Pound's "New York," is "reassembled into a new, distinctively Canadian dish."¹⁵

Klein remains one of the most critically acclaimed of Canada's poets, and as the country's first prominent Anglo-Jewish writer, he offered a model for

Jewish Canadian writers to follow. Despite his withdrawal from public life in the mid-1950s, his influence has been long-standing in Canadian literature, in particular among his fellow Jewish writers. The poet and prose writer Miriam Waddington published a biography of Klein in 1970, a study titled *Folklore in the Poetry of A. M. Klein* (1981), and an edited collection of his poetry. A biographical study, *A. M. Klein: La réconciliation des races et des religions* (1994), authored by Naïm Kattan (discussed later), lauds Klein for melding his literary career with civic duty and commitment to his community, and for being open to the world while safeguarding his own traditions. Further, an anthology of poetry dedicated to and written about Klein was published under the title *A Rich Garland: Poems for A. M. Klein* (1998). The collection featured some fifty poets, including the Jewish poets Eli Mandel and Miriam Waddington.¹⁶ Klein has also been the subject of academic books and symposia. With Klein, one can begin to speak of a community of Canadian Jewish writers who influenced each other: Klein encouraged the poet Irving Layton and strongly influenced the prose writer Henry Kreisel, who authored what was to become his best-known short story, "The Almost Meeting" (1981), about a missed encounter between a young writer and his literary hero, based on A. M. Klein, whom Kreisel had tried to meet after Klein had lapsed into silence.¹⁷ Most famously, the novelist Mordecai Richler modeled a highly unsympathetic character on Klein in his novel *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989).

The Winnipeg-born writer Adele Wiseman was a seminal figure in Canadian literary culture in the second half of the twentieth century, both as an author and as a promoter of literature. She grew up in Winnipeg's North End, the city's Jewish neighborhood, and her Ukrainian-born parents were involved in secular Yiddish cultural circles and sent her to a secular Yiddish school. Like Klein, she was educated at a Canadian university, receiving her B.A. from the University of Manitoba. As Ruth Panofsky has shown, Wiseman made an early commitment to become a professional writer and devoted herself to the vocation of perfecting her craft, despite declining success over the course of her career.¹⁸ She wrote in multiple genres; her most critically acclaimed writing centered on the Jewish immigrant experience: Her first novel, *The Sacrifice* (1956), which received universal acclaim, deals with traditional Jewish Ukrainian immigrants to Canada, Abraham and Sarah, who experience a series of tragedies in the transition from Old World to New World. Her second novel, *Crackpot* (1974), is a lighthearted glimpse at the life of a Jewish prostitute in Winnipeg's North End. Both novels are deeply Jewish in content and language and lend themselves to a variety of Jewish interpretations. For example, scholars have applied kabbalistic concepts in their readings of *Crackpot*.¹⁹

Wiseman identified Canada as a significant factor in her literary career. In an essay about women in Canadian fiction, she attributes her mobility as a woman writer to forging her career in a country that lacked “an already strongly established male literary establishment.”²⁰ Encouraged by mentors and fellow students at the University of Manitoba, she found herself one of the first women prose writers in Canada in the immediate postwar years. Further, she enjoyed a long and fruitful friendship with the prominent Canadian writer Margaret Laurence.²¹ This friendship, expressed in a voluminous body of letters, helped create a sense of community among women writers in Canada, who otherwise experienced isolation.²² Despite declining critical acclaim, she remained devoted to the literary path she had chosen, delaying the publication of a second novel for eighteen years. Finally, particularly in her last years, she exerted wide influence on Canadian literature as a mentor to other writers.

French

Canada’s French-language Jewish writers arrived in Canada after the Second World War, both as part of a sizable Sephardi immigration and as French-speaking survivors of the Holocaust. As Francophones, they naturally settled in Montreal, which was home to a French-speaking majority that had historically lived uneasily with a politically and economically dominant English-speaking minority. Until the “Quiet Revolution” of the 1960s, the province of Quebec outside Montreal was largely agrarian, staunchly Catholic, and French-speaking; the 1960s marked massive changes as the province secularized rapidly and nationalist movements situated the French language as a core component within a newly emerging Quebec identity.

While not the first French-language Jewish writer to achieve wide acclaim – in this respect he was preceded by the poet Monique Bosco – Naïm Kattan is the first to write predominantly on Jewish themes. Born in Baghdad, he was educated in Arabic, Hebrew, French, and English and pursued his advanced education in literature at the Sorbonne. He settled in Montreal in 1954, a time when Canada’s Jewish population was predominantly Ashkenazi and anglicizing rapidly. With facility in both English and French, he was able to move fluidly between cultures and became involved in cultural rapprochement between the Jewish community and the wider French Canadian population, who had historically been estranged from each other, through his liaison work with the Canadian Jewish Congress organization, the Cercle Juif de Langue Française. He also worked as a journalist with the French-language press and head of the literary section of the Canada Council, a federal funding agency

for the arts in Canada. His first novel, *Adieu Babylone* (1975), is a semiautobiographical coming of age novel that follows a young Iraqi Jew as he encounters the world of Western culture in the 1940s. One of the core themes of this work is how the protagonist negotiates his own minority Jewish heritage within a multiethnic Baghdad and his encounter with the West.²³

Kattan's multilingualism and transcultural identity have placed him in a unique position within Canadian literature. Critics point to the fluidity with which Kattan has moved among English and French cultures in Quebec combined with his experience as an outsider to the majority Muslim Iraqi culture in which he grew up. This is indicated in the title of a review of *Adieu, Babylon*: "Bridge of Tongues: Why an Arabic-speaking, Baghdad-born Jew Is a Perfect Guide to the Modern Canadian Experience."²⁴ According to one scholar, "it is because of the facility with which he moves in and out of the confines of cultures that Naïm Kattan has been able to fit so easily into the Canadian Mosaic." As Kattan himself stated in 1982, "I'm not Canadian just because I *prefer* Canada to the United States. . . . I have become part of the ethos of what is Canada."²⁵ Kattan's unique position at the crossroads of cultures has resulted in his being portrayed as the quintessential Canadian.

Régine Robin was born to Polish-Jewish parents in Paris, where she grew up speaking Yiddish and French and was sent to a leftist Yiddish Sunday school. She obtained a doctorate from the Université de Paris, settled in Montreal in 1977, and became a professor of sociology at the Université de Montréal. Her arrival coincided with the height of the Quebecois separatist movement and marked a time when the province was fundamentally redefining its sense of national identity. Her first novel, *La Québécoise* (1983), is considered a classic work of a genre called *écriture migrante* that emerged in the 1980s in Quebec. Like Kattan, she was multilingual – speaking French, Yiddish, German, Russian, and English – and was able to move freely among cultures. At the same time, her displacement as a post-Holocaust Jew resonates throughout her work.

La Québécoise offers a fragmented, nonlinear stream of consciousness account of a protagonist who is unable to integrate into her adopted home. The work follows a Paris-born Ashkenazi Jew, like Robin, who settles in Montreal and is "the wandering Jew" who is comfortable only in Hebrew; like Robin, she has attempted to salvage works in the Yiddish language via translation. The work is punctuated by outbursts such as this one:

ON NE DEVIENRAIT JAMAIS VRAIMENT
QUÉBÉCOIS.

De l'autre côté de la barrière linguistique?
Allons bon. Elle serait venue de Paris
pire encore
maudite Française.
Un imaginaire yiddishophone? Quel drôle de
mot!²⁶
WE WOULD NEVER BECOME TRULY
QUÉBECOIS.
On the other side of the linguistic barrier?
Okay then. She would have come from Paris
even worse
a damn Frenchwoman.
A Yiddishophone imagination? What a funny
word!²⁷

One of the themes of the work is the displacement of Jewish history, notably in the Holocaust, as well as the loss of Yiddish, which constitutes the subject of her book *L'Amour du Yiddish: écriture juive et sentiment de la langue, 1830–1930* (*The Love of Yiddish: Jewish Writing and the Feeling of the Language*, 1984). In a paper titled “Rêver la langue disparue” that she contributed to a 2004 conference called “Traduire le Montreal Yiddish/New Readings of Yiddish Montreal,” Robin addresses the imagined ways that Yiddish can inhabit a culture where no one understands it: “La langue perdue, la langue absente comme tremplin à l’imaginaire et à la création, si l’on veut, et quelques modalités de ces inscriptions.”²⁸ [The lost language, the absent language as a springboard to the imagination and to creation, if one desires it, and some modes of these inscriptions]. Rooted in Montreal and profoundly informed by her identity of displacement as an atheist Holocaust survivor, Régine Robin is, perhaps, the quintessential Quebec immigrant voice.

Concluding Remarks

These founding figures in Canadian Jewish literature were joined by a growing group of writers in all three languages. Yiddish letters in Canada expanded rapidly from 1950 to 1980, with a core group of some two dozen writers actively publishing in the language, including Yehuda Elberg, Peretz Miransky, Simkha Simkhovitch, Sholem Shtern, and Yaakov Zipper. Canada’s Yiddish writers were at the forefront of international Yiddish activity into the first decade of the twenty-first century. In the last decade, this Canadian Yiddish literary tradition has essentially come to an end with the death of the last major writer in that language, Rosenfarb herself. In contrast, the English and French Jewish literary

traditions have expanded. The list of writers in English who have achieved international renown includes Leonard Cohen, Irving Layton, and Mordecai Richler, and, most recently, David Bezmozgis. It also includes a long list of writers who have rooted their careers in Canada and published a wide variety of works with Jewish themes: Matt Cohen, Howard Kreisel, Norman Levine, Robert Majzels, Eli Mandel, Seymour Mayne, Lillian Nattel, Norman Ravvin, Nancy Richler, Miriam Waddington, and others. Geographically these writers span Canada's largest hubs of Eastern European mass immigration of the nineteenth century: Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg. The Holocaust and themes of uprooting and exile feature prominently in this body of literature. The list is shorter in French, with a handful of writers in Montreal including Monique Bosco and Victor Téboûl. The most recent Jewish Canadian writing can be found in the Canadian literary journal *Parchment: Contemporary Canadian Jewish Writing*, of which the latest edition (volume 16) was published in the spring of 2014.

The question of what constitutes Canadian Jewish literature is undergoing the same challenges as in the United States and in other locations: What makes literature Jewish and Canadian? Is it enough for a writer to be of Jewish and Canadian origins or to have Jewish identity and at one point to have called Canada home? Does a writer need to be writing on Jewish themes and in a Canadian setting? For example, the award-winning writer and filmmaker David Bezmozgis emigrated to Canada from his native Latvia in 1980 and grew up in Toronto's Russian Jewish neighborhood. His collection of short works, *Natasha and Other Stories* (2004), is set largely in Toronto and deals with Jewish characters. In scholarly studies, he tends to be conflated with a generation of Russian Jewish émigré writers who settled in North America and who explore their Russian roots in their work, notably the U.S. writers Gary Shteyngart, Lara Vapnyar, Ellen Litman, Anya Ulinich, Sana Krasikov, Irina Reyn, and Maxim D. Shrayer.²⁹ While the Jewishness of his writing is discussed, its Canadianness has proved more problematic; as one author states, while Canadian Jewish writers tend to be marginalized within scholarship of Jewish writing in "America," I hope to show that Bezmozgis is too interesting to be ignored just because he ends up on the wrong side of the border.³⁰

The Jewishness and Canadianness of the literary tradition are complicated by the lack of a tradition of criticism to accompany it. Canada has not produced its own equivalent to the celebrated U.S. literary critic Alfred Kazin to help shape and promote Canadian Jewish literature. The authors who are the focus of this study – Segal, Rosenfarb, Klein, Wiseman, Kattan, and Robin – are universally considered Jewish Canadian writers in commentary on the subject. They write on Jewish themes, depict Canadian landscapes, and are

self-identified as Canadian; they also struggled to stake out their careers and many wrote with a looming sense of isolation. With increasing fluidity in Jewish and Canadian identities, the categories blur. The last fifteen years have brought heated discussion on the state of Jewish Canadian literature in journals and symposia, some of it hosted by a Montreal publisher under the title “The Jewish-Canadian Literature Debate: Has Jewish-Canadian Writing Lost Its Vigour?” Some Canadian Jewish writers have bemoaned the recent state of Canadian Jewish letters as disappointing, overly romanticized, less Jewishly informed, and constituting only minor writers; others characterize today’s Canadian Jewish writing as more diverse and dynamic, and unfortunately overlooked by contemporary critics. Many of the participating authors suggest that Canadian Jewish literature has declined as the country’s Jewish population has largely shed its immigrant roots and achieved upward mobility.³¹

Despite being overshadowed by the Jewish literary scene in the neighboring United States, young Jewish writers are producing innovative works in Canada. The newest voices include Ayelet Tsabari, whose volume *The Best Place on Earth: Stories* (2013) draws on her own experiences as an Israeli immigrant of Yemeni descent, and Gabriella Golliger, whose novel *Girl Unwrapped* (2011) portrays a child of Holocaust survivors coming to terms with her lesbian and Jewish identities. Perhaps the future of Canadian Jewish literature lies precisely in this new diversity of voices and the struggle for new identities.

Notes

- 1 Michael Greenstein, *Third Solitudes: Tradition and Discontinuity in Jewish-Canadian Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008).
- 2 Ibid., 5.
- 3 J. I. Segal, “*Shpet harbst in Montreol*” in *Letste lider* (Montreal: Aroysgegebn fun der Y. Y. Sigal-Fundatsye, 1955), 106; translated by Miriam Waddington as “Late Autumn in Montreal,” in *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), 153.
- 4 Shari Cooper Friedman, “Between Two Worlds: The Works of J. I. Segal,” in *An Everyday Miracle: Yiddish Culture in Montreal*, ed. Ira Robinson, Pierre Ancil, and Mervin Butovsky (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1990), 115–128.
- 5 See Shmuel Rozhanski, *Kanadish: Antologiyе. Musterverk fun der yidisher literatur* 62 (Buenos Aires: Literatur-gezelschaft bam yivo in Argentine, 1974).
- 6 J. I. Segal, “Rezonansn,” *Nyuansn* 3 (February 1921): 65.
- 7 Irving Massey, *Identity and Community: Reflections on English, Yiddish, and French literature in Canada* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 53.
- 8 Rebecca Margolis, “Chava Rosenfarb’s Yiddish Montreal,” *Canadian Jewish Studies/Études juives canadiennes* 18–19 (2010–2011): 159–177.

- 9 Rebecca Margolis, "Sholem Shtern: Bridging the Gaps," in *New Readings of Yiddish Montreal/ Traduire le Montréal Yiddish/ Taytshn un ibertaytshn yidish in Montreal*, ed. Pierre Ancil, Norman Ravvin, and Sherry Simon (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2007), 93–102.
- 10 Chava Rosenfarb, *Exile at Last*, ed. Goldie Morgentaler (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2013), 10.
- 11 Ibid., 11.
- 12 Ibid., 11–12.
- 13 Goldie Morgentaler, "Land of the Postscript: Canada and the Post-Holocaust Fiction of Chava Rosenfarb," *Judaism* 49:2 (Spring 2000): 169.
- 14 A. M. Klein, A. M. Klein – *Complete Poems: Collected Poems*, Part 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 621.
- 15 Darlene Kelly, "A. M. Klein and the 'Fibbiest Fabricator of Them All,'" *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 43 (Fall–Winter 1998): 70–102.
- 16 Seymour Mayne and Glen Rotchin, *A Rich Garland: Poems for A. M. Klein* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1998).
- 17 Reprinted in Henry Kreisel, *The Almost Meeting and Other Stories* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2004).
- 18 Ruth Panofsky, *The Force of Vocation: The Literary Career of Adele Wiseman* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006).
- 19 For example, Francis Zichy, "The Lurianic Background: Myths of Fragmentation and Wholeness in Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*," in *Adele Wiseman and Her Works*, ed. Ruth Panofsky (Toronto: Guernica, 2001), 31–54.
- 20 Adele Wiseman, *Memoirs of a Book Molesting Childhood and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 58.
- 21 Their correspondence spanning some forty years has been published in John Lennox and Ruth Panofsky, eds. *Selected Letters of Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).
- 22 Ibid., 3.
- 23 Naïm Kattan, *Farewell, Babylon*, trans. Sheila Fischman (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2005), chapter 11, esp. 71.
- 24 Nasrin Rahimieh, *Oriental Responses to the West: Comparative Essays in Select Writers from the Muslim World* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1990), 29.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Régine Robin, *La Québécoise: roman* (Montreal: Québec-Amerique, 1983), 36–37.
- 27 English translation by Phyllis Aronoff of Régine Robin's *La Québécoise: roman*, published under the title *The Wanderer* (Montreal: Alter Ego Editions, 1997), 24.
- 28 Régine Robin, "Rêver la langue disparue," in *New Readings of Yiddish Montreal*, 77.
- 29 Adrian Wanner, "Russian Jews as American Writers: A New Paradigm for Jewish Multiculturalism?" *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 37:2 (Summer 2012): 157.
- 30 Bettina Hoffman, "David Bezmozgis – Muscles, Minyan and Menorah: Judaism in *Natasha and Other Stories* (2004)," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 25, Contemporary Jewish American Writers Respond to Judaism (2006): 102.
- 31 "The Jewish-Canadian Literature Debate: Has Jewish-Canadian Writing Lost Its Vigour?" <http://www.vehiculepress.com/subjects/jewish/jewishlitdebate.html>.

AMERICAN SITES

PART IV

★

CREATING FIELDS

The Role of the Public Intellectual in American Culture

JESSE RABER

The failing of liberal intellectuals, writes Lionel Trilling, is their “unwillingness to believe that in a time of change and danger openness and flexibility of mind” are “the first of virtues.”¹ These words would make a fine epigraph for an intellectual history of the revolt of the New York intellectuals against the ideological rigidity of Stalinism, that Big Bang of Jewish American intellectual history to which the star systems of *Partisan Review*, *Dissent*, *politics*, and *Commentary* all trace their origins. This story has recently been well told by scholars such as Neil Jumonville and Mark Shechner: Young Jewish radicals are shocked out of the slumber of Communist Party orthodoxy by the Moscow Trials and the Hitler-Stalin pact; they launch the “new” *Partisan Review*, proclaiming the margin of freedom from political ideology that must be granted to the arts and to the individual person; high modernism displaces proletarian realism, and, to some extent, Freud begins to displace Marx, in their intellectual sympathies. Trilling’s career, and especially the warm reception of *The Liberal Imagination*, represents the triumphant entry of this perspective into the main current of American intellectual life.²

Trilling’s identification of “openness and flexibility of mind” as “first of virtues” certainly belongs to this story, but it also belongs to another, alternative but intersecting genealogy of twentieth century Jewish American intellectuals. The quoted passage is not from *The Liberal Imagination*, nor any of Trilling’s other well-known essay collections, but from his early book on Matthew Arnold, and it marks a turning point in the history of a Jewish American tradition of thinking about cultivation – about “culture” as an accomplishment rather than an affiliation. Despite the fact that “Arnoldian culture” is a byword for genteel aloofness, this tradition is distinguished from gentility in the negative sense of something fussy and status-driven by its understanding of cultivation as involving a wholehearted embrace of everyday lived experience. Beginning with Abraham Cahan, a resolutely didactic writer whose project of cultural uplift is inseparable from his embrace of what he calls the “mama

gab” of household Yiddish, we will pursue this cultivation theme through Trilling, for whom the most advanced and praiseworthy ideas are those that most fully express the friction and recalcitrance of the condition of humanity’s embodied condition, to Susan Sontag, whose “new sensibility” aims to help people “recover our senses” in all their messy glory.³ Although they sincerely believe in a hierarchy of aesthetic tastes, of which they sit unabashedly on top, their elitism rests on democratic foundations. No doubt this seeming paradox is part of their appeal among American intellectuals.

It is tempting to explain the Jewish American affinity for Arnoldian discourses by invoking the idea of Jewish moral seriousness, or of a Jewish tradition of making texts into objects of worship, but these ideas are too broad to be of much use here. A more specific, but still insufficient, explanation might be that the Arnoldian ideal, especially in his *Culture and Anarchy*, is one of mutual social accommodation, a stance that would have an obvious appeal to a beleaguered people. Jewish American intellectuals, however, were drawn to the Arnoldian tradition as much for the critical personae it made available as for the ideas it advanced. There is something hierophantic about the Arnoldian critic; she speaks not as herself, but on behalf of an ideal self, of what Arnold calls the “best self,” a self that can be a model for everyone and hence is not particularly one’s own.⁴ Yet this best self is still a self, so that if the Arnoldian critic lacks the pronounced personality of, say, a confessional poet, she also avoids the extreme impersonality of the scientific socialist or the philological scholar, the respective intellectual types of the world of European radicalism the *Partisan Review* group was ambivalently leaving behind and of the American academic world they were ambivalently trying to enter. The Arnoldian posture allowed one to demand that space be cleared for one’s fully realized individual identity even when one’s personal experience was of a self painfully alienated, divided, insecure, or undefined. It was a way of placing one’s needs as a human being at the center of cultural debate without disclosing one’s truly personal needs, or the needs of the group to which one personally belonged. For Cahan, Trilling, and Sontag, this delicate balance of self-assertion and self-erasure did important cultural, and sometimes therapeutic, work.

These figures’ projects of cultivation are all grounded in theories of experience, in which aesthetic experience plays a central role. Each one’s theory is more dynamic and processual than the last, more devoted to what Trilling calls “the ideal of adventurous experience,” as the larger intellectual climate, under the influence of American pragmatism and Continental thought, becomes more antifoundationalist. Ultimately, it is these theories of experience that

seem to lie at the center of their thought; while hard to pin down in many areas, there they are consistent. Among the points about which each of these figures is somewhat elusive are the questions of what it means to them to identify as Jewish or American. None of them considers these issues of the first importance. Their scattered and sometimes apparently contradictory remarks on these questions, however, take on new forms of coherence when examined through the lens of their theories of experience and cultivation.

Abraham Cahan is perhaps the first major Jewish American public intellectual, and he played the role in many different ways: as a journalistic chronicler of Jewish life on the Lower East Side, a local colorist for glossy English-language magazines; as a writer and critic of fiction, a protégé of Howells and a disciple of Tolstoy and Turgenev; as a socialist tribune, the lion of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, whose editorials called on his readers to support boycotts, strikes, and demonstrations; and as the sage of “The Bintel Brief,” one of the nation’s first advice columns. In all of these roles his writerly persona, as Jules Chametsky has observed, is that of the native guide: he explains American customs to immigrant Jews, Jewish customs to American gentiles, the intellectual world to the uneducated, the workaday world to the intellectuals, and socialism to everybody.⁵ Cahan’s primary audience consisted of Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jewish immigrants, a community in which nearly everyone was literate but few had any nonreligious schooling, and that had to make a rapid adjustment to life in a secular industrial democracy. Cahan had arrived in New York City a decade or so ahead of the wave of mass Jewish immigration, and so was more adjusted to the United States than his readers; he also had more schooling, was better read in gentile letters, and had more experience with politics, both radical and democratic. This combination of factors enabled him to rise to a position of towering eminence in Jewish American public life.⁶

Given the persistently didactic tone of his work, one might also call his writerly persona that of the pedagogue, especially since Cahan articulates a distinct educational philosophy. In all of his roles, he is careful, sometimes to the point of being patronizing, to couch his ideas in terms that have a concrete, lived significance for his audience. In terms of the pedagogical debates of his time, Cahan is preoccupied with the problem that John Dewey calls that of “the child and the curriculum”: how to make a body of knowledge meaningful in terms of the learner’s existing interests and projects.⁷ His interest in pedagogical theory is most apparent in the chapters of his memoirs that describe his years at a tsarist school for Jews. His teachers, Cahan recounts, had been hired on the basis of their willingness to toe the official tsarist line,

and lessons were recited *memoriter* from approved textbooks; the student was made over, as Cahan describes it, in the image of “a recording machine as the material or textbook was fed into him by the teacher; then he became a phonograph, repeating the material back to the teacher, word for word.”⁸ At a time when political tensions ran high and the Russian intelligentsia was growing restive, these methods discouraged students from testing received ideas against other thinkers or their own experience. This kind of education, Cahan came to believe, not only was a tool of an inhumane regime, but was itself inhumane and unworthy of the socialist movement. “Modern pedagogy condemns memorizing entire lessons,” he writes. “Experience proves that the old system stifled able children and deadened their initiative. Interest precedes retention, not otherwise.” In the educational theory of the time, this idea was known as the “doctrine of interest.” This doctrine, which was originally developed by the German philosopher Johann Friedrich Herbart, was always more than a maxim about effective instruction. It advanced a particular conception of the ideal personality as one avidly absorbed in the pursuit of truth and justice, finding in these vehicles for self-enlargement.⁹

This concept of self-fashioning contributed to what I am calling Cahan’s Arnoldianism, but I do not mean to imply that Arnold had a direct influence on Cahan, for he did not. Furthermore, Cahan did not share Arnold’s ideal of reason purified by the elimination of interest, nor the Anglo-classical canon that he saw as its finest expression. Cahan’s sense of cultural hierarchy derived from the Russian realists, especially Tolstoy and Turgenev, whose literary ideal, as Cahan saw it, was politically charged observation purified by the elimination of editorializing, sentimentalism, and sensationalism. (Cahan’s views on realism will be discussed in more detail later.) This ideal was reinforced during his formative sojourn at Lincoln Steffens’s *Commercial Advertiser*, where he was trained in (and helped to shape) that newspaper’s brand of literary muckraking, which distinguished itself from the “yellow” press by its emotional and stylistic restraint, and by its judicious choice of stories with clear political ramifications that could be left mostly unstated. The important distinction arising for Cahan from this combination of influences was not between disinterestedness and interestedness, but between a properly “human interest” (a journalistic category that Steffens helped popularize) and an interest that is either perfunctory and mechanical or prurient and animalistic. The “doctrine of interest” in the educational theory that Cahan absorbed reinforced these ideas and linked them to a theory of the self, connecting the power to take a proper interest in matters to strength of character and social engagement. Synthesizing all these perspectives, Cahan developed a

hierarchical approach to art and culture that dovetailed with a normative ideal of the self that deplored stridency. This, despite the many differences between Cahan and the British critic, is an Arnoldian orientation, though not one that he inherited from Arnold.

Cahan's early column "Der Proletarishker Maggid" exemplifies his use of the doctrine of interest. (A *maggid* is an itinerant uncredentialed preacher who stands outside synagogues and proclaims his own interpretation of the weekly scripture portions; *Proletarishker* is a laughably slangy word for "proletarian.") Cahan's "Proletarishker Maggid" puts an eccentric but pointed socialist gloss on the weekly Torah readings. Sometimes the gimmick works well, as when the "Maggid" makes Joseph's line "I am your brother whom you sold into slavery" the occasion for a spiel about Jewish bosses who exploit Jewish workers. At other times the connection is more tenuous, such as when the "Maggid" likens breaking a strike to breaking the Sabbath. "Today our Biblical portion is about strikes," Cahan writes; "*Va'yak'hel Moïshe*, Moses gathered the children of Israel together and said to them: *Sheyshes yommin te'asseh m'lokhoh*, more than six days a week you shouldn't work for the bosses, the seventh day you shall rest."¹⁰ Avoiding sweeping statements of principle, the "Maggid" focuses on issues that he knows will already be on his readers' minds – assuming, that is, that they attend synagogue regularly.

Aside from showing his pedagogy at work, the "Proletarishker Maggid" illustrates an important element of Cahan's attitude toward Judaism: It provides a shared set of concrete interests that he can use as the basis for his lessons. Secular American life, on the other hand, figures, particularly in the novella *Yekl*, as a cultural thinness, whose only shared frames of reference are sports and dancing, which leaves individuals spiritually isolated. Maintaining an integral community in which there are many shared vocabularies is important for Cahan, but that means turning against the Jewish religion at some times and defending it at others. When Judaism becomes otherworldly and elevates itself above economics and politics, he loses patience with it. In "The Bintel Brief," a freethinking young socialist asks whether he should go to the synagogue to please his in-laws and is told that "there are times when it pays to give in to old parents and not grieve them." "When one can get along with kindness it is better," the editorial reply concludes, but the implication is that if socialism and religion cannot get along with kindness, then religion may be cast aside.¹¹

"Der Proletarishker Maggid" exemplifies Cahan's application of the doctrine of interest to all of his journalistic projects. For instance, whereas many socialist newspapers specialized in ideological broadsides, Cahan insisted on

a different approach at the *Forward*. When he (re)assumed the paper's editorship in 1902, he chided the board "because it doesn't interest itself in the things that the masses are interested in when they aren't preoccupied with their daily struggle for bread." On the front page of his first issue in this new period (March 26, 1902), he printed an announcement: "The news and all the articles will be written in pure, plain *Yiddishe Yiddish*, and we hope that every line will be interesting to all Yiddish-speaking people, big and little." The same issue ran human interest stories such as "In Love with *Yiddishe Kinder*," a collection of observations about interfaith romances, as well as pieces with a more direct connection to socialism that still led with anecdotes, such as "Protzentniks [Percenter] in Sweatshops," about bosses who made high-interest payday loans to their own employees. Its lead editorial encouraged working-class Jews to send their children to the tuition-free City College, but chastised those who had been sent to college and climbed into the professional class only to scorn their parents after assimilating the genteel prejudices of their new milieu.¹² Every article was carefully attuned to the day-to-day concerns of the *Forward's* readers, though only some of them tried to raise those readers' class consciousness. This strategy reversed that of the polemical socialist press, including the *Forward*, which Cahan had abandoned in 1897, and he maintained it for the rest of his tenure at the paper.

Turning to Cahan as a literary figure, one can also see his theory of literary realism, a genre that he classifies as one branch of the "craft of popularizing complex matters," as an element of his socialist pedagogy. For Cahan, the essential truth about politics is completely static and beyond democratic deliberation. He once went so far as to deny that Marxism makes anything that could be called "philosophical claims," contending that it rests, as does science (in his baldly positivist view), on sensory evidence that is ultimately self-explanatory. For years he planned to write a grand synthesis of Darwin and Marx showing how the iron laws of evolution led irresistibly to socialism. Although this project never came to fruition, Cahan remained true to its spirit. Under his editorship, for instance, the Yiddish socialist monthly *Di Tsukunft* declared in its inaugural issue that "the workman must know more than how he is oppressed economically and swindled politically." "He must also understand," the editors continued, "how mankind attained its present level, how it lived earlier and how it developed. We want him to understand Darwin's teachings about the struggle for existence equally with Karl Marx's theory of surplus value."¹³

Unlike the *Partisan Review* group, who insisted on the irreducibility of the artistic to the ideological, he recognizes no distinction between the aesthetic

and the political and assimilates the arts into the static and self-evident truths of Darwin and Marx. The power of art “arises from the pleasure we derive from recognizing the truth as it is mirrored by art,” he writes; “it is truth we admire and that is the source of aesthetic enjoyment.” He does not advocate “sermon-novels” pushing specific political ideas; rather, he looks to art to represent faithfully the simple facts from which common sense can draw socialist conclusions; the artist should present life and “let life expose its own wounds.”¹⁴

True aesthetic pleasure, what Cahan calls “the thrill of truth,” is for him as objectively determined as anything in the physical world. There is, therefore, a natural hierarchy of art, with realism at the top. Unlike *shund* (trashy potboilers), in which lurid details are strung together without ever leading to wider concerns, and unlike “genteel chromo-sentimentality,” in which an idealized world is presented that floats free from lived experience, realism encourages the act of taking a serious interest in everyday things, using them as entry points to wider concerns, just as Cahan does as a teacher. *Shund* in particular, for Cahan, vitiates the reader’s interest by wearing it out with cheap thrills, leaving it too addled to attend to important issues with real human sympathy. “How should the novel create pleasure for the reader?” Cahan asks. “How should it arouse his interest? Through the events? If so, then the characters who play a role in the story are secondary. If a murder could take place, for example, without a murderer and without a victim, it wouldn’t matter, because the murder is the main point of the story. The more unusual, the more densely intertwined, the more frightening the events are, the better.” “This is what the interest consists of,” he chides, “when you look only for a story in a novel.”¹⁵

Cahan’s socialist and realist hierarchy of cultivation, based on the interplay between essentially fixed political ideas and a dynamic theory of learning, does not go far enough for the generation of New York intellectuals that founds the new *Partisan Review*. “Marxism in culture,” the *Partisan* editors declared in a 1937 statement, “is first of all an instrument of analysis and evaluation; and if, in the last instance, it prevails,” they argued, “it does so through the medium of democratic controversy.”¹⁶ Not just the manner of communication, in other words, but the substance of political ideas, must arise from the world of experience rather than pure theory. Philip Rahv, one of the magazine’s two editors-in-chief, writes elsewhere that ideas by themselves are sterile until they are woven into the “felt life” of a society. Ideas and experience here are still, as with Cahan, two quite distinct spheres; the major difference between Cahan’s position and Rahv’s is that in the latter the two spheres really

act on and change each other in the course of reaching an equilibrium. The role of experience, “in the sense of ‘felt life’ rather than as life’s total practice,” in the “aesthetic sphere” is comparable, he writes, “to the part that the materialist conception of history assigns to economy.” Experience “is the substructure of literature above which there rises a superstructure” of “ideas.” “The base and the summit are not stationary,” moreover, but “continually react on each other.” For Rahv, as for Matthew Arnold, whom he rightly sees as supporting this position, ideas supervene upon experience; they are something more than, rather than being a part of, the “felt life.” Thus he can use a phrase like “The Cult of Experience in American Writing” to refer to antiintellectualism in the United States. Although he sees ideas as somewhat independent of social realities, Rahv nonetheless believes (and here he quotes Arnold) that “the ideas that literature works with” must be those “‘current at the time’, that is to say, only those which historical development has made actually and directly available to the imagination.” Great literature, in this conception, is the expression of ideas that have thoroughly permeated a culture, and the task of the critic is to “contribute to the making of an intellectual situation of which the creative power can avail itself.”¹⁷

The *Partisan Review* group, including Rahv, his coeditor William Phillips, Alfred Kazin, and Irving Howe, among other notable Jewish Americans, were educational entrepreneurs whose learning exceeded their schooling. Although the *Partisan* writers, most of whom were children of immigrants, benefited from institutions such as City College and the New York Public Library, they did not see themselves as products of the American cultural establishment, and they relished their role as unsponsored critics whose edge was sharpened by being in but not entirely of the United States. Lionel Trilling, a frequent *Partisan Review* contributor, shared his intellectual adolescence with this group but did not share many of its members’ sense that there was an intellectual virtue in remaining aloof from American cultural institutions. Instead of City College, Trilling attended the more prestigious Columbia University, at that time a bastion of Anglo-Saxon Protestant gentility, and later became that university’s first Jewish tenured professor (1939). By the time he published *The Liberal Imagination* (1955), most American universities had relaxed or discontinued their restrictions on Jewish enrollment, and Trilling could write for a general college-educated audience without conforming to specifically Christian norms. Trilling’s selection, in 1972, to give the first Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, an honor conferred by the National Endowment for the Humanities whose creation testifies to the increasing recognition of public intellectuals by the political establishment, signals the extent to which

he embodied the mainstreaming of Jewish intellectuals. As personified by Trilling, ideas did not “supervene” on American culture as foreign bodies, but arose organically from within it.¹⁸

For Trilling, then, in contrast to Rahv, ideas are very much a part of the turbulence of everyday experience. His essay “Reality in America” does not, like Rahv, find America overfond of “reality” at the expense of ideas; rather, the American definition of “reality” as everything besides ideas is found wanting. Reality in America, Trilling insists, includes the reality of ideas and always has, contrary to those such as Vernon Parrington or Theodore Dreiser who glorify its bullheaded dynamism and resistance to European intellectualism. Like Rahv, Trilling is clearest about this issue when discussing Arnold. One of the main arguments of his *Matthew Arnold* is that the English critic, for all his laudable devotion to finding stability amid the crush of modern life, fails to see that, intellectually and aesthetically, “order is not only a Greek temple at the end of a clear path, but also finding one’s path in the wilderness, or clearing the wilderness away.” As he writes elsewhere, “the life of mind consists as much in its failed efforts as in its successes”; “it is carried on, we may say, even in the vicissitudes it makes for itself.”¹⁹

Trilling attributes this view, that the “energies of mind” in “all their ill-conditioned disorder, are actually a function of mind’s ideal achievement,” to William James.²⁰ There is some inconclusive evidence suggesting that Cahan had also read James, but it is with Trilling that the Jewish American tradition of cultivation becomes pragmatist with a capital *P* and loses its faith in foundational or transcendent ideas once and for all.²¹ Trilling cites John Dewey’s *Ethics* in support of his famous formula that “literary situations” can be seen as “cultural situations, and cultural situations as great elaborate fights about moral issues, and moral issues as having something to do with gratuitously chosen images of personal being, and images of personal being as having something to do with literary style.”²² In his essay on Keats he writes that “mind came into being when the sensations and emotions were checked by external resistance or by conflict with each other,” a view identical with that laid out by Dewey in *How We Think*.²³ While this sense that mind is rooted in external resistance and internal conflict does not dampen Dewey’s optimism, for Trilling it is inseparable from his notorious “tragic sense of life.”²⁴ Trilling’s Deweyan description of Keats’s mind continues, “when to use the language of Freud, the pleasure principle is confronted by the reality principle.”²⁵ When Dewey writes that the mind, rather than following fixed rules of deduction and induction, is effectively reinvented each time it meets a new problem, he is relishing its power to rise to any occasion; although Trilling shares this attitude

to some extent, when he writes that the mind is generated by the conflict between two Freudian principles, the tone is far from triumphal.

Trilling's Freud is, above all, the Freud of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, for whom the price of living in society is an inner division that leads to self-hatred.²⁶ Thus while Dewey might basically agree with what Trilling calls "the tradition of humane liberal thought" that holds that "man can be truly himself and fully human only if he is in accord with his cultural environment, and also, only if the cultural environment is in accord with the best tendencies in himself," for Trilling, on the other hand, "no cultural situation is ever really good, culture being not a free creation but a continuous bargaining with life, an exchange in which one may yield less or more, but never nothing."²⁷ Thinking, as Trilling conceives it, is animated by conflicts and resistances that are both perpetually evolving and fundamentally intractable, and accordingly he seems to regard a thought as complete only when it has found such a difficulty. Often he insists on the inevitable persistence of problems that others might hope to solve, such as the opposition between "Interest and Duty." He finds these oppositions everywhere: within the individual, between the individual and the culture, and within the culture (for "in any complex culture there is not a single system of manners but a variety of manners," and "one of the jobs of culture is the adjustment of this conflict").²⁸

A social world without friction would not just be unthinkable for Trilling; it would be a world in which thinking was impossible. He is thus anxious to establish an axiomatic opposition between the individual and society. Freud puts this opposition on a scientific footing, but Trilling is equally happy to draw on Hegel's idea of the "base" self, "rending and tearing everything" in order to "end its accord" with "society" and establish its "existence on its own account."²⁹ Perhaps Trilling's best description of this opposition, because the one that expresses the fundamental, axiomatic quality it has for him, is the "daemonic." The self's daemonic energies are the source of the animating tensions that make social life thought-provoking and thinkable, and it is artists who give these energies their fullest expression, whereby they paradoxically minister to the very society they seem to oppose. "The writer must serve his daemon and his subject," Trilling writes. "And the democracy that does not know that the daemon and its subject must be served is not, in any ideal sense, a democracy at all."³⁰ Trilling does not recognize any obligation for writers to proselytize humane liberal thought, largely because he sees this thought as "not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition" in the West.³¹ Nonetheless, the daemonic should never be allowed to break out of its imprisonment in culture, for that would slacken life's animating tension just as surely

as total conformity. Similarly, the daemonic should threaten the integrity of the self, but only as a “mithridatic” treatment that ultimately reinforces it. (This odd term, which refers to the practice of immunizing oneself to a poison by taking it in gradually increased doses, is a favorite of Trilling’s.)³² The quest for “fullness of spiritual perfection” should, he writes in “The Teaching of Modern Literature,” involve the possibility of “losing oneself up to the point of self-destruction” in the varieties of aesthetic experience; but literature, for all its “unique effectiveness in opening the mind and illuminating it,” in “making the mind free and active,” is at the end of the day supposed to contribute to “what in America we call – or used to call until we got sick of it – the whole man.”³³ This dynamic of destabilizing energies ensuring the stability of the very system they disrupt reflects Trilling’s role as a spokesman for cold war liberalism, with its ideal of a society whose mobilization for a common cause (defeating communism) is accomplished precisely by allowing the individual citizen a wide range of civil liberties. One of Trilling’s most distinctive verbal gestures is his use of a first-person-plural pronoun meant to encompass the world of respectable opinion. The “best self” that he promotes to this audience is always thoroughly within the mainstream but for a small portion that it must always preserve “beyond culture”; it is an “opposing self,” but its opposition is pitched as something that “we,” the we of the urbane elite, should undertake as a matter of civic duty.

Trilling’s idea of cultivation involves adapting the view of Arnold, in which peace and stability are highly prized, to the intellectual dynamism of James and Dewey and the tragic sense of life that, though he attributes it to Freud, seems to be a bone-deep part of his own temperament. For Arnold, as for Trilling, modern life is characterized by a constant upheaval of ideas and attitudes, but unlike Trilling he sees culture as a still point from which this turmoil can be calmly regarded. While, as Trilling writes of him, Arnold “implies that true art can settle no questions, give no directives,” art nonetheless “offers to help meet current life by giving man a refuge in the contemplation of nobility.” This is a “religious theory,” writes Trilling, in which engagement with culture grants a “moral poise” that proves to be nothing less than “reason experienced as a kind of grace by each citizen.”³⁴ The reason that Arnold identifies with culture is not, of course, the instrumental reason of modern bureaucrats and engineers, but a pure reason defined by its isolation from “interest,” the acquisitive spirit that sets ignorant armies clashing by night. In the pure light of culture, for Arnold, one can float just above the world’s grinding conflicts – between social classes, between society as a whole and the individual, and within the self – and one can beckon the world upward too. Trilling turns this

conception on its head. Conflict, far from being the antithesis of reason, is its soul. The cultivation of aesthetic taste, instead of teaching a divine stillness, teaches a restless but sublimely graceful moral agility in the face of the unremitting assaults of civilized life. This is what Trilling really means by the “ideal of adventurous experience”: not a pilgrimage toward sunlit uplands, but the brilliant execution of a defensive war for a permanently beleaguered self that is, at the same time, dependent on this war for its animating tension. The art works he admires most, such as *The Princess Casamassima*, are those that both fully express and gracefully contain life’s unresolvable conflicts.³⁵

As with Cahan, Trilling’s identification as Jewish or American flows, in some significant part at least, from his project of cultivation. Judaism and Americanness in fact play somewhat complementary roles. If Trilling’s idea of cultivation involves embracing the mind’s task of negotiating constant conflict, then America’s cultural deficiency is its tendency toward “denying the reality of social difference” altogether.³⁶ Despite this failing, however, America recommends itself to Trilling for at least two reasons. For one, at least as he saw matters in the 1950s, America was receptive to the mind, was willing to let it have its say, and, increasingly, to let it occupy positions of power. “The American populist feeling against mind, against the expert, the theorist, and the brain truster, is no doubt still strong,” he writes in “The Situation of the American Intellectual at the Present Time” (1952). “But it has not prevented the entry into our political and social life of an ever-growing class which we must call intellectual,” including writers for the Luce periodicals and the “young college graduates” carrying out the “increasingly complex undertakings” of corporate, labor, and government bureaucracies.³⁷ This is, for him, a genuinely positive feature of the United States. Trilling’s second reason for identifying with America is that, regardless of its specific sins and virtues, it is simply the ground beneath his feet. Writing of Freud’s power to resist Viennese culture, Trilling refers to the psychologist’s “sense of himself as a biological fact,” his appreciation of the fact that however much he is shaped by his social environment, there is a dimension of his existence that precedes and eludes ideology.³⁸ Analogously, Trilling believes that the nation “might represent a principle of freedom as against the tyrannical actuality of any existing ideology.”³⁹ Of Arnold, Trilling writes that “it was the ‘just people’ aspect of life” that he “could never get; he missed the right perception of that world which has always existed and perhaps always will exist, which no utopia, no state, no culture, no rule of superior intelligence, no progress, will – or should – ever get rid of: life warm, mistakes silly, but the ‘dirt’ out of which things grow.”⁴⁰ In keeping with his rejection of Arnold’s fussy idealism, Trilling reminds his

fellow intellectuals that if “poetry is the criticism of life,” it must embrace the grounds (or “dirt”), biological, social, and otherwise, from which poetry grows. He urges them to start taking such features of American life as its dominant forms of schooling, psychiatry, and religion seriously as fields for intellectual engagement.⁴¹

If America’s distinctiveness, for Trilling, is its tendency to deny the reality of conflict, the distinction of Judaism is to deny its significance. This distinction is buried beneath his protestations of indifference to, or at most nominal affiliation with, Judaism, as in the essay “Under Forty.” Yet, as Adam Kirsch has noted, the few remarks that Trilling makes about Judaism in his critical essays do cohere into a picture with which he clearly has some sympathy, as in the essays “Wordsworth and the Rabbis” and “Isaac Babel.”⁴² “Isaac Babel” describes the Russian writer’s profoundly ambivalent feelings about the Cossacks, Russian cavalry soldiers famous for their ferocity. Babel, as a clumsy and short-statured boy, had watched his father, a Jewish shopkeeper, cower before a Cossack who “politely paid no heed” to a gentile mob looting his store. Later, as a young man, Babel served in the Russian army in a Cossack unit and came to admire their ruthless violence as an expression of virility and the will to power, even as he continued to find it morally repugnant. “Wordsworth and the Rabbis,” meanwhile, traces similarities between the authors of the ancient Jewish text *Pirke Aboth* (*Sayings of the Fathers*), who refused to proselytize, engage in politics, or even defend themselves from attack, and the British romantic poet, who also makes a virtue out of quietism. In both essays, Trilling identifies Judaism with a principled lack of interest in winning life’s battles – it is the antithesis of the Cossack ethos and is one with Wordsworth’s imperturbable “sense of being,” which belongs to the strong and weak alike. In one sense this makes Judaism the polar opposite of Trilling’s idea of cultivation, which glories in the perpetual struggle of life. In another sense, though, they are not so different, because both reject the idea of finally winning anything and wish simply to endure with dignity.⁴³

While Trilling’s career traced the leading edge of Jewish integration into American academic life, Susan Sontag’s blazed a less familiar trail for women public intellectuals. Rather than casting herself as a tribune of the respectable “we,” she identified herself as one of America’s “minority generation,” and her spiritual homeland, if she had one at all, was the republic of letters. She likewise dissented from consensus by greatly expanding the field of highbrow criticism, to include films (avant-garde, B-grade, and pornographic as well as mainstream), photographs, dance performances, and other subject matter that anticipated by several decades the academy’s turn to cultural studies. Her

writerly persona was that of a traveling companion to terra incognita, an intellectual courage teacher and workout partner. The “best self,” for Sontag, was the person who was sensitive, open-minded, and canny enough to face radically new experiences without being overwhelmed. In the wake of the 1960s, the appeal of this ideal was considerable.

Susan Sontag’s theory of mind and experience is even more dynamic than Trilling’s, and the kind of cultivation that it makes possible for her is, by the later phases of her career at least, even more defensive. Where Trilling focuses on mind as a process rather than a product, Sontag presses onward to new frontiers in which the “style of knowing,” or “new modes of vivacity,” are the exemplary mental activities. These new sensibilities are worth pursuing, they can be the basis for a program of cultivation, because “the enlivening of our sensibility” inevitably “nourishes our capacity for moral choice.”⁴⁴ Morality, Sontag argues, is a synthetic outcome of one’s whole consciousness, so whatever expands that consciousness, whatever people find useful for “blowing their mind,” must also make morality wider and truer.⁴⁵ Sontag sees herself as opposed to “the Arnold notion of culture,” which she sees as obsessed with “the heavy burden of ‘context’” carried by the arts, with their static ideas rather than their vivaciousness of pure form. How like Arnold she is, though, when she writes that art performs its “‘moral’ task because the qualities which are intrinsic to the aesthetic experience (disinterestedness, contemplativeness, attentiveness, the awakening of the feelings) and to the aesthetic object (grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy, sensuousness) are also fundamental constituents of a moral response to life.” Here Sontag is closer to Arnold than is Trilling himself, especially in her emphasis on contemplativeness and disinterestedness; her claim that the “nourishment” of the mind is “art and speculative thought, activities which can be described as either self-justifying or in need of no justification” reverses Trilling’s insistence on culture’s embeddedness in conflict and struggle.⁴⁶

Sontag’s ideas change over the course of her career, fittingly for a thinker for whom the plasticity of the self is a major theme. In the essays collected in *Against Interpretation* she is exuberantly omnivorous, welcoming all new modes of vivacity as welcome expansions of the mind. By the end of the 1960s, though, in the essays collected in *Styles of Radical Will*, Sontag recognizes dangers in the act of opening oneself to radically new forms of perception: “one is offered a choice among vocabularies of thought and action which are not merely self-transcending but self-destructive.”⁴⁷ While *Against Interpretation* had fixated on art as a vehicle for the “new,” *Styles of Radical Will* introduces the figure of the “frontier,” a psychogeography with a center and periphery.

“One of the tasks art has assumed,” she writes, “is making forays into and taking up positions on the frontiers of consciousness (often very dangerous to the artist as a person) and reporting back what’s there.”⁴⁸ This perceptual boundary crossing, breaking the mind’s established systems of order, makes the mental frontiersman the practitioner of a “poetry of transgression”: “He who transgresses not only breaks a rule. He goes somewhere that the others are not; and he knows something the others don’t know.”⁴⁹ By virtue of the dynamism of ideas itself this poetry of transgression has become irresistible, the only thing capable of satisfying “the sense of urgency, the spiritual restlessness” engendered by the realization that “there are ways of thinking that we don’t yet know about” waiting for us beyond the frontiers of our existing modes of perception.⁵⁰ At the same time, however, the “systematic violation of older formal conventions” is one of those “spiritual projects” that tend to “consume themselves – exhausting their own sense, the very meaning of the terms in which they are couched,” leading eventually to “the unraveling of thought itself.”⁵¹ Sontag’s most vivid example of this problem is pornographic art, which pursues ever more transgressive forms of the erotic until the self realizes its “voluptuous yearning” for its own “extinction.” “Sexuality is something, like nuclear energy, which may prove amenable to domestication through scruple, but then again may not,” she writes; she might have said the same of art.⁵²

For this late-1960s Sontag, the individual’s cultural vocation is no longer merely to absorb as much as possible, but to negotiate the double bind by which art is both the necessary liberator and the possible destroyer of the self. Sontag calls those who succeed in this project “spiritual athletes.” In her notorious response to a *Partisan Review* questionnaire of 1966, anthologized as “What’s Happening in America,” she finds America’s distinctiveness in the demands it places on such athletes. The famous American “energy,” she declares, is “a hypernatural and humanly disproportionate dynamism that flays everyone’s nerves raw.” Taken out of context, one could be forgiven for mistaking this line for an approving description of the poetry of transgression. For the most part Sontag is utterly scathing about America in this essay and concludes that it is “a doomed country” and justly so. Its very sins, though, also produce the “subtlest minority generation of the decent and sensitive” whose finding and keeping themselves in the midst of its dynamism are a cultural feat of the highest order.⁵³

In her essays of the 1970s Sontag shifts her attention from the heroic individual spiritual athlete to the wider cultural landscape, which begins to strike her as something in need of curation. The project of culture becomes less

individual and more collective, in a development whose continuity with her earlier writing can be seen in *On Photography*. Earlier, the simultaneous promise and danger of the audience's relationship to the artwork in the poetry of transgression had been a basically personal matter; here it is transposed into an issue of wider social concern: the role of omnipresent photography. Now, though, rather than worrying that unwise exposure to media will provide an experience too explosive for the self to withstand (e.g., pornography as nuclear energy), Sontag is concerned that overexposure simply bleaches out the self, leaving it dull and weary. "The same law holds for evil as for pornography," she writes in her landmark discussion of Holocaust photographs. "The shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings, just as the surprise and bemusement felt the first time one sees a pornographic movie wear off after one sees a few more." "Once one has seen such images," she cautions, "one has started down the road of seeing more – and more. Images transfix. Images anaesthetize."⁵⁴ The relentless consumption of forms, so valued in *Against Interpretation* and treated so ambivalently in *Styles of Radical Will*, becomes a clear danger in *On Photography*, as Sontag sees that the "unlimited production and consumption of images" can create a kind of total social anesthesia that permits "the narrowing of free political choice to free economic consumption." At this point Sontag's idea of cultural uplift shifts to maintaining an "ecology" of images, preventing both under- and overexposure of the public to politically charged images.⁵⁵ She has completely reversed her omnivorousness of *Against Interpretation*, but her sense of the moral life as primarily sensorial, and only secondarily ideational, remains constant.

How, then does Judaism figure in these ideas? Above all as a figure for the chastening of the senses. Sontag refers to "the ascetic traditions of Judaism" and often alludes to its moralizing character. For the Sontag of *Against Interpretation* these would be purely negative qualities.⁵⁶ In *Styles of Radical Will*, she can write more ambivalently about the "incredible burst of creativity in the arts, science, and secular scholarship" that resulted from the secularization of the Jews, the massive release of "frustrated spiritual energy" from unnecessary strictures. (Because she thinks of exposure to new aesthetic forms as addictive, she sees the Jewish culture of drab discipline as "doomed to disappear," and with it the identity of Jews as "a people.") Like American culture, then, Jewish culture is significant mainly for the spiritual challenges it poses to its members. "These innovating artists and intellectuals were not alienated Jews," Sontag quips, "but people who were alienated *as Jews*."⁵⁷ The enormous energy released when Jews enter Western culture would be a positive for the Sontag of the early 1960s, a mixed blessing for the Sontag of the

late 1960s, and something darker for the Sontag of *On Photography*, in which she describes Diane Arbus's coldly fixated relationship to her "freak" subjects as "a revolt against the Jews' hyper-developed moral sensibility."⁵⁸ If the tendency of photography – really, of the whole imagistic, anti-interpretive relation to the arts that is Sontag's perennial subject – is to hollow out the ethical life unless strictly supervised by the conscience, the stern, unseduceable morality that Sontag attributes to Judaism may be necessary after all. She hardly trumpets the value of Judaism, but what else can one make of the way she first introduces the ethical danger of images in *On Photography*? Discussing the way that, even as her first sight of Holocaust photos both opened a deep well of grief and killed part of her capacity for feeling, initiating her into the full difficulty and complexity of the life of images, she writes that "it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw these photographs (I was twelve) and after."⁵⁹ This passage into a mature distrust of the drive to look at everything is a bat mitzvah that is anything but irrelevant to the modern intellectual.

We have been considering how Jewish American intellectuals framed Judaism within secular cultivation projects, but, as the pivotal role played by Holocaust photographs in Sontag's career suggests, it is also possible to turn this analysis on its head and read these projects as responses to specifically Jewish situations. By her own account, Sontag's "new sensibility" was in part a giddy reaction against what she saw as a Jewish refusal to embrace experiences whose moral value was uncertain, while her evolution toward a more guarded "ecology of images" was precipitated by a reckoning with the attempted erasure of the Jews from history. There are alternative genealogies, alternative explanations, for her oscillation between, on the one hand, an aesthetic radicalism that lives on the bleeding edge of moment-to-moment perceptions, and, on the other hand, the ecological view, with its emphasis on preserving the reality of the past. It is possible nonetheless to see in it Sontag's ambivalence about her own Jewishness, which seemed to play no self-conscious role in her wide-eyed explorations of "What's Happening in America," but which made a claim on her from the past. Sontag, like many American Jews who had witnessed the collapse of old sensibilities during the 1960s, found it possible for her Judaism to be unremarkable, effectively out of sight for herself and others. Her recoil from an ethics and aesthetics based purely on what grabs the attention may be read as a discomfort with the implications of such a view for an element of her identity that might not have survived it.

Just as her Jewishness complicated Sontag's radicalism, it also tempered Trilling's liberalism and Cahan's socialism. Cahan argued for a more

capacious and gradualist socialism than many of his fellow leftists, ostensibly because of an abstract pedagogical principle about starting conversations on ground that is familiar to all involved. In practice, though, this meant emphasizing the ethnic, religious, and linguistic bonds uniting the East European Jewish immigrants rather than dividing them along lines of class and ideology. It is not hard to see how Cahan, who like others who immigrated in advance of the great waves of immigration had been miserably lonely before his fellows arrived in greater numbers, could have deduced his principle from his longing for a Jewish community. Trilling, for his part, distinguished his frictive “opposing self” from the monolithic orthodoxies of Arnold, and of his contemporaries the New Critics, by way of psychological principles derived from James, Dewey, and Freud. The effect of these principles was to valorize, and indeed normalize, the situation of being both inside and outside one’s culture, a situation that Trilling experienced acutely as a Jewish Ivy League professor and that applied to many upwardly mobile Jewish American professionals in the postwar period. The Arnoldian roles that Cahan, Trilling, and Sontag created for themselves, as arbiters of culture on behalf of an ideal of selfhood that was poised, centered, and at home in modernity may have colored the way they experienced their Jewishness, but these august roles were also compensatory responses to the uncertainties of Jewish American experience.

Notes

- 1 Lionel Trilling, Preface to the Second Edition of *Matthew Arnold* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1954), n.p.
- 2 See Neil Jumanville, Introduction to *The New York Intellectuals Reader* (New York and London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2007), and Mark Shechner, *After the Revolution: Studies in the Contemporary American Jewish Imagination* (Bloomington and Philadelphia: Indiana University Press, 1987).
- 3 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 293, 14. It should be noted that Cahan’s embrace of demotic Yiddish was controversial, pitting him against those who advocated a “high” Yiddish style. His treatment of everyday Yiddish as the literary language of the immigrant community was not a neutral act, but something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In addition to the sources cited in note 6 later, see Lawrence Rosenwald, *Multilingual America: Language and the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 84–92.
- 4 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder, 1869), 89.
- 5 Jules Chametzky, *From the Ghetto: The Fiction of Abraham Cahan* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 125.

- 6 Biographical details about Cahan throughout this chapter are drawn primarily from Abraham Cahan, *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, trans. Leon Stein, Abraham P. Conan, and Lynn Davison (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969). They are also informed by Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*; Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976); Sanford Marovitz, *Abraham Cahan* (New York: Twayne, 1996); Theodore Marvin Pollock, "The Solitary Clarinetist: A Critical Biography of Abraham Cahan, 1860–1917," (Diss., Columbia University, 1959); Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870–1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); and Ronald Sanders, *The Downtown Jews: Portraits of an Immigrant Generation* (New York: Dover, 1969).
- 7 John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902).
- 8 Cahan, *Education of Abraham Cahan*, 112.
- 9 On the doctrine of interest, see John Dewey, *Interest in Relation to Training of the Will*, National Herbart Society Supplement to the Yearbook for 1895 (Bloomington, IN: Public School Publishing Company, 1896).
- 10 This translation is quoted in Sanders, *Downtown Jews*, 97. The original column appears in the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, but Sanders does not give a specific date.
- 11 Isaac Metzker, ed., *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2011), 53. This exchange is from 1906; a precise date is not given.
- 12 These translations from the March 26, 1902, *Jewish Daily Forward* are from Sanders, *Downtown Jews*, 255–257.
- 13 *Di Tsukunft*, January 1892. This translation is from Rischin, *Promised City*, 152.
- 14 Abraham Cahan, "The Younger Russian Writers," *Forum*, September 1899, 119–128.
- 15 Abraham Cahan, "Gute un shlekhte romanen" [Good and Bad Novels], *Di Arbeiter Tzeitung* (December 29, 1893), 4. This translation is from Ellen Deborah Kellmann, "The Newspaper Novel in the *Jewish Daily Forward* (1900–1940): Fiction as Entertainment and Serious Literature," (Diss., Columbia University, 2000), 39.
- 16 "Editorial Statement," *Partisan Review* 4:1, December 1937. Reprinted in Jumonville, *New York Intellectuals Reader*, 60–62.
- 17 Philip Rahv, *Literature and the Sixth Sense* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 33, 256.
- 18 Biographical information on Trilling is drawn from Shechner, *After the Revolution*; Adam Kirsch, *Why Trilling Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); and Susanne Klingenstein, *Enlarging America: The Cultural Work of Jewish Literary Scholars, 1930–1990* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998).
- 19 Trilling, *Matthew Arnold*, 201; Lionel Trilling, *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 500.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Ronald Sanders suggests that Cahan's essay "Realism" (published in the *Workmen's Advocate* on March 15, 1889) borrows the idea that "sensations are a form of cognition and not merely reflections upon a passive sensibility" from James. The Herbartian educational theory upon which Cahan seems to be drawing also shows some debts to James. For Cahan's "Realism" see Sanders, *Downtown Jews*, 181; for James's influence on the Herbartians, see George Basil Randels, *The Doctrines of Herbart in the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1909), 29, 64.

- 22 Trilling, *Moral Obligation*, 388. Compare to this discussion of Dewey from Trilling's essay "The America of John Dos Passos": "The moral assumption on which Dos Passos seems to work was expressed by John Dewey some thirty years ago; there are certain moral situations, Dewey says, where we cannot decide between the ends; we are forced to make our moral choice in terms of our preference for one kind of character or another: 'What sort of an agent, of a person shall he be? This is the question finally at stake in any genuinely moral situation.'" Trilling, *Moral Obligation*, 8. Trilling is quoting from Dewey's *Ethics*. See John Dewey, *The Middle Works, 1889-1924, Volume 5: 1908* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 194.
- 23 Trilling, *Moral Obligation*, 245. John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1910).
- 24 While this phrase has become associated with Trilling, he does not seem to have committed it to writing.
- 25 Trilling, *Moral Obligation*, 245.
- 26 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: Penguin, 2002).
- 27 Lionel Trilling, *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 41; Trilling, *Moral Obligation*, 279.
- 28 Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review Books, 2008), 207.
- 29 Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 35.
- 30 Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, 101.
- 31 *Ibid.*, xv.
- 32 In "Freud and Literature," for instance, Trilling argues that Freud's theory of trauma implies a "mithridatic function" for tragedy, differing from the Aristotelian cathartic function, "by which tragedy is used as the homeopathic administration of pain to inure ourselves to a greater pain which life will force upon us." *Ibid.*, 56.
- 33 Trilling, *Moral Obligation*, 401, 212.
- 34 Trilling, *Matthew Arnold*, 153, 252.
- 35 See "The Princess Casamassima" in Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*.
- 36 Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, 261.
- 37 Trilling, *Moral Obligation*, 281.
- 38 Trilling, *Beyond Culture*, 112.
- 39 Trilling, *Moral Obligation*, 279.
- 40 Trilling, *Matthew Arnold*, 398.
- 41 Trilling, *Moral Obligation*, 291.
- 42 All of these essays can be found in Trilling, *Moral Obligation*. See the fourth chapter of Kirsch, *Why Trilling Matters*.
- 43 Trilling, *Moral Obligation*, 320, 193.
- 44 Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 22, 300, 25.
- 45 Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Macmillan, 2013), 58.
- 46 Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 298, 25, 29.
- 47 Sontag, *Radical Will*, 70.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 57.

- 53 Ibid., 194, 195, 204.
- 54 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2001), 20.
- 55 Ibid., 178–180.
- 56 Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 47.
- 57 Sontag, *Radical Will*, 203.
- 58 Sontag, *On Photography*, 44.
- 59 Ibid., 20.

The Caravan Returns: Jewish American Literary Anthologies 1935–2010

WENDY I. ZIERLER

Caravan: company of travelers journeying together, as across a desert or through hostile territory.

Treasury:

1. A place in which private or public funds are received, kept, managed, and disbursed.
2. Such funds or revenues.
3. A collection of literary or artistic treasures.

Anthology:

1. A collection of literary pieces, such as poems, short stories, or plays.
2. A miscellany, assortment, or catalog, as of complaints, comments, or ideas.

Medieval Greek anthologia, a collection of epigrams, from Greek, flower gathering, from anthologeîn, to gather flowers.

– <http://www.thefreedictionary.com>

Beginnings: *The Jewish Caravan* and *Golden Treasury* of Leo W. Schwarz

When I was growing up, there was a thick black hardcover book with red medieval letters on the spine that occupied a prominent place on the bookshelf in the den of our house, right beside the Funk & Wagnalls *Encyclopedia* and above the TV set. The book was called the *Jewish Caravan*, and as a child, I always assumed that it was about Jewish Gypsies or nomads. I never opened the book to check. Years later, when I was already a graduate student in Jewish literature, committed to the Jewish feminist project of literary recovery, I opened *The Jewish Caravan* (1935) and learned with delight that it was a collection of “Great Stories of Twenty-five Centuries,” edited by Leo W. Schwarz. I eagerly leafed through the pages of the modern section and discovered a

short story by the immigrant American Jewish writer Mary Antin called “The Lie” (1913) that helped launch my doctoral work on immigrant Jewish women writers in Israel and the United States. At the time, I remember being struck by the fact that, among all the modern literary selections, only the “America” section of the caravan/portrait included any contributions by women.

In preparing this survey of American Jewish literary anthologies, I nostalgically returned once again to *The Jewish Caravan* and was surprised to see something that I had never noticed before in my parents’ copy of the book – a Hebrew/English inscription from my mother’s late brother, Marty (Moshe), on the inside cover:

ב"ה תשי"ב
לאחותינו היקרה
"דלא מוסיף יסף"

He who does not increase his knowledge decreases it. Hillel.
The best wishes for a happy Chanukah.

י'רייזל, משה, יוסף, אשר

In 1951, my mother’s brother was a young rabbi in Sarnia, Ontario, the same small town in western Ontario where my father was born and grew up. It was on that 1951/5712 Chanukah of the inscription that my mother visited her brother and sister-in-law in Sarnia for the first time and met my father, whom she married less than a year later. This inscribed copy of *The Jewish Caravan* is certainly a poignant, personal artifact of my family history, but it also bears larger significance for this study of American Jewish literary anthologies. As a Chanukah gift presented by a synagogue rabbi to a younger sister who had just begun her college studies, it represented a conviction, cited in the name Hillel, no less (Ethics of Our Fathers 1:13), that as one sets out to increase one’s secular knowledge, one ought to make a point of increasing one’s Jewish knowledge, too, lest one lose one’s Jewish self. My uncle, a rabbi in a small outlying Jewish community, must have thought that this book – a compilation of selections from the Hebrew Bible and the Apocrypha, the New Testament and Josephus, *Aggadah*, medieval literature, early Modern Jewish literature, Haskalah literature in Hebrew and Yiddish, and American Jewish fiction – would help my mother accomplish the goal of higher Jewish learning at a time when there were no Jewish Studies departments at colleges, although by then there were Hillel Foundations on some campuses dedicated to that purpose.

Leo Schwarz, a Harvard graduate with ties to the Menorah Society, a forerunner to Hillel (now the largest Jewish campus organization in the world), and later a Hillel director in the United States and abroad,² clearly sympathized

with this goal of higher Jewish learning. In the preface to *The Jewish Caravan*, he notes the origins of the book in his “delightful hours with young people in The New School for Jewish Education in Westchester, N.Y.,” and expresses his hope that *The Jewish Caravan* serve as “text and a collateral reader” for “progressive teachers both in Jewish schools and general educational institutions.”³

Schwarz’s *The Jewish Caravan* was certainly not the first such Jewish anthology. Edmond Fleg’s *The Jewish Anthology* (1925), translated from French by Maurice Samuel and published in the United States in 1925, had a similar twenty-five-century sweep, claiming to offer “through the medium of brief extracts, a rapid and fragmentary picture of Jewish spiritual experience from the beginnings to modern times.”⁴ What Samuel’s translation conspicuously lacked, however, was any real representation of Jewish literature from the United States. While the Zionist Samuel made a point of including additional selections from modern Hebrew literature, asserting that the recent renaissance of Hebrew letters “within the last generation is an event of prime importance,”⁵ the book included only two poems by American writers, the Yiddish poets Morris Rosenfeld and Abraham Reisen, and no English language selections.

In contrast, Leo Schwarz set out to create a compilation that would clearly link the American Jewish literary present with its international Jewish past. As Jeremy Shere argues in an article about Schwarz’s anthological project, “while ‘caravan’ was commonly used in the titles of American literary anthologies, for Schwarz the term had extra significance in that it portrayed Jewish civilization as a long line of connected periods and literary styles reflecting the people’s social development throughout the centuries.”⁶ In addition to the metaphor of the caravan, mobilized in the title, Schwarz characterized his book as a “collective portrait of the Jewish people . . . an effective demonstration of the fact that the Jews, despite a comparatively tragic history and matchless loyalty to religious tradition, have been many-sided human beings, living in a real flesh-and-blood world, a world always tempered by the social and cultural climate of each age and of the people among whom they lived.”⁷ If the caravan image suggested a continuous journey through time, the collective portrait image suggested a way for Jews to become “united through literature and history.”⁸

According to David Stern, throughout Jewish literary history, the anthology has served as a medium for the canonization, transmission, preservation, and generation of tradition, as well as for the “creation, or re-creation, of Jewish culture and community.”⁹ Although Schwarz does not claim to present a complete canon or anthology of Jewish literature, noting that there is no way to represent properly in one volume the great collections of the Bible, the Midrash, the Talmud, and medieval poetry, his decision to include

modern Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, and English/American Jewish literature alongside classically canonical Jewish works and literary works suggests an ever-growing multilingual Jewish canon, one that has something vital to contribute to Jewish life and to the world at large.

Other reflections in the preface to *A Jewish Caravan* as well as the sequel volume, *A Golden Treasury of Jewish Literature* (1937), indicate editorial goals that correspond with Stern's observations about the function of Jewish anthologies, as well as others particular to the early twentieth century American Jewish context. Schwarz's sense of the potential curricular uses of the volume certainly fit with the educational goal of transmission. Additionally, Schwarz aimed to project a positive image of the Jewish people at a time of rising anti-Semitism and diminished American Jewish solidarity and pride. Thus, in the preface to his sequel anthology, *A Golden Treasury of Jewish Literature* – the treasury emphasizes wealth or enrichment – Schwarz leads with the assertion that “wherever Jews have lived they have enriched society,” and then raises an explicit objection to the ways in which Jewish literature has been misjudged, underestimated, and omitted from various manuals of American literature.¹⁰ If mainstream literary editors have failed to recognize Jewish American writers, Schwarz makes it his business to provide a forum for them to be valued and treasured. “It is our belief,” writes Schwarz, “that the live coal of Jewish literature can still touch the lips of its dispirited heirs” – a reference to Isaiah 6, a passage featured prominently in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), which Schwarz excerpts in *A Golden Treasury* – “and reveal a dignity, a vitality, and a beauty which may fortify all who love liberty and peace.”¹¹

The “live coal of Jewish literature” as ignited by Schwarz certainly touched the historian Lucy Dawidowicz, who writes nostalgically about the effect that *The Jewish Caravan* and *A Golden Treasury* had on her as a young reader:

How can I tell you what those books meant to me then, some thirty years ago? That was untimely. Being Jewish was not fashionable then; Jewish culture was not in vogue, especially not among the young. Leo Schwarz' books sustained my inner Jewish interests, which found little other external support. . . . What Leo Schwarz's works did for me, they did for at least two generations of American Jews. They transmitted our wide-ranging culture to those who lacked the formidable knowledge or linguistic tools needed for the originals. But Leo Schwarz's works did not merely transmit: they also validated the Jewish cultural heritage. Handsomely produced, well translated, whose literary standard was as cultivated as many goyish works then being published, Leo Schwarz's anthologies conferred upon Jewish literature a prestige and luster it had not previously enjoyed at any brow level.¹²

Schwarz's decision to open his second anthology, *A Golden Treasury*, with a selection of American Jewish stories entitled "Our Native Land" and then to zoom out to material from other countries and other times and to selections from American Jewish poetry, drama, and Jewish thought clearly communicated a sense of the importance of American Jewish literature to this overall project of Jewish cultural production and validation. Given all this, which American Jewish stories did Schwarz decide to include in these collections? How successful was he in shaping a future American Jewish literary canon? And how many of the stories included do we still read today in our own university "texts or collateral readers"?

To be sure, some of the works included in the American sections of these two volumes failed to endure the test of time. We no longer recognize the names of such writers as S. Lieben, Edwin Seaver, Myron Brinig, Anita Brenner, and Samuel Glusberg, although Brinig wrote some twenty-one novels and Brenner and Glusberg were important figures in the Latin American Jewish literary world. Other selections in the volume prove to have had greater staying power: Mordecai Manuel Noah's account of his being fired from his position as ambassador to Tunis; Mary Antin's "The Lie," which is later printed in the landmark *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature* (2001); an excerpt from Meyer Levin's *The Old Bunch* (1937), which is reprinted in several later anthologies including Daniel Walden's *On Being Jewish* (1974) as well as the *Norton Anthology*; selections by Ludwig Lewisohn, Michael Gold, from Edna Ferber and Henry Roth, all of these exemplify Schwarz's keen and far-ranging editorial eye and underscore the influence of these volumes on future efforts of American Jewish literary canonization.

Note that American Jewish writing represents less than 100 of the 800 pages of stories in *The Jewish Caravan*, and approximately 175 of the 780 pages of stories, poems, plays, works of humor, and Jewish thought collected in *A Golden Treasury of Jewish Literature*. An impression emerges from these volumes, then, of American Jewish literature as a fledgling enterprise that could not yet stand on its own.

The American Jewish "House of Fiction" at Midcentury

It is this impression that the Jewish journalist, editor, and sportswriter Harold U. Ribalow sets out to counter with *A Treasury of American Jewish Stories* (1958), a single-volume compilation of the stories included in two prior volumes,

This Land, These People (1950) and *These Your Children* (1952). “In 1950, when *This Land, These People* was first issued,” writes Ribalow, “few readers believed that one could collate an impressive book of Jewish short stories.”¹³ In terms of sheer bulk, the 724 pages of this American *Treasury* stand in sharp contrast to Schwarz’s prior American literary selections, as well as to Ludwig Lewisohn’s slim and diminutive *Jewish Short Stories* (1945), a 4 x 5 inch, 150-page volume, containing ten Jewish stories, only five of which are written by writers who lived in the United States, two of them translated from Yiddish.¹⁴ Lewisohn’s selections indicated that American Jewish literature in the English language was a fledgling enterprise indeed, not worthy of broad representation in such a Jewish anthology. Contrary both to Schwarz and to Lewisohn, Ribalow included only stories originally written in English. Even so, he attested to the excellence of the stories as well as their Jewish content: Every one of the short stories in the volume is one “only a Jew could have written,” and “that is inextricably bound to Jewish life in America.”¹⁵

Ribalow’s goal in editing the volume thus emerges as threefold: to prove that there is a serious body of Jewish American writing; to refute the notion (perhaps held by Ribalow’s own Hebraist father, Menachem Ribalow, founder of the American Hebrew journal *Hado’ar*) that literature can be Jewish only insofar as it is produced in a Jewish language, that is, in Hebrew or Yiddish; and to dispel the “commonly held belief that Jewish writers in America generally avoid their cultural inheritance.”¹⁶ If Schwarz’s aim had been to connect American Jewish literature to the broad temporal and linguistic sweep of world Jewish literature and to use this material to create a sense of overall Jewish unity, Ribalow’s goal seems to have been to formulate a distinct, indigenous American Jewish canon, with its unique themes and concerns, including “Jewish alienation,” but also a “new trend of affirmation and security.”¹⁷ “To Be or Not to Be,” the subtitle of the final modern section of Schwarz’s *Jewish Caravan*, reflected a sense of existential insecurity about the future of world Judaism given the erosion of tradition. In contrast, Ribalow’s introduction exudes an ebullient sense of literary achievement and stability; as he writes at its end:

As one who believes in the power, influence, and immortality of the written word, I like to feel that this generous anthology, produced by the finest writers in American-Jewish life, speaks well for Jewish creativity in the English language. It used to be said that nothing genuinely Jewish could be produced in any language outside of Yiddish and Hebrew. If this was ever true, it is not true today. The insights, the passion, the honesty, the artistry of the dozens of writers who have made this volume possible prove eloquently that the Jew

in America is building a house of fiction as sturdy and imposing as any Jewry ever established.¹⁸

Ribalow was indeed correct that American Jews were on their way to building a very sturdy “house of fiction,” although ironically, many of the selections that he adduces as evidence of this sturdy house have proved over time to be less than durable. For better or worse, most of his selections have disappeared from the canon of American Jewish fiction. Writers such as David Bernstein, Alexander Klein, Jenny Machlowitz Klein, Robert Markewich, Emmanuel Winters, Sylvan Karchmer, even more published writers such as Irwin Stark and Charles Angoff, to name only a few, have been largely forgotten and not merely because of changing taste. Already in 1951, in his review of *This Land, These People*, Saul Bellow questioned the literary quality of Ribalow’s selections:

Mr. Ribalow is convinced that the two dozen stories in his collection make up a “definitive composite portrait of American Jewish life.” Certainly the variety of subjects is large enough to make his claim seem just . . . Mr. Ribalow ought therefore to be right – and is extraordinarily wrong. The subjects are here but they are not, except by Schwartz, Michael Seide, and two or three others, entered, opened, and brought to life.¹⁹

Bellow claims there is either an overblown immigrant quaintness or a bombastic artificiality to the language of many of these stories, what Bellow refers to as “a plush horse of a style.” “What a stuffed shirt!” Bellow exclaims in response to the narrator of Ludwig Lewisohn’s “Writ of Divorcement.” “Did he really speak to her in this language? And does he expect us to believe that it is the language of the modern American’s soul?”²⁰

Bellow’s acerbic remarks may have derived, in part, from Bellow’s having been excluded from Ribalow’s selection, and while this was certainly a glaring and perplexing omission, not all of Ribalow’s choices were off the mark. Ribalow includes two fascinating stories, Thyra Samter Winslow’s “A Cycle of Manhattan” (1923) and Waldo Frank’s “Under the Dome” (1921), that had been previously anthologized by Schwarz. Ribalow’s anthology ends with “Monte Saint Angelo” (1951), a remarkable story by Arthur Miller about a young Jewish man’s search for his identity in Italy, that later is reprinted in the 2001 *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature*. Two of the women writers represented in Ribalow’s anthology, Jo Sinclair and Anzia Yezierska, later become very important to the project of constructing a female Jewish American literary tradition, though overall, women writers are conspicuously underrepresented in the book. Of the forty-eight stories in Ribalow’s volume,

only six are by women. In this regard, Ribalow's anthology begins a trend that only intensifies with the publication in the 1960s and 1970s of new anthologies of Jewish American fiction.

One such anthology is *Breakthrough: A Treasury of Contemporary American Jewish Literature* (1964) edited by Irving Malin and Irwin Stark, which captures the achievements of those predominantly male Jewish American writers who did indeed break through to the American literary mainstream – Bellow, Roth, Singer, Mailer, and Malamud – all of whom were glaringly absent from Ribalow's 1958 *Treasury*.²¹ If Ribalow's anthological project emphasized the distinctive Jewishness of American Jewish writing in English, Malin and Stark's anthology trumpeted the importance of American Jewish literature in terms of its mainstream relevance, heralding the Jew of Jewish American literature as a universal archetype of modern man:

Whether as Swann, Bloom, or Shem, Mann's Joseph or Kafka's Joseph K., The Jew has long been recognized as the great contemporary archetype. . . . He belongs to a century where religious symbols are considered vestigial, and ritual and tradition are too feeble to transmute the raw materials of daily existence into a system of communally accepted beliefs. He inhabits a world where value is groundless except as man creates it out of suffering and nothingness, where the absurd is the condition of his being.²²

There are a number of curious or salient aspects to the editors' characterization of Jewish American literature and its central protagonists. One is the dismissal of the relevance of all religious symbols and tradition in this literature, even as they lead off the collection with Roth's "Eli, the Fanatic" (1958), a story about an assimilated Jewish man's guilt-ridden fascination with and eventual sartorial emulation of an Ultra-Orthodox Holocaust survivor. Malin and Stark also include Paul Goodman's 1945 "A Prayer for Dew" (set in a synagogue), and most strangely, close the collection with Arthur A. Cohen's expression of Jewish religious/theological commitment, "Why I Choose to Be a Jew" (1959).

Perhaps even more striking to this feminist literary historian is the unapologetically male-centered thematic of this new "breakthrough" fictional canon, a literature about the Jewish man of the city as an everyman of modernity, an urban intellectual schlemiel inhabiting a modern existence of alienation and marginality. Consistent with this masculine focus, the editors include only one story by a woman, Grace Paley's "The Loudest Voice" (1959), the story of a young girl who ironically gets the lead role in her school Christmas play – symbolic of a kind of Christian, that is, universal, acceptance – only because of her stereotypically loud-mouthed immigrant female voice. The

male-centeredness of the collection extends even more broadly in the non-fiction section of the anthology, which features selections from the works of assimilated, male Jewish intellectuals – Philip Rahv, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Lionel Trilling, Leslie Fiedler, and Norman Podhoretz.

Malin and Stark help initiate a Jewish American anthological trend of excluding women writers, which reaches its apex in Meyer Levin and Charles Angoff's thousand-page *The Rise of American Jewish Literature: An Anthology of Selections from the Major Novels* (1970), which does not include a single contribution by a woman. Like Ribalow in 1958, Angoff and Levin proudly celebrate the achievements of American Jewish novelists – "We now have an American Jewish Literature. The last fifty years have seen the creation of an important body of work, a good deal of it of high critical as well as of popular acclaim."²³ They include some enduringly important male Jewish writers – Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, Bellow's *Herzog* (1964), Philip Roth's "Eli, The Fanatic" – but also several other lesser novels that have since fallen in critical importance. And here, too, as in Malin and Stark's anthology, the protagonists of many of the chosen works fit a certain predictable masculine profile: disgruntled, misunderstood men, carrying out sexual, intellectual, or military escapades, occasionally dealing with overbearing Jewish mothers. Angoff and Levin favor this content and include long excerpts of their own novels, all the while passing over all the achievements of the likes of Mary Antin, Emma Wolf, Edna Ferber, Anzia Yezierska, Jo Sinclair, Fannie Hurst, and Tillie Olsen. It is this sort of critical exclusion that will later spur on the efforts of Jewish feminist anthologists in the 1980s and 1990s.

Irving Howe's Anthological Project: Remembering a Dying Yiddish Past

An Eastern European immigrant thread clearly runs through Angoff and Levin's selections, a kind of fealty to a Yiddish past that is even more salient in the Jewish American anthological projects of Irving Howe, beginning with his important and influential collaboration with Eliezer Greenberg on *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (1953). Howe and Greenberg's *Treasury* did not by any means center on American Yiddish fiction, and most of the selections, even those by Yiddish writers who immigrated to the United States (Sholem Asch, Sholem Aleichem, Lamed Shapiro, I. B. Singer, and Avraham Reisen), are set in the old country rather than in the United States. As Jeffrey Shandler observes, Howe and Greenberg imbue their collection with a retrospective aura; they

dedicate their volume “To the Six Million” and in the light of the cataclysmic losses of the Holocaust present for their English-speaking American readers a Yiddish literature that is “an all-but-closed canon.”²⁴ The lengthy introduction to the volume, meant for a reader trained in Western culture but unschooled in Eastern European Jewish culture, offers a history of the *shtetl* and of the development of Modern Yiddish and makes the following argument about the relationship between Modern Yiddish literature and the end of the traditional Eastern European Jewish milieu:

Modern Yiddish literature focuses upon the *shtetl* during its last tremor of self-awareness, the historical moment when it is still coherent and self-contained but already under fierce assault from the outer world. Between language and milieu there is a curious, ambivalent relationship: the one seems to batten on the other. Yiddish reaches its climax of expressive power as the world it portrays begins to come apart.²⁵

I mention all of this not only because *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* had a significant impact on providing American Jewish readers with some familiarity with Yiddish literature,²⁶ but also because Howe makes a similar argument about a literature reaching its apex just as the world it portrays is coming apart in the often-quoted introduction to his other landmark anthology, *Jewish-American Stories* (1977). In this introduction as well as in his selections for the volume, which included two non-American, non-English language stories (Sholem Aleichem’s “On Account of a Hat,” and Isaac Babel’s “The Story of My Dovecote”), Howe explicitly defines the canon of Jewish American literature as a Yiddish-derived “regional literature,” which “deals overwhelmingly with one locale, usually the streets and tenements of the immigrant Jewish neighborhoods or the ‘better’ neighborhoods to which the children of immigrants have moved.”²⁷ Howe compares this Jewish American regional literature to southern fiction, viewing both as subcultures that find their “voice and passion at exactly the moment it approaches disintegration.”²⁸

As it turns out, not all of Howe’s selections confirm this Yiddish immigrant conception of Jewish American literature. Henry Roth’s story “The Surveyor” (1966) for example, is not about the Lower East Side neighborhood or generational clash that is so apparent in *Call It Sleep* but about the reawakening of Jewish identity in the context of a Jewish man’s visit to a site of the Inquisition in Spain. Rather than confirming Howe’s paradigm, Roth’s “The Surveyor” seems to anticipate later twentieth century Jewish American writers’ interest in the themes of return and reclaimed ethnic identity. Similarly nonconforming is Isaac Rosenfeld’s “King Solomon” (1956), a work of comic modern

midrash that presages other more contemporary American creative engagements with the Jewish literary past.

None of this literary evidence seems to dislodge Howe, however, from his strict delimitation of Jewish American fiction in these regional, Yiddish immigrant terms. So thoroughly does he embrace his definition that he goes so far as to predict (after the manner of the closed canon of Yiddish literature) the demise of American Jewish literature:

There remains a question, worth asking if impossible to answer with certainty: What is the likely future of American Jewish writing? Has it already passed its peak of achievement and influence?... My own view is that American Jewish fiction has probably moved past its high point. Insofar as this body of writing draws heavily from the immigrant experience, it must suffer a depletion of resources.²⁹

Where has all of this taken us? Our survey of American Jewish literary anthologies thus far has revealed a series of recurrent themes and concomitant ironies. If Schwarz's anthologies arose from an existential fear about the end of Jewish life under the pressures of modernity, proffering a canon of great Jewish literature as a means of shoring up collective Jewish identity, Ribalow, Levin, and Angoff dismiss the existential fear and celebrate American Jewish literary achievement, albeit adducing less than the best American Jewish writing as the proof. Malin and Stark celebrate the genuine breakthrough of American Jewish writers into the American literary mainstream, highlighting the ways in which Jewish existential angst, alienation, and detachment have come to represent Western urban male experience writ large. They present some of the most aesthetically accomplished works of twentieth century American Jewish literature not to argue, as previous anthologists had, for the distinctiveness of Jewish experience, as much as for its universality. Unwittingly, they celebrate a breakthrough that can also be seen as a kind of cultural diffusion or depletion. Furthermore, while Howe insists on defining American Jewish literature in more particular, regional, Yiddish-derived terms, he takes the implication of Malin and Stark's collection one step further by predicting the end of Jewish American literature as he knew it.

Anthologies of the New Wave

To be sure, every significant Jewish American literary anthology published since 1977 has attempted in some way to refute Howe's dismal predictions for the Jewish American literary future. Ted Solataroff and Nessa Rapaport's

Writing Our Way Home: Contemporary Stories (1992), later reissued as *The Schocken Book of Jewish American Fiction*, is one important example. In their introductory essays to this volume, Solotaroff and Rapaport aver that contrary to Howe's prophecy contemporary American Jewish literature is alive and flourishing, having found new and vital central concerns in the wake of fading American yiddishkayt. The state of Israel post 1967, black-Jewish relationships, Holocaust memory, new forms of Jewish religiosity and spirituality – all these are themes and issues, Solotaroff argues, that are being broached by contemporary Jewish American writers.³⁰ Nessa Rapaport's essay "Summoned to the Feast"³¹ calls attention to the cultural confidence and Jewish literacy of this new generation of writers, enabling them – in ways that Leo Schwarz in 1935 might only have dreamed of – to construct fictional dialogues with prior Jewish texts and to create fictions that serve the function of modern literary midrash or intertextual commentary.

Solotaroff and Rapaport's arguments have been echoed and extended by the editors of other more recent collections of Jewish stories such as Paul Zakrzewski (*Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge*, 2003), Melvin Jules Bukiet and David G. Roskies (*Scribblers on the Roof: Contemporary American Jewish Fiction*, 2006), and Derek Rubin (*Promised Lands: New Jewish American Fiction on Longing and Belonging*, 2010) that feature stories that not only tackle new themes such as alternative spiritual practices and the rise of political and religious fundamentalism, but also devote renewed literary interest to the very themes that Howe claimed had been exhausted: the immigrant experience (as seen in selections by the Russian immigrant writers David Bezmozgis, Lara Vapnyar, and Gary Shteyngart) and the Yiddish social and literary milieu (as in Dara Horn's *The World to Come*, 2006).

Recent anthological work by American Sephardists such as Diane Matza (*Sephardic-American Voices: Two Hundred Years of a Literary Legacy*, 1997) and Ilan Stavans (*The Schocken Book of Modern Sephardic Literature*, 2005) has also gone a long way toward refuting the notion that American Jewish literature need derive from an Eastern European immigrant Yiddish background. According to Matza, the distinctiveness of much Sephardic American immigrant literature inheres in its language and sound, bearing traces of Greek, Turkish, Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, and Hebrew.³² Matza also emphasizes the cosmopolitanism of this literature, as well as the confidence of women writers.³³

Perhaps my most favorite anthology in this post-Howe group is Gerald Shapiro's *American Jewish Fiction: A Century of Stories* (1998), a collection of stories including some that predated Howe but also a "current crop" who "apparently missed [Howe's] obituary notice."³⁴ Recalling Schwarz's "collective

portrait image,” Shapiro titles the introduction of his collection, “Group Portrait” – “a celebratory photo session, men and women squeezed together shoulder to shoulder, some sitting, some standing, a few peeking into the frame from a dark corner.”³⁵ Shapiro makes very astute selections for this volume: Each of the stories is a literary gem, and the collection is one of the first to evince a historical sweep as well as genuine literary egalitarianism, with the ratio of male to female contributors just about even.

To be sure, Jewish feminism has also served as a vital source of Jewish American literary energy, and anthologies have played an important role in harnessing this energy. Not long after the publication of Howe’s 1977 volume, Julia Wolf Mazow set out to counter the “relative absence of Jewish women authors from the well-known anthologies”³⁶ as well as the skewed literary representation of Jewish women, by offering an alternative anthology of American Jewish women’s writing, an important beginning, if a somewhat uneven compilation in terms of the literary quality of the stories. A truly major achievement in this vein was Joyce Antler’s *America and I: Short Stories by American Jewish Women Writers* (1990), a selection of American Jewish women’s short stories from the beginning of the twentieth century through the 1980s, which makes a compelling case for an American Jewish female literary tradition. “Speaking in a variety of voices,” writes Antler, “male and female, heterosexual and lesbian, this fiction is diverse and richly detailed, comic and serious, exotic and familiar. . . . Through literature, [these women writers] have come to represent, and to possess, America.”³⁷

The Caravan Returns: The Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature (2000)

In her introduction to *Anthologies of British Poetry: Critical Perspectives from Literary and Cultural Stories*, the scholar Barbara Korte notes that

as vehicles of cultural values and canon mediation, certain types of anthology – especially survey and teaching anthologies – function as “cultural texts” in the definition provided by Aleida Assmann, i.e., texts that are part of a culture’s re-collection that help the individual form his or her identity, as well as serving as a basis for the entire culture’s collective identity.³⁸

Antler emphasizes two important ideas in her introduction: that writing and reading literature can bolster national, geographical, or group identity; and that a diversity of voices is preferred to uniformity. Several of the anthologists surveyed in this article have espoused the first idea, but fewer, the second.

Nowhere are these two ideas given more clear expression than in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (2001, hereafter *NAJAL*), edited by Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein, the first Jewish American anthology explicitly designed to serve as a college textbook.

To be sure, there is a great deal of authority to be wielded through the instrument of the teaching anthology, a power to establish a canon, thereby, as David Stern notes, “authorizing, sacralizing, and legitimating certain works, and marginalizing, delegitimizing and anathematizing others.”³⁹ The editors of the *NAJAL* assume this authority specifically by trying to be as expansive and inclusive as possible. “This anthology,” the editors declare,

means to expand the question of identity to encompass all its turns and folds. “Jewish American literature” signifies an American literature that is Jewish: fiction, poetry, drama, memoir, and autobiography, commentary, letters, speeches, monologues, song lyrics, humor, translations, and visual narratives created by authors who admit, address, embrace, and contest their Jewish identity, whether religious, historical, ethnic, psychological, political, cultural, textual or linguistic.⁴⁰

In terms of the authorial selection, and in marked contrast to many of the other prior anthologists surveyed, the editors self-consciously embrace a postmodern principle of inclusion, “acknowledging the diversity of Jewish writing in the United States, especially by authors who wrote in the Jewish languages – ignored or given token representation in most other collections. Writers of Yiddish and Hebrew and those nurtured in Ladino or Judeo-Arabic environments expand our notion of Jewish American literature.”⁴¹ Whereas previous anthologizers used their collections to define and delimit, to mount arguments against the denigration of Jews or Jewish culture, or to plead the cause of the excellence of American Jewish literature against some notion of prior exclusion from the mainstream, this collection takes the mainstream success of certain Jewish writers as a given and makes a revisionist canonical effort to extend membership in the canon to other writers and subgroups previously unacknowledged. If the term “anthology” derives from the Greek word meaning “to gather flowers,” here the editors gather liberally and eclectically, choosing pieces to serve aesthetic and historical purposes, but also to afford broad representation.

In an essay reflecting on the experience of editing the *NAJAL*, its editor Hilene Flanzbaum confesses her postmodern/poststructuralist stripes, calling attention to an inherent conflict between the skepticism about categories preached by poststructuralism and the identity politics that have sprung up

around it, the very sort of ideological position that would urge the literary representation of previously excluded groups. She argues that her awareness of these tensions, her embrace of deconstruction as well as reconstruction, made her well suited to undertake this anthological task, for “to be Jewish in America has been to partake in a continual process of simultaneously making and shattering meaning.”⁴² According to Flanzbaum, studying Jewish American literature involves an encounter with competing claims that vary with time, place, and the larger political climate – a series of “mobile truths.”⁴³ I mention this term, as it takes us back to the beginnings of this discussion, and to the image of the “caravan,” which Leo Schwarz used to suggest the development of Jewish literary culture in different places and different times. Here Flanzbaum extends this imagery to imagine not merely linear development, but simultaneous display and airing of different ideas, expressions, convictions, and versions of identity. As she continues,

What the *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature* will finally offer students is one big melee, one giant free-for-all, with no transcendent definition achieved, with no final foundation on which to hang their hat; instead it will offer an entirely various compilation of perspectives.⁴⁴

To be sure, all of this contingency and pluralism, lacking in a “transcendent definition,” can give rise to its own form of existential fear. The “big melee” is certainly a far cry from the well-behaved literary “collective portrait” that Schwarz also envisioned. Yet he also knew that there was little one could do other than allow an opportunity for various views to be aired. In this sense, the *NAJAL* represents a coming around again of the Jewish American caravan. As Schwarz writes in the last paragraph of his introduction to the modern section of *The Jewish Caravan*:

Everywhere, like all peoples today, the Jew is concerned with his future. The theologian declares: “The Jewish people, like its God, is eternal!” “No,” observes the social philosopher, “the Jews are an ailing people, perhaps beyond recovery.” “True,” asserts the social revolutionary, “but the Jew really has nothing to lose but the chains of tradition and discrimination; he has a world of freedom and health to gain.” A Christian sociologist proposes a remedy in the form of a new mission: “The achievement – let me state it boldly – is the salvaging of Western civilization. That is the challenge to Israel.” The mystic sings: “I believe that Judaism has not truly arrived at its real task, and that the great forces that live in this most tragic and incomprehensible of all peoples have not yet spoken their most significant utterance in world history.”

Which of these is the true prophet? Only Clio⁴⁵ knows, but she won’t reveal her secret to our generation.⁴⁶

Notes

- 1 "Blessed is the Name, 5712 (1951). To our dear sister. . . . Reyzl, Moshe, Yosef, Asher."
- 2 See Benjamin M. Kahn, "Leo Schwarz as Teacher," *Jewish Heritage* (Spring 1968): 60.
- 3 Leo Schwarz, *The Jewish Caravan: Great Stories of Twenty-Five Centuries* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1935), xi.
- 4 Edmond Fleg, *The Jewish Anthology*, trans. Maurice Samuel (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1925). Joseph Leftwich's *Yisroel: The First Jewish Omnibus* (London: J. Heritage, 1933) appeared in England two years before the publication of *The Jewish Caravan*, but it focused solely on modern Jewish literature and was organized by author's country/language of origin. Though Leftwich included a group of American writers, the most extensive selections were English/British, German, and Yiddish.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Jeremy Shere, "Collective Portraits: The Anthological Imagination of Leo W. Schwarz," *Shofar* 23:3 (Spring 2005): 41.
- 7 Schwarz, *The Jewish Caravan*, ix.
- 8 Shere, "Collective Portraits," 33.
- 9 David Stern, "The Anthology in Jewish Literature: An Introduction," in *The Anthology in Jewish Literature*, ed. David Stern (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7. Note that Stern's comments occur in the context of a volume that includes essays on anthologies at just about every stage of Jewish literary history, including the Bible, rabbinic literature, medieval Hebrew literature, as well as modern Hebrew and Yiddish literary anthologies. While the volume includes a treatment of the Yiddish anthological project of Eliezer Greenberg and Irving Howe, it, like Fleg's anthology, conspicuously lacks a broader discussion of American Jewish literature, something this essay aims to provide.
- 10 Leo Schwarz, ed. *A Golden Treasury of Jewish Literature* (New York: Rinehart, 1937), v.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Lucy S. Dawidowicz, "Leo Schwarz as Writer," *Jewish Heritage* (Spring 1968): 61.
- 13 Harold U. Ribalow, "Introduction," in *A Treasury of American Jewish Stories*, ed. Harold U. Ribalow (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1958), 7.
- 14 Ludwig Lewisohn, ed. *Jewish Short Stories* (New York: Behrman House, 1945).
- 15 Ribalow, *Treasury of American Jewish Stories*, 8.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., 11.
- 19 Saul Bellow, "In No Man's Land," *Commentary* (February 1951), 203.
- 20 Bellow, "In No Man's Land," 204. In 1963, Bellow edited his own excellent anthology of modern Jewish (not strictly American) stories that demonstrated his magnificent aesthetic sense. This collection, meant to be a paperback, rather than a fat hardcover anthology, recalls Lewisohn's earlier efforts, but offered a much more impressive and extensive collection of stories, in addition to a fascinating and oft-cited introduction that described as characteristically Jewish those stories in which "laughter and trembling are so curiously mingled that it is not easy to determine the relations of the two." Saul Bellow, *Great Jewish Stories* (New York: Laurel Books, 1963), 12.

- 21 Roth, Bellow, Singer, and Malamud are similarly omitted from Azriel Eisenberg's *The Golden Land: A Literary Portrait of American Jewry, 1654 to the Present* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1964). Eisenberg professes a hope that his book "might provide a balanced picture of American Jewish life," though his editorial remarks and selections indicate a tendency toward insisting that literature set a communal agenda. "It is hoped that this volume will give American Jews an insight into their past such as may lead to an assessment of their present and a thoughtful consideration of their future. The current prosperity of American Jewish community life, the beautiful, lavish synagogues and centers, the successful campaigns, the so-called resurgence of religion – these and similar phenomena have beguiled many into believing that we are on the threshold of a new Golden Age. This may or may not be so" (9).
- 22 Irving Malin and Irwin Stark, "Introduction," in *Breakthrough: A Treasury of Contemporary American Jewish Literature*, ed. Irving Malin and Irwin Stark (Philadelphia: JPS, 1963), 1.
- 23 Charles Angoff and Meyer Levin, "Introduction," in *The Rise of American Jewish Literature: An Anthology of Selections from the Major Novels*, ed. Charles Angoff and Meyer Levin (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 7.
- 24 Jeffrey Shandler, "Anthologizing the Vernacular: Collections of Yiddish Literature in English Translation," in *The Anthology in Jewish Literature*, ed. David Stern (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 313.
- 25 Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, "Introduction," in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Viking Penguin, 1953), 28.
- 26 On this subject see David Roskies, "The Treasures of Howe and Greenberg," *Prooftexts* 3:1 (January 1983): 109–114.
- 27 Irving Howe, "Introduction," in *Jewish-American Stories*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: New American Library, 1977), 3.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., 16.
- 30 Ted Solotaroff, "The Open Community," in *Writing Our Way Home: Contemporary Stories by American Jewish Writers*, ed. Ted Solotaroff and Nessa Rapaport (New York: Schocken, 1992), xiii–xxvi.
- 31 Nessa Rapaport, "Summoned to the Feast," in *Writing Our Way Home*, xxvii–xxx.
- 32 Diane Matza, ed., *Sephardic-American Voices: Two Hundred Years of a Literary Legacy* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1997), 119
- 33 Ibid., 9.
- 34 Gerald Shapiro, ed., *American Jewish Fiction: A Century of Stories* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), viii. For another anthology from that same year and also published by University of Nebraska Press, see Hida Raz, ed., *The Prairie Schooner Anthology of Contemporary Jewish American Writing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998). In her introduction, Hilda Raz notes the significance of this publication given that "Jewish writers were not welcome to submit their work to quarterlies like *The Prairie Schooner* in the early days of this century" (3).
- 35 Ibid., xiv.
- 36 Julia Wolf Mazow, *The Woman Who Lost Her Names: Selected Writings of Jewish American Women* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), xv.
- 37 Joyce Antler, *America and I: Short Stories by American Jewish Women Writers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 19.

- 38 Barbara Korte, "Flowers for Picking: Anthologies of Poetry in British Literary and Cultural Studies," in *Anthologies of British Poetry: Critical Perspectives from Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Barbara Korte, Ralf Schneider, and Stephanie Lethridge (Amsterdam: Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichende Literaturwiss, 2000), 11.
- 39 Stern, "Introduction," in *The Anthology in Jewish Literature*, 6.
- 40 *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 3.
- 41 *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, 12.
- 42 Hilene Flanzbaum, "Reflections on Editing: Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology," *Massachusetts Review* 44:1/2 (Spring–Summer 2003): 65.
- 43 Ibid., 68.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 The Greek muse of history.
- 46 Schwarz, *The Jewish Caravan*, 413.

Poetics and Politics of Translation

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A well-worn legend has it that translations of Shakespeare's dramas performed in New York's Yiddish theaters carried the title of a text, the author's name, and then the translator or adapter's name preceded by "*fartaytsht un farbesert fun ...*" (translated and improved by ...). Thus, we might observe that *King Lear* or *Hamlet* had been "translated and improved by ..." Those who cite this familiar sign of Yiddishchutzpah do not, indeed cannot, marshal proof that it existed: no scripts, playbills, or advertisements. Nonetheless, the strength of the claim and the smile it evokes continue. Its humor depends on the listener's insider knowledge of the supposedly enormous gap between the high culture of Renaissance drama (or, at least, its subsequent elevation to high culture) and the humbleness of contemporary Yiddish. Shakespeare's plays, this suggests, can only be understood by a Yiddish audience if they are offered in an edited, explicated version, brought down to (Yiddish) earthiness. The joke depends, as well, on the perceived hubris of Yiddish, its audacity in claiming to improve Shakespeare, doing just about anything more effectively than it has been done before.

Related to this posturing about English-to-Yiddish translation is a view of Yiddish-to-English translation that makes claims about the impossibility of rendering certain ideas into another tongue, or the observation that, in translation, Yiddish loses its *tam*, its flavor or uniqueness or specificity. All of these myths about Yiddish translation underscore the significance of fundamental questions in translation theory: Whom does a translation serve? To whom does it owe fealty? Should it be primarily concerned with the target language (into which the translator translates) or the source language (out of which he or she translates)? Is the translator to focus on the writer of the source or on the targeted reader? These questions assume particular urgency in Jewish American culture when translation is from Jewish languages (i.e., those – like Yiddish or Hebrew – written primarily by and for Jews or written in Hebrew script) into *la'az*, the "language of a strange (i.e., not Jewish) people."

As a character who is desperate for a translator famously observes in Cynthia Ozick's short story "Envy, or Yiddish in America" (1969): "Please remember that when a goy from Columbus, Ohio, says 'Elijah the Prophet' he's not talking about *Eliohu hanovi*. . . . They talk Bible Lands, with us it's *eretz yisroel*."¹ Despite its title, the story is, as Ozick has said, more about the fate of Hebrew writers in America who lacked translators than about Yiddish writers who did not. And despite claims that the story offers thinly veiled references to the Yiddish storyteller I. B. Singer and the Yiddish poet Yankev Glatshteyn, she had in mind her maternal uncle Avraham Regelson, a renowned Hebrew poet.² Ozick's desire to imbue English with the resonance of Yiddish and Hebrew led her to call for "a new Yiddish," a language written in English – the language spoken by a majority of Jews worldwide – but steeped in and invoking the liturgical, religious, ethical reverberations of Jewish history and tradition.³ Translation, here figured as a less than adequate rendition of Jewish principles and lives, is replaced by something presumably more authentic, something new that does not supersede the old but incorporates it, no longer needing to adjudicate between source and target because the latter literally includes the former. New Yiddish, like this view of translation is, as Ozick acknowledged, a literary conceit rather than a programmatic approach.⁴ Translation theorists and translators always contend with the difficulty of imbuing English with the cultural nuances of foreign languages and peoples. This difficulty is more pronounced as American literature has become increasingly plural, including non-English works into the canon of American literatures, as foreign language instruction in many American universities is threatened, and as the concern over the state of language learning in the United States continues to grow.

The need for translation in Western culture, and among Jews, is commonly traced to the familiar Tower of Babel story, which is to say that it is traced to the human desire to understand and interpret the hubris implied in that desire. (One of the most influential studies of translation, published by George Steiner in 1975, is titled *After Babel*.) Sometime between the third and first centuries BCE (scholars differ about this dating), the Septuagint – the first translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek – was produced, clear evidence of the need for and anxiety about translation. According to a familiar legend, the Septuagint was the product of seventy-two (some say seventy) scholars who were summoned from all the tribes of Israel and placed in separate rooms for seventy-two (or seventy) days. At the end of this period, each one emerged with a perfect translation, and, in keeping with the nature of perfection, all of their translations were identical, ultimate proof of the divinely inspired

success of this enterprise. Furthermore, some considered this translation (or these identical translations) superior to the original.

The translation of more worldly texts must be held to more mundane standards than these. Yet in the case of modern translations of Yiddish, the expectations and the resulting disappointments seem almost as fraught. As Isaac Bashevis Singer observed in the early 1940s, Yiddish and Hebrew have switched places as the language of the Jewish street (Yiddish) became the language that required scholarship, and the language of the learned and the faithful (Hebrew) took its place on new Jewish streets.⁵ As Hebrew is domesticated, Yiddish is increasingly sacralized, a language to be preserved intact, an ineffable connection to a lost past that is threatened by further losses each time it is given over to another idiom. In almost every text and commentary, translators seem to remind themselves and their readers with startling regularity of the etymological links among translation, transgression, and aggression. Translators literally carry something over from one place (or language) to another. In doing so, they transgress by definition – they step across or beyond their point of origin. And the act of aggression – attack – thus performed is inevitable. The etymological connections are almost identical in Yiddish. The Yiddish *iberzetsung* [translation] – like the German *Übersetzung* from which it derives – contains a similar notion of things being placed elsewhere, carried over, set down. Moreover, it is aggressive, containing within it a verb used for hitting or striking. Hebrew has its own version of this homology. In Hebrew, to cross over (*l'avor*) is not necessarily a sin (*aveira*), but the roots are identical and so are the dangers. Hebrew, however, does not make translation (*tirgum*) a threatening act in Jewish culture.

The contemporary lament that “something is lost in the translation,” especially of Yiddish, is more accurately understood as a lament about the history of the Jews in the twentieth century and about the present and future of Yiddish. Yiddish may make contradictory but nonetheless accurate claims of both being tied to a specific past that assimilation, the Holocaust, and Stalin have decimated and being a world literature, part of secular Western culture, in conversation with the European languages among which it lived and the American context in which it thrived. More common, among translators and their critics, is the question Cynthia Ozick raised: How can this Jewish language, steeped as it is in Jewish ritual and lore, be understood in non-Jewish languages? Yiddish readers need no gloss for *tallis un t'fillin*, *Elul*, *Parshas Noyekh*, *vaser af kashe*, but English readers will need a fair amount of patience – or footnotes – to understand the resonance of “prayer shawl and phylacteries,” “the Hebrew month in which the Jewish New Year is celebrated,” “the week

in which the Torah portion (beginning with Genesis 6:9) concerning Noah is read,” and “water for a kind of porridge.” This, of course, is precisely the issue with which translators are always struggling, and Yiddish should be considered no more or less difficult to translate than any other modern language. But these commonplace translation problems can assume epic proportions as speaking populations diminish, and we recall their turbulent histories in this century.

More than raising questions about accuracy or knowledge or fidelity to a text, the very act of translation from Yiddish to English may hint at the end of a culture: Replacing Yiddish words with English ones seems to suggest that Yiddish has no audience or future. Translation from Yiddish can thus feel like a capitulation to history, implying that the original texts, like their intended audience, will disappear. Translation becomes, potentially, a form of obliteration. The ongoing existence of Yiddish, in this context, can be understood as resistance, and translation as an act of collaboration in the destruction of a culture, a betrayal of the language in which it flourished and the millions who spoke it.

Yet a simultaneous and seemingly contradictory view of translation also exists. The contemporary cultural valence of Yiddish suggests that translation may be an act of *resistance* to history. Increasingly, everything one does with or in Yiddish – speaking, reading, writing, teaching, translation, scholarship – may be understood as a defiant gesture aimed at preserving the traces of a culture that underwent dreadful transformations in the previous century. Cultural politics demands that translators work against the obliteration of the culture; translators, in turn, may suggest that their work will turn the historical tide, not only preserving Yiddish culture, but also helping it proliferate. In either case, however reluctant we may be to invoke it, the language of the Holocaust is pivotal to the discussion: As collaborators or resisters, Yiddish translators are inevitably measured by standards that even the translators of the Septuagint never faced.

American readers who encounter Yiddish works in translation are considerably more sentimental about the culture of Yiddish than even its most active practitioners were. Romanticized American notions of shtetl life and tradition – as the site of community support and unity, of simple but honest living, of faith and acts of charity – are only one expression of this sentimentalism. The familiar use of phoenixlike images – suggesting that Yiddish as a spoken language or a creative medium will once again rise – is a different but no less deluding kind of romanticization. Popular Yiddish culture now consists less of poetry or drama or fiction than of klezmer music and of something

called “Yiddish dance.” It consists, in other words, of fewer and fewer Yiddish words. One way of avoiding the difficulties of translation is to obviate the need for words.

While it is true that translations from Hebrew have become something of a staple of the Jewish American bookshelf and translations from Yiddish have blossomed in the past thirty years, it is also the case that no more than 2 percent of Yiddish works have ever been translated into English, while a handful have been translated multiple times. Also revealing is a comparison of the works translated *into* Yiddish two or three generations ago and today. Yiddish readers at the beginning of the twentieth century had access to the classics of world literature in their mother tongue: the Hebrew Bible, Shakespeare, eighteenth and nineteenth century novels and poetry from Russia, England, Germany, the United States, and more. In America today, the possibilities for reading new translations from English into Yiddish consist primarily (although not exclusively) of children’s books: *Winnie the Pooh*, *The Cat in the Hat*, *The Little Prince*, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *Curious George*, *One Fish, Two Fish*. These have been created in part to attempt to teach readers some Yiddish (although they are often printed in transliteration) but also to show that it can be done.⁶

The question of audience, then, returns in a new guise. Always fundamental to any consideration of translation, it is also the cause of a great deal of debate and obfuscation. Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” is, arguably, the founding (and most opaque) text of modern translation theory. The theorist Paul de Man, who has been charged with a similar opacity, put Benjamin’s 1923 German essay succinctly in context when he wrote that “it is a text that is very well known, in both the sense that it is very widely circulated, and in the sense that in the profession you are nobody unless you have said something about this text.”⁷ And, in a statement that will not help clarify the difficulties despite its excellent analysis of the essay and the problems of translation, Carol Jacobs has concluded that “Benjamin defines translation as untranslatable.”⁸

Benjamin’s essay begins with a famous, arguably startling, sentence: “To know a work of art or a genre well, it is of little use to take heed of the audience, of the respondent.”⁹ His insistence continues to reverberate, and we can clearly discern its effects on translations into English published after 1968, when the English version of his essay first appeared. Those translations tend to explain less, to rely more on the reader, and to revert to the ambivalences and critiques of earlier Yiddish works.

Translation has increasingly been understood as serving the original text and not the innocent reader. The reader is made to work harder, to perceive

his or her own language as strange. Translators are now more likely to foreignize the target language rather than obscure the differences between source and target. To be sure, this is not a new development. In 1813, Friedrich Schleiermacher urged translators to preserve the foreignness of a text, to make readers feel that they are encountering something unfamiliar that they must strive to understand.¹⁰ Our contemporary vision of translation has also been influenced by the analyses of the Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar. Even-Zohar seeks to undo the distinctions between “high” and “low” cultures, “center” and “periphery,” and even “translated” and “original.” This more dynamic understanding of culture and of translation has obvious implications for Yiddish and other cultures in which diglossia is the norm. Published in 1978, Even-Zohar’s “The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem” argued for the significance of translated texts to any understanding of culture, and within any cultural system.¹¹

Benjamin’s essay, to which all considerations of translation inevitably return, insists that neither the original nor the translation is created with the expectation of a particular readerly response. Before going on to argue that a translation is intended for readers who do not understand the language of the original, he asserts that “no poem is intended for its reader, no painting for its viewer, no symphony for its listener.” Instead, he writes, the task of the translator is “to find in the translator’s language that latent structure which can awake an echo of the original.”¹² Translators and theorists struggle to determine what that “latent structure” is and how to produce an echo that gives us back the sound made by the speaker – altered, repeated, as if from a distance, but nonetheless clearly identifiable as that original sound.

Translators answer this question in different ways and the answers change in different contexts. For scholars of translation such as Lawrence Venuti and Susan Bassnett, the 1970s mark a fairly clear line of demarcation in which translations became increasingly interdisciplinary, international, and both academically respectable and culturally significant.¹³ This is mainly attributable to two significant factors: the burgeoning of poetic, critical, and theoretical publication concerning translation, and the increasing assertiveness of American ethnic cultures (and, in the case of Yiddish, of Jewish American culture in the same period). In addition to the translation of Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” (1968) and Steiner’s *After Babel* (1975), the journal *Delos: A Journal on and of Translation* first appeared in 1968. Its second issue (also 1968) included a remarkable confluence of interests: Benjamin’s essay first appeared there; Steiner joined its editorial board; it published the symposium “The State of Translation” with more than two dozen comments by such critical luminaries

as W. H. Auden, Frank Kermode, Robert Lowell, and Lionel Trilling; and Ruth Whitman's translation of a famous poem by Yankev Glatshteyn entitled "Good Night, World" appeared.

At the same time, these years saw the increasing assertiveness of Jewish culture in America. This growth of a new American Judaism can be traced to Jewish responses to the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 (and, to a lesser extent, 1973) and to the U. S. "roots" and Black Power movements of the 1970s. A proliferation of courses about the Holocaust was seen at universities around the country and a more general popular culture interest in the Holocaust also increased during the 1970s. The study of Yiddish, and Americans' interest in heritage languages, was also on the rise. The sociolinguist Joshua Fishman has documented just how widespread this growing focus on Americans' mother tongues was. In the 1940 U.S. census nearly 1.8 million people claimed Yiddish as their native language. Between 1940 and 1960, the U.S. Census Bureau reported an entirely predictable 45 percent decrease in this number. But then, between 1960 and 1970, there was a 66 percent *increase* in those claiming Yiddish as their mother tongue. Although this number declined in the following decade, the 1980 figure was still 42 percent higher than that of 1960, with 1.2 million people claiming Yiddish as the language of their childhood homes, nearly half a million more than in 1960.¹⁴ (The 1990 census showed a similar decline, but the number was still higher than that found in 1960.) These statistics cannot be explained demographically by birthrates or immigration. They attest to a new and growing willingness, even eagerness, to claim a different language and with it a distinct ethnic identity. Fishman found a similar trajectory for other language and ethnic groups – Korean, Dutch, German, and Italian – in the United States during these decades. By 1970, ethnic diversity had become a byword, as had new models for Jewish assertiveness and distinctiveness.

One particularly trenchant example of the effects of these historical and aesthetic shifts can be found in Irving Howe's two translations of a poem by the American Yiddish writer Kadya Molodovsky. Her famous "El khanun" (God of Mercy) was written in 1945 but appeared in Howe's English translation in 1969. Asking God to choose another people because "we are tired of death, tired of corpses," Molodovsky ended her poem with the following line: "*nem tsu fun undz di shkhine fun gaonus.*" At first, Howe translated this – or, more accurately, edited it – to read, "Take back the gift of our separateness." When the poem was republished in 1987, that line became, as it was in the Yiddish "Take back the divine glory of our genius."¹⁵ Molodovsky's words are defiant; they claim Jewish genius (*gaonus*) and invoke the separateness that is implied by the divine (*shkhine*). Howe's initial "gift" and "separateness" are

much less forceful, much more modest than the assertion Molodovsky made at the end of the war and to which he returned only after the transformations in American culture and translation theory of the 1970s.

A different shift in the fortunes of Yiddish literature in translation is evident in a volume first published one year before *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*. Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav's *American Yiddish Poetry* (1986) is subtitled *A Bilingual Edition*. The Harshavs chose depth over breadth; unlike the wide range of the *Penguin* collection, which included a few poems by many poets, their volume contained multiple works by just seven poets. Twenty years later, the Harshavs published another anthology of Yiddish poetry in which some two dozen poets were added to the seven they had included in the first volume. No longer a bilingual edition, *Sing, Stranger* (Stanford, 2006) bears two subtitles: *A Century of American Yiddish Poetry* and *A Historical Anthology*. In its monolingualism, its thematic and diachronic focus, and especially the shift from a primary focus on Yiddish poetics to one on Yiddish history, it thus reflected both the economics of the publishing industry and the continuing insistence that Yiddish literature was a large, significant, though too-little-known contributor to the expanse of American literature.

Yiddish on the American literary scene became increasingly prominent when Isaac Bashevis Singer won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978 and emerged as one of the most important writers of American and Jewish American literature and, indeed, of world literature. The reputations of the Nobel laureate, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and the Yiddish writer, Yitzhok Bashevis, are noteworthy in their differences. Until his ascension into the highest ranks of American literati, and even later, Yiddish readers primarily cast Bashevis as the younger brother of the more famous writer Israel Joshua Singer, as a storyteller with a disturbing penchant for describing sinful or transgressive Jews, and as one who continued to write *about* his original audience but was no longer writing *for* them, writing instead for a readership that was remote from the Eastern European Jewish and immigrant experiences he invoked. Rather than contributing to the visibility of Yiddish culture, he could be seen as contributing to its erasure, allowing subsequent translations into other languages to be made from what he called his "second language" rather than from the Yiddish in which they had first been written.¹⁶ Bashevis claimed to have made English his second language after working on the translation of *The Family Moskat* (1950), his first novel written and translated in the United States.¹⁷ Three years after this American debut, Bashevis's much-anthologized story "Gimpel the Fool" was translated by Saul Bellow. A decade younger than Bashevis, Bellow had already published two acclaimed novels (*Dangling*

Man [1944] and *The Victim* [1947]) and was completing another (*The Adventures of Augie March* [1953]); he would win the Nobel Prize in Literature two years before Bashevis himself received it.

The accusation that Bashevis was contributing to the erasure of Yiddish had been leveled at another, older contemporary: Sholem Asch. Asch was arguably the most popular Yiddish writer in America before Bashevis assumed that mantle. Widely translated, his works, beginning with the extraordinarily controversial novel *The Nazarene* (1939), would sometimes be published in English translation before appearing in Yiddish. Serialization of *The Nazarene* began in the Yiddish *Forverts* but was halted by the newspaper's notoriously heavy-handed editor, Abraham Cahan. The novel was first published in Maurice Samuel's fluid translation; the Yiddish version did not appear until 1943. Asch followed this novel about Christ with another about Paul (*The Apostle* [1943]) and the Virgin Mary (*Mary* [1949]), neither of which was ever published in book form in Yiddish. Asch was accused of apostasy, of pandering to Christians, of insensitivity to the plight of the Jews in Europe, of betrayal. Some of the vitriol he faced among Yiddish critics was no doubt due to the fact that the publication of these novels in English erased all signs of their Yiddish origins. Asch's publisher, G. P. Putnam's Sons, sold some two million copies of *The Nazarene*, an astounding number for any Yiddish translation. But it also sold the novel with no sign of its linguistic origin. The title page contained the translator's name but not the source language. *The Apostle* was issued, in a condensed version, by the U.S. Armed Services. Christian missionaries carried these novels abroad, with no indication and often with no knowledge of their Yiddish sources. The novels seemed not to strengthen what continues to be called the "Judeo-Christian" tradition, but rather to erase all signs of the purported Jewish origins of that tradition.

The juncture between Yiddish and American English-language writers and writing was established a generation before Asch's novels, stories, and plays became part of the American literary canon. Not surprisingly, Yiddish was most significant for Jewish American writers, but was of some importance for other Americans as well. Its point of origin may be traced to 1898, when Leo Wiener published *Songs from the Ghetto*, the first book of translations of Yiddish poetry into English. Through its prose translations, *Songs from the Ghetto* introduced the poetry of the Yiddish "sweatshop poet" Morris Rosenfeld to an American audience. Wiener, a prolific translator from Russian as well as Czech and German, must be credited with many firsts. He was one of the first Jews to teach at Harvard, where he would soon be appointed as the first professor of Slavic Studies in the United States. He was also the first to

suggest that Yiddish literature had a history worth examining and to present some of that literature in English translation. His *History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (1899) called the language “Judeo-German” and contained translations from Yiddish with facing pages that were transliterated and presented “in the modified orthography of the German language.”¹⁸

Songs from the Ghetto was favorably reviewed by a number of American newspapers and journals including the *Critic* (December 1898), *New York Times* (October 22, 1898), *Poet Lore* (January 1, 1900), *Chicago Daily Tribune* (December 17, 1898), the *Bookman* (March 1899), the *Spectator* (August 19, 1899) and, most famously, by William Dean Howells in the *Saturday Evening Post* (February 4, 1899). Howells became one of Rosenfeld’s earliest and most devoted promoters, lauding the book (or, more accurately, Wiener’s translation and adaptation of it) for what he saw as its realistic depictions of the (Jewish) workers of New York’s Lower East Side. Hutchins Hapgood, the author and anarchist who wrote *Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York* (1902), was another admirer of the book, further recommending the poetry of three worthy but unknown, because largely untranslated, Jewish poets: the Yiddish poets Eliakim Zunser and Abraham Liessin (pseudonym of Abraham Walt) and the Hebrew poet Menahem Dolitzkin. Rosenfeld’s poems were set to music and retranslated in subsequent decades, most notably in the collection (*Songs of Labor* [1914]) cotranslated by the activist Rose Pastor Stokes and Helena Frank, one of the earliest translators of Yiddish into English.

To the extent that Yiddish, at this point, became significant to the broader American literary imagination, it did so only in translation. Although favorable, many of the reviewers of Rosenfeld’s book were much more laudatory of Wiener’s English than of Rosenfeld’s Yiddish. In the perspective of such reviews, the latter was, as Yiddish speakers themselves often called it, still a “jargon,” unlovely in sound and incomprehensible in sense. In this, some reviewers anticipated the infamous view that their contemporary, Henry James, would soon express in his travelogue *The American Scene* (1907). Commenting on the Jewish Lower East Side, James saw its Yiddish theaters and streets as places where “Jewry . . . had burst all bounds”; he called its cafes “torture-rooms of the living idiom,” or, in other words, as sites in which Yiddish speakers tortured the English language; and what he called “the Yiddish world” as “this agency of future ravage.”¹⁹ His views could not have been further from the sympathetic ones expressed by Howells or Hapgood, and the difference was as much political as cultural. James, returning from England to spend a year traveling in the United States, saw an American scene in which a swarming Jewry threatened to deform the English language and its culture. Howells and

Hapgood saw socialists and revolutionaries, intellectuals and workers who seemed to share their hopes for a new American political scene.

Hebrew and Yiddish were the deep structure of Jewish American literary creations. Emma Lazarus studied Hebrew and translated medieval Hebrew poetry into English by using Henrich Heine's German translations, a practice of translating via an intermediary language that would become increasingly common and problematic. The immigrant writer Mary Antin published *From Plotsk to Boston* (1899), the successor to her own translation of a Yiddish text initially addressed to her uncle. The English writing of other immigrants such as Anzia Yezierska and Abe Cahan resonated with the spoken Yiddish of their homes and the biblical and liturgical texts of Hebrew. Unlike the broken English (sometimes called Yinglish) of their novels, a different aesthetic was followed by Henry Roth in *Call It Sleep* (1934), where Yiddish and Hebrew became the languages of lyricism and beauty. These resonances continued well past the immigrant generation in the fiction of such diverse writers as Grace Paley and Saul Bellow and, more recently, in fiction by Michael Chabon and Dara Horn, or in the English that includes (and teaches) Yiddish phrases in the poetry of Irena Klepfisz. Cynthia Ozick's Hebrew- and Yiddish-inflected prose is yet another indication of the extent to which these Jewish languages have become part of the American Jewish literary imagination.

In 1944, when the well-known "Under Forty" symposium polled eleven prominent writers about the influence their Jewishness may have had on their intellectual development, all of them distanced themselves from what they saw as the constraints of the category "American Jewish" culture.²⁰ At the same time, several referred to Yiddish culture – whether in the original or translation – as significant. Alfred Kazin praised the familiar Yiddish writers Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, and Israel Joshua Singer. Delmore Schwartz attributed his literary imagination to having been raised in both Yiddish and English. Ben Field claimed to keep a picture of Mendeleyev Sforim on his wall. Isaac Rosenfeld quoted Yiddish in his response. Some of these men, who, along with other prominent Jewish writers, were dubbed "the New York intellectuals," were considered arbiters of American culture and politics. They wrote in a flawless English but continued to hear the Yiddish not only of their youth but also of their literary education.

The question of what constitutes the Yiddish literary canon – in Yiddish or in English translation – remains no less vexed than the question of the American Jewish or the American literary canon. In English, readers' knowledge of Yiddish literature has been determined by the work of a few translators and editors, Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg primary

among them. Although it was Wiener who first anthologized Yiddish literature in English translation, Howe and Greenberg were the most prolific anthologizers, producing six volumes over more than two decades spanning genres, countries, and dates of origin.²¹ (Joachim Neugroschel, an equally prolific anthologist and translator, published works that were even more expansive but less popular.)²² Followed by anthologies of poetry and prose too numerous to name here, Howe and Greenberg became the standard by which other anthologies were measured. Largely missing from all but the most recent anthologies was the work of women writers and of writers who were not from the United States or Eastern Europe. This omission has been partially addressed by such volumes as *Yiddish South of the Border* (2003), edited by Alan Astro; *Arguing with the Storm* (2008), edited by Rhea Tregebov; *Found Treasures* (1994), edited by Frieda Forman et al.; *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish* (2014), by Kathryn Hellerstein; as well as the growing number of translations of single-authored works. If, as is often claimed, Norton anthologies canonize the literatures they address, then the 2000 *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature* (edited by Jules Chametzky et al.) instantiated a canon that is emphatic in its inclusion of English translations from Hebrew and Yiddish. The present volume underscores the continuing significance of this inclusion to any consideration of Jewish literary creativity in the United States.

Notes

- 1 Cynthia Ozick, "Envy; or, Yiddish in America – a Novella," *Commentary* 48:5 (November 1969): 33–53.
- 2 See Suzanne Klingenstein, "'In Life I Am Not Free': The Writer Cynthia Ozick and Her Jewish Obligations," in *Daughters of Valor: Contemporary Jewish American Women Writers*, ed. Jay Halio and Ben Siegel (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), 48–79.
- 3 Ozick's essay was first published as "America: Toward Yavneh" in *Judaism* (Summer 1970): 264–282. It was reissued in her collection of essays *Art and Ardor* (New York: Knopf, 1983) under the new title "Toward a New Yiddish," 151–177.
- 4 Ozick, *Art and Ardor*, 152.
- 5 Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Problemten fun der yidisher proze in amerike" [Problems of Yiddish Prose in America], *Svive* 2 (March–April 1943): 2–13.
- 6 See Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 116–125.
- 7 Paul De Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 73.
- 8 Carol Jacobs, "The Monstrosity of Translation," *MLN* 90:6 (December 1975): 758.

- 9 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," trans. James Hynd and E. M. Valk, *Delos: A Journal on and of Translation* 2 (1968): 76. I use this less well-known translation because it is printed with facing German text, and I believe it is more readable than the more familiar translation by Harry Zohn found in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 69–82. Zohn's first sentence is "In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful" (69).
- 10 Friedrich Schleiermacher, "On the Different Methods of Translating," trans. Susan Bernofsky, in *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 2004), 43–63.
- 11 First explored (in Hebrew) in his 1971 doctoral dissertation, Evan-Zohar's work appeared in English in his essay "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem," in *Literature and Translation: New Perspectives in Literary Studies*, ed. James S. Holmes, José Lambert, and Raymond van den Broeck (Leuven: Acco, 1978), 117–127; and, revised, in *Poetics Today* 11:1 (1990): 45–51. The latter is widely reprinted.
- 12 Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," trans. Hynd and Valk, *Delos*, 76.
- 13 See esp. Susan Bassnett, "The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies," in *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*, by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 1998), 123–140; and Lawrence Venuti, Introduction to *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 2004), 43–63.
- 14 Joshua Fishman, "Mother Tongue Claiming in the United States since 1960," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 50 (1984): 21–99. See also: Joshua Fishman, "Vos vet vayer zayn? Vos vet undz noch blaybn?" [What will be? What will remain for us?], *Afn shvel*, April–June 1983, 2–4.
- 15 Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds., *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1969); Irving Howe, Ruth Wisse, and Chone Shmeruk, eds., *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (New York: Viking Press, 1987).
- 16 "An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer," by Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 19.
- 17 Singer worked with A. H. Gross on the translation until the latter's death; Maurice Samuel then assumed Gross's role. Bashevis emigrated from Poland to the United States in 1935. His first novel, *Satan in Goray*, was written and published there. (The first chapter of the novel was translated by his nephew, Morris Kreitman [Morris Carr], and included in the latter's collection, *Jewish Short Stories of Today* [London: Faber & Faber, 1938].) For a decade after his emigration, Bashevis wrote essays and journalistic pieces for Yiddish publications, but not short stories or novels.
- 18 Leo Wiener, *History of Yiddish Literature* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1899), x.
- 19 Henry James, *The American Scene* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1907), 131, 137.
- 20 "Under Forty: A Symposium on American Literature and the Younger Generation of American Jews," *Contemporary Jewish Record* VII:1 (February 1944): 3–36. Respondents were Muriel Rukeyser (the only woman included), Alfred Kazin, Delmore Schwartz, Lionel Trilling, Ben Field, Louis Kronenberger, Albert Halper, Howard Fast, David Daiches, Clement Greenberg, and Isaac Rosenfeld.

- 21 Howe and Greenberg, eds.: *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (New York: Viking Press, 1954); *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969); *Voices from the Yiddish: Essays, Memoirs, Diaries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972); *Yiddish Stories, Old and New* (New York: Holiday House, 1974); *I. L. Peretz: Selected Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1974); *Ashes Out of Hope: Fiction by Soviet-Yiddish Writers* (New York: Schocken, 1977). Howe also edited *The Selected Short Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York, Modern Library, 1966), and *Jewish-American Stories* (New York: New American Library, 1977). The latter included some writers who could not reasonably be considered American (Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Babel); they were, however, significant to an American sense of Jewish literature. Howe coedited two more anthologies of Yiddish-to-English translation after Greenberg's death: *The Best of Sholem Aleichem*, ed. Irving Howe and Ruth Wisse (Washington, DC: New Republic Books, 1979); *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, ed. Irving Howe, Ruth Wisse and Chone Shmeruk (New York: Viking Press, 1987).
- 22 In addition to literal translations from which dramatic adaptations were made (of S. Ansky's *A Dybbuk* for Tony Kushner and Sholem Asch's *God of Vengeance* for Donald Margulies), Neugroschel's translations include *Yenne Velt: Great Works of Jewish Fantasy* (London: Cassell, 1976); reissued as *Great Tales of Jewish Fantasy and the Occult: The Dybbuk and Thirty Other Classic Stories* (New York: Random House, 1991 and Overlook, 1997). *The Shtetl* (New York: Richard Marek, 1979); reissued (New York: Overlook Press, 1989 and 1995). *The Dybbuk and the Yiddish Imagination: A Haunted Reader* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000). *No Star Too Beautiful: Yiddish Stories from 1382 to the Present* (New York: Norton, 2002). *Radiant Days, Haunted Nights: Great Tales from the Treasury of Yiddish Literature* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2005). *The Golem: A New Translation of the Classic Play and Selected Short Stories* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

PART V

★

NEW PERSPECTIVES

Jews on America's Racial Map

ADAM ZACHARY NEWTON

This chapter divides in two parts and tells two stories. Part I, *Some Property Holders*, surveys a range of primary sources and identifies historically significant residents of a fictive locality within the larger terrain of Jewish American literature(s). Part II, *Tenancy*, addresses the constitutive yet supplementary role played by more recent literary criticism and literary history in a narrative about that district's development and internal tensions. Stated demographically, a secondary framing action outside the neighborhood of original source material comes to mark the latest influx of population there, albeit aslant its customarily mixed character. For both parts and both stories, however, while the metaphor of "racial map" surely specifies coordinates for ethnoracial topographies other than exclusively African American, the chapter's primary focus is the composite and storied entity *blacks-and-Jews*.

Part I Some Property Holders

Bibliographies neither narrate literary history nor analyze its vicissitudes. Nonetheless, they reveal an instructive atlas of their own design. For example, the specified intent of *Black Jewish Relations in African American and Jewish American Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography* (2002) is to document works in which "black and Jewish characters meet, or at least comment on, each other."¹ Since the burden is placed on mimetic "encounter," a text, for example, like Lionel Trilling's 1945 short story "The Other Margaret" is omitted (as the bibliography's author freely acknowledges),² because the story's Jews, unlike its blacks, are the stuff of internal, anecdotal allusion rather than embodied characterization. The logic of inclusion or exclusion, of annotation either extended or condensed, that underpins the bibliography depends on whether a given text by an African or Jewish American author figures story-level *relatedness* of one kind or another (affirmative, aversive, amorous, belligerent, individualized, social, cooperative, mercantile, intellectual, artistic, etc.). The "relations" of

the bibliography's title are thus analogous to (or parasitic on) sociohistorical interaction between the two communities,³ a mapping of and by Jews in *relation* to blacks that can most certainly take less obvious forms.

For the purposes of this section, however, a focus on encounter (even if only imagined or affective) is borne out by a restrictively bounded corpus – a region left uncharted in the bibliography of black-Jewish relations – that will serve as our embarkation point. That region would be the now-much-less-familiar body of works, prose, poetry, and literary essay, in Yiddish and Hebrew, whose composition by American Jewish writers spans the decades of the twenties through the fifties.⁴ Although these parallel but linguistically restrictive categories are often entirely omitted in general accounts of Jewish American literature, their very nature could be said to anticipate an argument by African American writers such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison about America's intrinsic quality of “amalgam,” as well as the transnational and multilingual horizons of contemporary scholarship that examine American culture at its borders, margins, and hybridized core – native grounds, in these cases, either *faryidisht* (Yiddishized) or *nehepah l'ivrit* (Hebraicized). In a “Yiddishland” no longer on any map for most American readers and decades after they wrote, the *dikhter-dertseylers*⁵ (poet-prose writers) who produced such work played the role of “witnesses to Yiddish culture in America [a]nd simultaneously to American culture as it gets drawn into Yiddish.”⁶ Something very similar can be said for what Alan Mintz has called “the Hebraist moment in American Jewish culture” otherwise known as *Tarbut Ivrit*.⁷

Scholarly treatments (Katz and Bachman) detail how these literatures, in Hebrew and Yiddish, respectively, oscillate between realist depictions and romantic evocations, observational pointillism and extended narrative.⁸ Both groups of writers, as newly arrived immigrants, deploy African Americanness as reflective Occasion or refracted Other alternately universalized or particularized, eroticized and exoticized – a mirror, a metaphor, a secret sharer and fellow traveler, a totem, a topic, an emblem, a vehicle for empathy or alienation – in short, the gamut of identificatory possibilities that would also underwrite much of the writing in English about blacks by Jewish Americans in the overlapping decades. As African American experience was being formally represented in these non-English literatures, it simultaneously served as a topical vehicle for romantic, realist, and naturalist expression alike, and for a number of poets offered itself as a counterpoint to both Hebrew classicism and Yiddish modernism. The literature also mapped *itself* onto native grounds, drawing from both recognized literary influences (from Harriet Beecher Stowe to James Weldon Johnson)⁹ and the world of folklore (spirituals and

tales), and even translating into Hebrew and Yiddish African American sources both traditional and contemporary.¹⁰

We might think about this as the paradox of a beckoning alienness, of *zikh gelernt zayn in der fremd* ["learning how to exist in der fremd"], as Merle Lyn Bachman renders a verse from a poem by the American Yiddish poet Berish Vaynshteyn,¹¹ identifying it together with sibling poems as "threshold" texts and marginal documents within an encompassing (or contiguous) literary tradition and in specific relation to their African American subject-objects.

From Bachman's survey of Nakhman Mayzel's anthology, we learn that the poetry included lyric poems about lynchings, for example, Berish Vaynshteyn's "*Lintshing*" from 1936;¹² narrative poems or poem sequences such as Y. Y. Shvarts's 260-page epic *Kentoki* [*Kentucky*] (1925); and poems of urban observation or fantasy like Avrom Reyzen's "A negerl" [A Negro boy] (1911), Roza Nevadovska's "Negershe kinderlekh" [Negro children] and "Tsu di shvartse froyen" [To the black women], "In subvey" [On the subway] (1926) by A. Leyeles, Sara Barkan's "A neger-viglid" [A Negro lullaby], "Geburt" [Birth] by Alter Eselin (1927), Levy Goldberg's "In a neger-kvartal" [In a Negro quarter], H. Leivik's "Negerish" (1932), Zisha Bagish's *Dos gezang fun neger* [The song of the Negro] (1936), and J. L. Teller's "Imigrantish" [In the manner of the immigrants] (1940).¹³

Selected examples of American Hebraists whose poetry and fiction also installed themselves as both precursor and belated addition to the canon of literary Jews writing about blacks are Simon Ginzburg ("Joe" from 1915), Simon Halkin "El ha kushit" [To the Negress] (1926) and "Pizmon kushi" [Negro melody] (1927/8), Eisig Silberschlag "Mi pi kushim" [From Negro mouths] and "Al kever shel kushi" [At a Negro grave] (1930), Simon Ginzburg "No York" (1931), Reuben Wallenrod "Hazayot boker" [Morning phantoms] (1937), Shlomo Damesek *B'gorali* [My fate] (1946), Avraham Tzvi Halevy "Lenoks Avenu" (1948), Moshe ben Meir "Tfilat isha kushit" [Negress's prayer] (1957), Reuben Avinoam "B'tzel shehor-'or" [Light in dark shadow] (1950) and "Viduyo shel kalev" [Caleb's confession] (1942) and (1958), "Ma'aseh b'kushi" [A Negro tale] (1945), and S. L. Blank *Mr. Kunis* (1934) and "Adam v'khalbo" [A man and his dog] and "Ish, isha v'kof" [Man, Woman, Ape] (1954) and "Eish zarah" [Strange fire] (1958).¹⁴ Beyond the strict confines of the United States, in fiction by the late Israeli author Yoram Kaniuk, for examples, stories such as "Ha msibah shel Charlie Parker" [Charlie Parker's party] indicate not only a similar Jewish penchant for African American culture, but also the extendable boundaries – the shifting landscape – of America's racial map.¹⁵

"Shifting landscape" is a hinging phrase meant to pivot us here by summoning the irregular career of Henry Roth, a pivotal figure in the twentieth century

tradition of Jewish American literature who, along with Nathanael West,¹⁶ can be seen to hinge an earlier generation of Jewish American writers for whom racial coordinates tend to function either on the periphery (realists/vernacular modernists like Mary Antin, Abraham Cahan, and Anzia Yezierska)¹⁷ or as an instrumentality (so-called ethnic modernists including Gertrude Stein and Michael Gold),¹⁸ and the postwar maturation of “Jewish American literature” (however ambivalently or differentially claimed by its practitioners) demonstrated by such fiction writers as Isaac Rosenfeld, Delmore Schwartz, and Daniel Fuchs in the 1940s; Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth, and later Stanley Elkin, Arthur Miller, Edward Lewis Wallant, Delmore Schwartz, H. J. Kaplan, Lionel Trilling, Alfred Kazin, Norman Mailer, Budd Schulberg in the 1950s; Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick, Lore Segal, Leslie Fiedler, Jay Neugeboren, Bruce Jay Friedman, E. L. Doctorow in the 1960s; and poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Muriel Rukeyser, Adrienne Rich, Gerald Stern, Philip Levine, and Irena Klepfisz.¹⁹ As to the prewar generation, as Emily Budick points out, “Although there are no African American characters in Mike Gold’s *Jews without Money*, his naming of one of his Jewish characters ‘Nigger’ at least hints at a continuous feature of the tradition of Jewish American fiction.”²⁰ The recent critical literature figures in this regard as well, given the trend of comparativist studies that couple or double-track writers, for instance, Anzia Yezierska and Nella Larsen, Samuel Ornitz and James Weldon Johnson, Edna Ferber and Jessie Fauset.²¹

Henry Roth maps rather singularly as a literary Jew with respect to racial borderlands. He and his family lived in (Jewish) East Harlem from 1914 until 1928 – the same year, as Steven G. Kellman notes in his biography of Roth, that Claude McKay published *Home to Harlem*. Kellman speculates on Roth’s possible interaction with the constellation of figures in the New Negro Movement/Harlem Renaissance or visits he may have made to the Savoy Ballroom, Small’s Paradise, and the Apollo; notes the cameo appearances of African Americans in Roth’s later fiction; and mentions Roth’s friendship with his fellow writer John A. Williams in the 1960s and correspondence with Eldridge Cleaver in the 1970s. In *Call It Sleep* (1934), Roth’s singular immigrant bildungsroman of arrested development, we find these two pointillist moments (the first, an anticipation of Isaac Rosenfeld’s more extended ontological meditation on black alterity in *Passage from Home*):²²

A negro passed. Was his? Yes. White too. He could ask that. Why does he breathe white if he’s black?

Out of the dark manure-smell into the sunlight, the Negro stable boy came out on patent leather shoes, holes cut for bunions. He was laughing – strong

teeth, and head thrown back – and his laughter, sleeve within larger sleeve of mirth, opened like a telescope, rich warm, contagious.²³

A more sophisticated meditation by Roth on race (which might be retrojected obliquely *back* to Rosenfeld) can be found in the posthumously published novel *An American Type* (2010), which appeared five years after Kellman's biography. "Do you realize what that would look like from his standpoint?" says Ira Stigman in colloquy with himself about a hapless black driver whose masonry-filled truck has broken down in traffic under the El, becoming the object of amused consternation for various officials and passersby.

Do you realize what that would look like from his [the colored guy's] standpoint?

No, I don't. I can scarcely envisage it. What he would do when he got home, how he would appear to his wife, kids, neighbors in the climate of his neighborhood.

That's what I mean. That's the trouble with you, your immense shortcoming, limitation, that you don't.

I know that all too well. Still, I can plead that the populace has these mutually exclusive spheres, the American populace: the Negro, the Irish, the Italian, the Jew, the Pole, the Oriental, half a dozen others; and we carom off each other all the time. The only one I know anything about, and that's not much, is the Jew, mostly this Jew . . . and not too proud of him either.²⁴

As it happens, the street scene's true significance becomes the vehicle; it serves Roth's protagonist as a writing opportunity, as vignette material for a possible *New Yorker* sketch. Ira tries to imagine the scene from various approaches and even wonders, "What if a black man saw it? Now, you've got something: a black aspiring writer. The entire picture would be different: a sense of identity would pervade, a sense of plight, different from his, a sense of folk with whom the self is integrated" – at exactly which point he speculates associatively, "Say the guy was a Jew, Moe Cohen, and his old clunker piled up under the second avenue El?" and after concocting a short narrative that includes Yiddish vernacular ("‘Oy Gevald. I got such lousy luck. . . . You understand Yiddish? Oy, *kallaf auf iss*'" says his imaginary alter-truck driver Moe Cohen) wanly decides, "But then it would never do for *The New Yorker*."²⁵

While Roth's Proust-length multinovel saga confines itself to a single narrative arc initiated in *Call It Sleep* and resumed in the Mercy of a Rude Stream tetralogy (1994–1998) plus *An American Type*, we might read the preceding passages as an unintended valediction on the ethical politics of Jewish writers imaging/imagining African American others. We can thus tease out in merged filaments of Rosenfeld ("What would he do when he got home . . . in

the climate of his neighborhood”), proto-Malamud (“Now, you’ve got something: a black aspiring writer”), and even urban set pieces (like the black pick-pocket in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*) of the sort for which Bellow became notorious. When the enlivening fiction of a black perspective (where “the entire picture would be different” as a result of the pervasive “sense of identity,” the imagined sense of a “plight different from his” and “of folk with whom the self is integrated”) pivots to a comically Jewified one (Moe Cohen and his “*Oy gevald*”), the contrast is telling. Where the former, a black American vignette, should prompt in an author “more sophisticated ways [of storytelling] that would appeal to the cultivated and subtle mind, to the intellectual, the philosophically capable . . . [o]r to the sociological: rather dwell on the status of the Negro, economic, social, demographic,” the latter, the Jewish counterpart, yields only shtick: a quasi-vaudeville routine. (In that respect, Roth clearly had much to learn from American Yiddish poets’ counterpoint of black and Jewish spaces and sensibilities.)²⁶ But whatever his authorial intention, in the context of this essay’s concerns it can be read as compressing, both tenderly and ironically, a decades-long discourse of black-Jewish narrativity and literary affiliation, with that uncannily distancing effect of objects in the rear view mirror appearing closer than they are.

The twenty-first century cultural landscape boasts a next generation of Jewish American writers (as surveyed by Josh Lambert’s essay in this volume).²⁷ But it boasts as well newer kinds of intercultural “caromings” – for example, the biracial and Jewish Korean literary mash ups in *Petropolis* by Anya Ulinich (2009) and *Super Sad True Love Story* by Gary Shteyngart (2010), or the salsa / klezmer, Cuban-Jewish musical fusion of Roberto Juan Rodriguez. For this essay’s purposes, however, Eric Sundquist’s alternately forward- and backward-looking *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (2005) concludes by singling out two texts by Jewish American writers that plot perhaps the most flamboyant post-*Tenants* (see later discussion) coordinates for Jews on America’s racial map: Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America: Part 1: Millennium Approaches* (1993) and *Part 2: Perestroika* (1994), and Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000). Kushner’s play seems to channel Malamud directly (while fundamentally altering the closed loop of black-Jewish binarity with the emancipatory politics of queer identities):

ROY: Move your nigger cunt spade faggot lackey ass out of my room.

BELIZE: Shit-for-brains filthy-mouthed selfish motherfucking cowardly cocksucking cloven-hoofed pig.

ROY: Mongrel. Dingo. Slave. Ape.

BELIZE: Kike.

ROY: Now you're talking!

BELIZE: Greedy Kike.

ROY: Now you can have a bottle. But only one.²⁸

This exchange effectively rewrites the penultimate standoff between Harry and Willie, which Ozick and Budick after her pointedly deploy in order to ground their analyses. Thirteen years after its publication, Philip Roth's novel has generated a substantial commentary, including a number of pieces that play the game of literary detection, suggesting antetypes for the novel's cultural politics of passing in figures such as Anatole Broyard and Ralph Ellison.²⁹

But with no prominent African American content whatsoever, the Roth novel that may activate an even more fascinating, precisely because uncanny, circuit of black-Jewish energies is *The Plot against America* (2004), a counterhistory of state-sponsored anti-Semitism in the United States during the fictitious Charles Lindbergh administration of 1940–1942, whose last pages allude to the Leo Frank lynching of 1913 but whose other 361 pages (plus historical postscript) omit any mention of the real and grotesque history of violence directed at American blacks. Thus, at the level of neither plot nor character but rather entirely from within the horizon of reception, that claim was staked in the form of the critic and novelist Stanley Crouch's blistering critique of the imaginative deficit that he says accounts for the novel's patent indifference to American black history. "So what is Philip Roth's great sin?" Crouch wonders aloud.

Simply this: His new novel moves along as though that bestial level of social bigotry was not a highly visible fact of American life at the time that "The Plot Against America" is imagined to have taken place, between 1940 and 1942. . . . How could this book pass everyone at Roth's publisher without the unmentioned smell of burning flesh filling room after room until someone raised a question about the stench for which the novel had cut off its nose in order to avoid acknowledging?³⁰

Sundquist's 2005 book parenthetically mentions the text, but only alludes to what was to become a fascinating controversy in its own right, and as such, also an uncanny throwback (albeit one-sided) to the Baldwin-Ellison-Hyman-Howe-Arendt-Elkins counterpoint in the pages of *Dissent*, *Commentary*, *New Yorker*, *New Leader*, and other political-cultural magazines of the 1960s, as tracked by Emily Budick. Indeed, it is often at such reflexive junctures, interstices; at second or third removes (like Budick's analysis of Trilling's "The Other Margaret," a story in which no Jews actually appear but nevertheless become referentially meaningful), where a black-Jewish interreading becomes

most salient if criticism is to be more than merely reflectionist or mimetically bound. Rather than a continuation of the story – the master plot – of “black-Jewish relations,” our concern would be with its afterlife through a set of continuing permutations. This takes us to a peculiarly inward turn in writing by Jews about race and what I call the question of “tenancy.”

Part II Tenancy

In 2006, thirty-five years after the book was published, a film of Bernard Malamud’s *Trauerspiel* about black and Jew, *The Tenants*, was released. The 1971 novel, notes Aleksandar Hemon in his new introduction, is “rife with discord and confusion and unanswerable questions, all leading to an eventual narrative disintegration that closely corresponds to the breakdown of order and civility the book depicts.”³¹ The story about two vying writers in an abandoned tenement and a proprietorship by turns literary, cultural, and sexual signaled a particularly jagged articulation of a bruited but complicated proximity of twentieth century black and Jewish imaginaries within the national republic of letters. The film, also rife with discord and confusion but for reasons owing more to casting and dramaturgical choices, was a critical and commercial failure.³²

“The black” – as the narrator’s discourse consistently identifies Willie Spearmint (later Bill Spear), African American antagonist to Jewish American Harry Lesser – is portrayed by hip hop totem and pop-cultural savant Snoop Dogg, a canny decision in an otherwise undistinguished ensemble, his hyper-presence overshadowing the cast’s decidedly low-resolution Jews. Some reviewers praised Snoop Dogg’s performance, by turns spirited and stoned; others wondered aloud about any palpable Jewishness in Dylan McDermott’s writer Jew, whose serious beard, oversize glasses, and sliding New York accent suffice to identify him as such. Widely lamented was the film’s general tenor of anachronism, its 1970s mise-en-scène time-delayed in an odd sort of representational fermata.

The novel, of course, is extremely pointed about the Jewishness of one of its writers even if it is deliberately etiolated – made *lesser* – within the story. For it is in Harry Lesser’s voice, whether focalized through the narrator or actually rendered in direct discourse, that we hear Malamud’s own distinctive authorial Jewish patois.³³ Indeed, its contrast with Willie’s black vernacular could hardly be more acute, creating perhaps the most flagrant expression of a presiding imbalance between the two characters in the novel’s slanted mimesis.³⁴ “Art is the glory and only a schmuck thinks otherwise,” says Harry

to Willie in one of several code-switching expostulations. "Don't bug me with that Jewword," responds Willie in lacerating demotic; "None of that crap on me, Lesser, you Jewbastard, we tired of you fuckn us over." For the routinely designated "writer," it thus becomes all too easy to synonymize Lesser as both "Bernard Malamud, author" and/or "Jew," allegorical avatars both; by contrast, "the black" (crucially, also figured as a writer) remains totemically black from whatever region, figural or factual, he may have been constituted.³⁵

Where *The Human Stain*, Philip Roth's 2000 novel about an African American academic passing as a Jew, offered an incredibly rich, albeit tragic exploration of black-Jewish entanglements, saturating black-Jewish (in)visiblity with recombinant possibility, the motion picture of *The Tenants* (released a mere six years later) yielded a kind of Jewish Flatland that seemed to miscalculate Malamud's self-critical intent entirely. Whereas in the novel's agon, Lesser inveighs against Willie's increasingly gratuitous bigotry, "OK, Bill, but cut out the Jew stuff,"³⁶ making readers progressively aware of modern Jewishness as a kind of existential *ambivalence*, the film, in spirit and sensibility, accomplished precisely such excision: an evacuated Jewishness that fades to monochrome, the cliché Jew-as-invisible man.³⁷ What's left is Sartre's boxing metaphor for everyday life, "a binary praxis of antagonistic reciprocity," theatricalized as racial grotesque.³⁸

As Cynthia Ozick acutely showed only shortly after the novel's publication,³⁹ its irrevocable forward thrust toward racial eschaton should perhaps be read *backward*: The two rivalrous tenants in its metaphorical house of fiction had already been anticipated a decade before by two notable intellectuals embroiled in "literary conversation" (Irving Howe's and Ralph Ellison's 1963 essays, "Black Boys and Native Sons" and "The World and the Jug," as previously mentioned), a conversation that epitomized the torqued mutuality of a larger group narrative at once cooperative and conflicted, collaborative and competitive, involving both elites and folks, with enmeshments across the varied regions of commerce, business and labor, education, entertainment, religion, politics and social action, regionality itself, and, not least, cultural production.

I have chosen to begin the second section of this chapter in 2006, however, for a very particular reason. For as it happens, the elision of the novel's ritualized combat between American black and Jew at a historically low ebb of their communal interaction appears *itself* anachronistic when one considers that the release of the film version of *The Tenants* corresponds more closely to a moment in popular culture when the HBO situation comedy *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–) built a plot arc around the continuing cotenancy, of Larry

David and Leon Black (played by the comedian J. B. Smoove);⁴⁰ milked for its profanely hilarious potential, Malamud's basic plot never seemed so ripe for comic subversion.

Furthermore, if we continue to look forward three decades instead of back – from a vantage Ozick's partisan essay could obviously not claim – between the novel's original publication in 1971 and the film adaptation of 2006, we note a certain countertrend. Say that it begins, satirically enough, with the famous scene from Mel Brooks's film *Blazing Saddles* (1974) in which the chief of the Sioux Nation (played by Brooks) determinedly approaches a frightened black family in a lone – segregated – wagon, only to proclaim, in stentorian Yiddish, "Loz im geyn!" (let them go!) and then more intimately, "Abi gezunt" (as long as you're healthy), with the narrated flashback concluding, "and the rest is history." Say the trend continues with sentimental theatricals like Herb Gardner's *I'm Not Rappaport* (1984) and Alfred Uhry's *Driving Miss Daisy* (1987), both made into films shortly after publication. Say the pluralist, mawkish spirit of such works is paralleled in children's literature with the publication of Patricia Polacco's *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (1992), specifically retooled for the PBS program *Reading Rainbow*.⁴¹

Most pertinently for this chapter, this trend could be said to culminate on the latitudes of a different cultural zone entirely, with the spate of scholarly monographs about the black-Jewish dynamic written in the 1990s and 2000s by literary critics and historians, most of them Jewish.

Excepting the last, about which I say more later, all of these instances were either comically depressurizing or utopian (Brooks's vaudevillian, pre-*Borat* gag feels eerily postmodern now), even as Malamud's text drew from much darker realms of chthonic fantasy by drawing a curtain on one sort of high-minded affiliation between American blacks and Jews, and as print-media spectacles of black-Jewish strife spiked during the 1980s and early 1990s (e.g., Jesse Jackson in 1984, Louis Farrakhan in the same year and thereafter, Leonard Jeffries in 1990). Indeed, given the post-*Tenants* social turmoil that reached its own crescendo in a Brooklyn neighborhood circa 1991, Uhry's anodyne story ("at once moving and sterile," to quote Eric Sundquist)⁴² about a Jewish ex-schoolteacher and her black chauffeur in Atlanta against the (pallidly rendered) background of social ferment and change in the 1950s and 1960s represents both a bridge and a buffer between an imagined apocalypse and the real world mayhem of the Crown Heights riot. *Driving Miss Daisy* depicts an oasis of geriatric calm in a bygone, genteel-Jewish South, its interracial quasi-marital wrangling safely removed not only from the sort of subversive eros reflected in Art Spiegelman's controversial Valentine's Day *New Yorker*

cover from 1993 of an unchaste, “knowingly naïve” kiss between Hasid and Haitian allegorizing and gently lampooning black-Jewish cultural strife, but also the various episodes mentioned of public black-Jewish conflict that now appear as machismo-driven as they were racial.⁴³

In the decade that followed agonistic trend and utopian countertrend, a space seemed to have been cleared for a much more cerebrally inclined and politically neutral academic enterprise. And here is where the movie version of *The Tenants* acquires a particular significance as a kind of photo negative for both Malamud's 1971 novel and the academic work of the 1990s and 2000s that will often document its example in the twentieth century tradition of “literary blacks and Jews.” As the novel's plot, so eerily predicative of real-world and highly publicized erosion between black and Jewish constituencies, transposes into an underdeveloped role for Jews in a film version that, given its release date, one might have expected to *crystallize* or *refract* it – “the Jew,” in other words, as a minus sign – so the work by mostly Jewish academicians in the 1990s and 2000s inadvertently contracts a previous cotenancy on the plane of letters to a tenant of one: ironically enough, the sole tenant that Harry Lesser imagined himself to be in his building before he discovered the stealth presence of the Other.

I emphasize *literary* here because it may well be that – as of this essay's writing in 2014 – the most intriguing modulations of American or indeed global black-Jewish connectivity take shape, as Jonathan Freedman has acutely argued, and as the examples of *Blazing Saddles*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *Borat* triply suggest, in otherwise charted regions of popular culture: on the *z* axis, so to speak – in music and visual media⁴⁴ – rather than the two-dimensional axes of high cultural literary fiction.⁴⁵ Indeed, the choice so belatedly to adapt (but also underserve the original creative vision of) *The Tenants* inadvertently puts a period to a racially overdetermined literary thematics that, at the beginning of the new millennium, may well have run its course.

Yet obviously, dwelling on Malamud's plot risks a patency all its own and is meant to be deliberately revealing. After Ozick's “Literary Blacks and Jews” (first published a year after *The Tenants*' publication) effectively inaugurated the genre for literary criticism and gave it its name, the novel rapidly became a touchstone for critics calibrating the (dis)affiliative tenor of literary interactions between late-century American blacks and Jews. “For if the major subject of *The Tenants* is the competition between African and Jewish American writers, the novel itself, as Jewish-authored text, mirrors the problems it reveals”⁴⁶ – a mirroring effect that subsequent criticism has also shared. Thus, while Ozick's essay tracked Malamud's “warlike,” “merciless,”

and “claustrophobic” story back to a nonfictional colloquy in 1963 between Ralph Ellison and Irving Howe in the pages of *Dissent* and the *New Leader*, both the novel and Ozick’s commentary serve as the point of departure for Emily Budick’s superlative study (and perhaps the high water mark in the genre), *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (1998), and figure prominently in both Eric Sundquist’s commanding *Strangers in the Land* and Ethan Goffman’s smaller-bore *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature* (2000).⁴⁷ Whatever literary intervention the novel may have represented in its own right (by no means an easily settled question), the expressive and autobiographically inclined writers in it almost seem to have catalyzed a generation of academic writing *outside* it.

As to that critical enterprise itself (aspirationally formalized as “Black-Jewish Studies”),⁴⁸ we might ponder what drives this seemingly last uncanny turn of the black-Jewish screw in the wake of a prior, documented American Jewish investment in a dialogue alternately aesthetic-cultural and sociopolitical, motivated variously by common cause, nostalgia, liberal earnestness, libidinal pull, ibidinal investment,⁴⁹ cultural paternalism, political fraternalism, and at times even rivalry or fear. For, far more blatantly than in *The Tenants*, one cannot but help to notice an asymmetry in the critical discourse that, while hardly replicating Malamud’s “theater piece disguised as stately discourse,” nevertheless transposes it to a new key.⁵⁰ As the critical practice of largely next-generation Jewish academics (and thus at least partly a function of institutional trends), “black Jewish Studies” thus stands in intriguing counterpoint to the historical discourse of *black-Jewish relations*, more or less picking up where the latter appears to have left off while reaping some of the interdisciplinary gains claimed by alternate methodologies for Jewish Studies.⁵¹ A kind of holdout occupancy on the upper floors of a building that formerly housed literary production by American Jews *and* blacks, it appears all the more striking against the background not only of Malamud’s novel but also of the diminished Jewishness in *The Tenants* as film.

And while the metanarrative of this late episode (or even coda?) in jointly owned cultural real estate remains to be written, if not from outside the bounds of the professoriate then still perhaps from quarters beyond mainly Jewishly situated storytellers, Paul Gilroy’s principled call in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993) for renewed black-Jewish critical dialogue also retains its potency. In the meanwhile, the recent cartographies that situate Jews and blacks otherwise than strictly literarily or reimagine Jews in relation to other ethnocultural Others on America’s racial map offer a set of new coordinates.⁵²

By way of conclusion, then, we find an article by Harold Heft in the Jewish online magazine *Tablet* that takes us almost full circle. Entitled “America’s Blackest Jewish Writer,” it makes the case on behalf of the African American Walter Mosley – best known for his genre fiction but perhaps more relevantly, also the author of *The Man in My Basement* (2005), a different sort of “tenant-novel” – for inclusion in the “American Jewish literary canon.”⁵³ Mosley happens to be halakhically Jewish (mother Ella Mosley, née Slatkin), and is on record as citing the influence of both Malamud and I. B. Singer (whose minor character, the fully Caucasian Black Dobbe in “Der Spinozist,” may, however, be the closest Singer’s fiction approaches anything black-Jewish). The elusive ideal of a modern Jewish canon succeeds only to the degree that the container takes its cue from shifting contents within. This is the burden of Dan Miron’s call for a new Jewish literary thinking that charts cultural longitudes and latitudes according to opportunities for contiguity rather than to the dictates of an idealized continuity. In that way, the “cultural miscegenation”⁵⁴ whereby Mosley can be labeled America’s blackest Jewish writer makes its own compelling case for the porosity, plasticity, and self-revising *jew d’esprit* that ineluctably underwrite modernity and canonicity alike. Let the perhaps improbable figure of a canonized Walter Mosely, then, have the (temporarily) last word in this essay’s selective account of Jews on America’s (shifting) racial map.

Notes

- 1 Adam Meyer, *Black Jewish Relations in African American and Jewish American Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002), vii.
- 2 By contrast, that story serves as a focal point in Emily Budick’s *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 3 As the descriptive term of choice for sociocultural bipolarity, “black Jewish relations” is tracked in the two bibliographies by Lenwood Davis, *Black-Jewish Relations in the United States, 1752–1984: A Selected Bibliography* (Portsmouth, NH: Greenwood Press, 1984) and Adam Meyer. The critical literature grew considerably in the interval between these two publications as well as thereafter. In history, the social sciences, and journalism, the following are examples: Hasia Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915–1935* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Edward S. Shapiro, “Blacks and Jews Entangled,” *First Things* (August/ September, 1994); Paul Berman, *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments* (New York: Delta, 1995); Jonathan Kaufman, *Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times between Blacks and Jews in America* (New York: Touchstone, 1995); Jack Salzman, *Struggles in the Promised Land: Towards a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and *Bridges and*

- Boundaries: African Americans and American Jews* (New York: Braziller, 1992); Maurianne Adams and John H. Bracey, eds. (1999); Michael Lerner and Cornel West (1996); V. P. Franklin, Nancy L. Grant, Harold Kletnick and Genna Rae McNeil, eds., *Strangers and Neighbors: Relations between Blacks and Jews in the United States* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); Seth Forman, *Blacks in the Jewish Mind: A Crisis of Liberalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Marc Schneier and Martin Luther King Jr., *Shared Dreams: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Jewish Community* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2009); Liam Machlin, *Striking Down the Alliance: Blacks, Jews, Catholics and the Limits of Liberalism* (Seattle: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013); the 2000 documentary by Joel Sucher and Steven Fischler *From Swastika to Jim Crow*; the 2010 traveling art exhibit, *Transcending History: Moving Beyond the Legacy of Slavery and the Holocaust*; and finally, the “whiteness” studies by Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 2005); and Jonathan Schorsch, *Blacks and Jews in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- 4 Treated more comprehensively in this volume by the accompanying essays of Mikhail Krutikov, Avraham Novershtern, Nahma Sandrow, Michael Weingrad, Hana Wirth-Nesher, and Rebecca Margolis, among others.
 - 5 The phrase cited by Merle Lyn Bachman and coined by Nakhman Mayzel, from the introduction to his voluminous 1955 literary anthology, *Amerike in yidishn vort* (New York: Yidishe Kultur Farband, 1955). Bachman draws almost all her examples of Yiddish American poems about black themes from Mayzel’s anthology, which itself groups these poems under one topic. See also the anthologies by Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), and Howe, Wisse, and Shmeruk, *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (New York: Penguin, 1988), and the essay in Yiddish by Yitskhok Rontsh, “Der neger in undzer literatur” (1945). Hasia Diner’s valuable *In the Almost Promised Land* devotes a long and comprehensive chapter to the related source material published in the American Yiddish press.
 - 6 Merle Lyn Bachman, *Recovering “Yiddishland”: Threshold Moments in American Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 119.
 - 7 See Mintz’s 2011 essay of the same title along with his groundbreaking volume, *Sanctuary in the Wilderness: A Critical Introduction to American Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), and Michael Weingrad, *American Hebrew Literature: Writing Jewish National Identity in the United States* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).
 - 8 See also the studies by Colleen Heather McCallum-Bonar, “Black Ashkenaz and the Almost Promised Land: Yiddish Literature and the Harlem Renaissance,” Diss., 2008, Ohio State University; Mikhail Krutikov, “Der rase-inyen in der yidisher literatur,” *Der Forverts* (April 27–May 3, 2012), 12; Jessica Kirzane, “From Erotic Fantasy to Puritan Coldness: Imagining Race and Sexual Desire in Jewish American Fiction of the Early 20th Century,” in *The Sacred Encounter: Jewish Perspectives on Sexuality*, ed. Rabbi Lisa Grushcow (New York: CCAR Press, 2014), 195–208; and Rachel Rubinstein, *Members*

- of the Tribe: Native America in the Jewish Imagination (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010).
- 9 See also Yankev Glatshteyn's essay on Richard Wright in *In tokh genumen* (1945–1947).
- 10 For example, the American Hebraist Efraim E. Lisitzky, whose dialogically inflected narrative poetry reimagines folk material both Native American (*Medurot do'akhot* from 1937) and African American (*B'oholei kush: Shirim* from 1953). As Stephen Katz remarks, beyond the commonplaces of romantic escapism or shared abjection and marginalization, Lisitzky's work "needs to be seen as part and parcel of his engagement with America" (*Red, Black, and Jew: New Frontiers in Hebrew Literature* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010], 52). In Yiddish, A. Eysen published *Volt vitman: Finf un tsvontsik lider* (1934), translations of twenty-five poems from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. A more complete translation of Whitman was published by L. Miller (pseudonym of Eliezer Meler) in 1940.
- 11 In her translation of Vaynshteyn's "*Af dayn erd, Amerike*" Bachman explains that the prepositional phrase "has the connotation of a perpetual condition, as place neither home nor exile, in which the immigrant invents his relationship to America" (*Recovering "Yiddishland,"* 166).
- 12 This text was part of a six-poem sequence entitled *Negers* from Vaynshteyn's 1936 volume, *Brukhshtiker*. Also relevant are Yehoash's "*Lintshn*" from 1919, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's "*Salut*" from 1934, and Yosef Opatoshu's 1915 story *Lintsheray*, which is mentioned by the critics Eric Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Bernard Cohen, *Sociocultural Changes in American Jewish Life as Reflected in Selected Jewish Literature* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1972); and more recently and in greater depth Marc Caplan, "Yiddish Exceptionalism: Lynching, Race, and Racism in Joseph Opatashu's American Fiction," in *Inventing a Modern Jewish Identity: Joseph Opatoshu, a Yiddish Writer, Thinker, and Activist between Europe and America*, ed. Sabine Koller, Gennady Estraiikh, and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), 173–187.
- 13 I thank Jessica Kirzane for some of these references. In her own essay, "From Erotic Fantasy to Puritan Coldness," Kirzane reads two short stories by Barukh Glozman about Jewish male desire for black women, "*A nakht in a dorem-shtot*" and "*Af di felder fun Dzshordzshia*" (1927).
- 14 "*Kushi(t)* in Hebrew suggests a neighboring, albeit anachronistic, resonance with "African American" since, as both demonym and toponym, it encodes a place-name. Conventionally, the term denotes "black" (or Eng. "Negro") with an occasionally pejorative valence nowadays. See Hagar Salamon, "Ethiopian Jewry and New Self Concepts," in *The Life of Judaism*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 227–240.
- 15 On Kaniuk, see the final section of Stephen Katz's *Red, Black, and Jew* on blacks in Hebrew literature.
- 16 Rachel Rubinstein discusses both figures: Roth in *Members of the Tribe* and West in "Nathanael West's Indian Commodities," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 23:4 (Summer 2005): 98–120.
- 17 See the essay on Yezierska by Brooks E. Hefner, "'Slipping Back into the Vernacular': Anzia Yezierska's Vernacular Modernism," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 36:3 (Fall 2011): 187–211.

- 18 The formulation developed by Werner Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). See also Steven J. Belluscio, *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006).
- 19 See the essay by Leslie Fiedler, "Negro and Jew: Encounter in America," *A New Leslie Fiedler Reader* (Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books, 1999), 97–107; some of the essays in Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin, eds., *Leslie Fiedler and American Culture* (Dover: University of Delaware Press, 1999); and the chapter by Susan Gubar, "Jewish American Women Writers and the Race Question," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer, 231–249 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). More recent compendia for an American Jewish "canon" can be found in Joel Shatzky and Michael Taub, eds., *Contemporary Jewish-American Novelists: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Portsmouth, NH: Greenwood Press, 1997); Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein, eds., *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001); and Josh Lambert, *American Jewish Fiction: A JPS Guide* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2009).
- 20 Budick, *Blacks and Jews*, 139.
- 21 See Carol Batker, *Reforming Fictions: Native, African, and Jewish American Women's Literature and Journalism in the Progressive Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Cheryl Greenberg's essay "Separated at Birth? Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*," in *Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side: Narratives Out of Time*, ed. Catherine Rottenberg, 87–106 (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2013); Martin Japtock, *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005); and my own *Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), which, however, deploys such coupling in the service of a larger project about the ethics of reading.
- 22 The passage that begins "Why Was He a Negro and I a Jew?" is briefly adduced by Budick, Ruth Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey through Language and Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2000), and my own *Facing Black and Jew*.
- 23 Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Picador, 2005), 273, 245. In a rich analysis from *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), Jonathan Freedman suggests what may be the more resonant juxtaposition, that of Jew and Chinese rather than Jew and black, in a novel most of whose action is located in the mixed Jewish/ Asian Lower East Side (where Roth's family happened to reside for a scant four years before moving to East Harlem). Penetrating treatments of Roth's novel can be found in Hana Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 2006) and Wirth-Nesher, ed., *New Essays on Call it Sleep* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 24 Henry Roth, *An American Type* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 210.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 211.
- 26 Roth's late work is subject to remorseless critique by Joshua Cohen in his review of *An American Type*, "Call It Sleek: The Gentrification of Henry Roth," *Harper's Magazine* (July 13, 2010).

- 27 See also Derek Parker Royal's and Wendy Zierler's essays, and the recent collections edited by Hilda Raz (1998) and Deborah Ager and M. E. Silverman (2013).
- 28 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes: Revised and Complete Edition* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2013), 187.
- 29 For example, the essays by Timothy L. Parrish, "Ralph Ellison: *The Invisible Man* in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," *Contemporary Literature* 45:3 (Fall 2004): 421–459; and Brett Ashley Kaplan, "Anatole Broyard's Human Stain: Performing Postracial Consciousness," *Philip Roth Studies* 1:2 (Fall 2005): 125–144, and Roth's "Open Letter to Wikipedia," *New Yorker*, "Page Turner," September 6, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/an-open-letter-to-wikipedia>. Sundquist correctly notes the novel's allusions not only to Ellison's *Invisible Man* but also, perhaps slyly, to Malamud's *The Tenants*, among multiple other intertexts. Freedman's interreading of the novel in *Klezmer America* with films of Douglas Sirk and Roy Eldridge's role in the Artie Shaw band is more relevant for this chapter's purposes.
- 30 Stanley Crouch, "Roth's Historical Sin," *Salon*, October 11, 2004.
- 31 Bernard Malamud, *The Tenants* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003), ix.
- 32 As a film, its indebtedness to Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976) may be as pertinent as any discernible anxiety of influence exerted by the Malamud text itself, which is to say, simply, that what the motion picture adapts is largely the stuff of plot, absent the density of allusive particulars that make the novel so unmistakably haunted – and as such, one of many noteworthy edifices in the tradition of American fiction.
- 33 In a *New York Times* interview shortly before *The Tenants* was published, Malamud and his questioner collaborate in suggesting that a Jewish character is a person "who says, 'Oy Vey'." See Israel Shenker, "For Malamud, It's Story," *New York Times* (October 3, 1971).
- 34 According to James A. McPherson, the novel incorporated his own ventriloquized suggestions, and thus such disparity may well follow from the text's semicollaborative authorship, i.e., "I distinguished Willie Spear's idiom from Harry Lesser's" ("To Blacks and Jews: Hab Rachmones," *Tikkun* 4:5 [September–October 1989]: 15).
- 35 Cynthia Ozick's essay "Literary Blacks and Jews" (1972) mounts the debatable claim that Malamud drew the character of Willie from the totemicizing culture of black nationalism. Malamud, however, in the interview with Shenker, insisted he was a "singular" creation.
- 36 Malamud, *The Tenants*, 94.
- 37 As Stephen Holden remarked in his *New York Times* review, "In its casting and direction (by Danny Green), *The Tenants* nervously sidesteps the black-Jewish issue by giving neither Harry nor Irene any recognizably Jewish characteristics" ("For Two Competing Writers, Race is Great Divide," *New York Times* [February 3, 2006]).
- 38 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Quinton Hoare (London: Verso, 2006), 5.
- 39 "Literary Blacks and Jews," first published in *Midstream* 18:6 (1972): 10–24 and subsequently collected in *Art and Ardor* (1984).
- 40 Sample dialogue from "Meet the Blacks," Season 6, Episode 1 (Aired September 9, 2007): "Larry: So your last name is 'Black'? Black: Yes./ Larry: That's like if my last name was 'Jew,' like Larry Jew. . . 'Cause I'm Jewish."

- 41 The book's organizing tropes of neighboring and reciprocal adoption were rendered even more obvious in that version, which featured live-action sequences of the host, LeVar Burton, enjoying the diversity of a city neighborhood and preparing challah and potato latkes with his adoptive "bubbie." In Polacco's fable, Larnel Moore, a middle-class African American boy, bonds both transgenerationally and interethnically with a childless elderly Jewish woman. Both an adopted tailless cat and the tale-laden master plot of the Passover holiday become the shared currency of a relationship cordoned off, once again, from either actual hostility or adult mutuality: "Larnel, your people and mine are alike, you know. Trouble, we've seen. Happiness, too. Great strength we've had. You and I are alike, so much alike." This and other books by Polacco are discussed in Jodi Eichler-Levine, *Suffer the Little Children: Uses of the Past in Jewish and African American Children's Literature* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).
- 42 Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land*, 482. In a footnote, Sundquist rightly counterpoints Uhry's play to the subplot of the black maid Calpurnia and the Finch family in Harper Lee's 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Tony Kushner's *Caroline, or Change* (2003), in which the title character is aligned ambivalently with her Jewish employer's stepson, Noah.
- 43 "This metaphoric embrace is my Valentine to New York, a wish for the reconciliation of seemingly unbridgeable differences in the form of a symbolic kiss" ("Editor's Note," *New Yorker* [February 15, 1993], 6).
- 44 Perhaps the parodic last word is the 2011 video "Black and Jewish," among whose many clever jests is a riff on both Wiz Khalifa's "Black and Yellow" and the Yeshiva University Maccabeats' "Purim Song" (itself channeling Pink's "Raise Your Glass"). Sample lyrics: "Black dad, Jewish mom / Eating gefilte fish while pouring Dom / Soon as I hit the shul I go so hard / On Rosh Hashana, I blow the Shofar / Get my hair did, read the Torah / I'm hugged out, stab my enemies with a Menorah / No paper planes, but I'm taking flight / I got a free trip to Israel: Birthright!" <http://www.funnyordie.com/videos/d056b3dd60/black-and-jewish-black-and-yellow-parody>. Online magazines like *Tablet*, *Habitus* (e.g., Issue 04, "New Orleans"), *Guilt and Pleasure* (e.g., "The Sound Issue" #6, Fall 2007), *Jewcy*, *Jewlicious*, *Heeb*, and *Zeek* regularly feature articles or bylines about creative "mongrelization."
- 45 Freedman's *Klezmer America* is especially rich and innovative in this respect through its enthusiastic attention to Jewish/Latino and Jewish/Asian cross-hatchings. See also the studies by Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Michael Rogin, *Blackface/White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Mike Gerber, *Jazz Jews* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2010); Josh Kun, "Bagels, Bongos, and Yiddishe Mambos, or The Other History of Jews in America," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 23:4 (Summer 2005); Lori Harrison-Kahan, *The White Negress: Literature, Minstrelsy, and the Black-Jewish Imaginary* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011); and Jon Stratton, *Jews, Race and Popular Music* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009).
- 46 Budick, *Blacks and Jews*, 18.
- 47 Goffman's book reboots the project initiated by the historian Louis Harap, *Dramatic Encounters: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-Century American Drama, Poetry, and Humor*

- and the *Black-Jewish Literary Relationship* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1987). See also the studies included in the general bibliography by Dean J. Franco, *Race, Rights, and Recognition: Jewish American Literature since 1969* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Andrew Furman, "Revisiting Literary Blacks and Jews," *Midwest Quarterly* 44:2 (Winter 2003): 131–148; and Katya Gibel Azoulay Mevorach, *Black, Jewish and Interracial: It's Not the Color of Your Skin But the Race of Your Kin, and Other Myths of Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
- 48 The formulation appears in Jeffrey Melnick, "Review of Ethan Goffman's *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 47:4 (Winter 2001): 1027–1029, and Catherine Rottenberg, *Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side: Narratives Out of Time* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 4. The subfield it identifies should be distinguished from "Black Jewish Studies" as pertaining to specifically African American expressions of Jewish religious identity or practice. See, for example, the chapter "The Black Nation Israel" in Sundquist's *Strangers in the Land* and Walter Isaac, "Locating Afro-American Judaism: A Critique of White Normativity," in *A Companion to African-American Studies*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2006), 512–542.
- 49 I borrow the pun on "libidinal" from Eric Santer, *The Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 50, where *ibidinal* signifies that "a symbolic investiture not only endows the subject with new predicates; it also calls forth a largely unconscious 'citation' of the authority guaranteeing, legitimating one's rightful enjoyment of those predicates (that is at least in part what it means to 'internalize' a new symbolic identity)."
- 50 Examples are Carol J. Barker, *Reforming Fictions: Native, African, and Jewish American Women's Literature and Journalism in the Progressive Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Martin Japtok, *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005); Melnick, "Black & Jew Blues," *Transition* 62 (1993): 106–121; *Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000); and "A Black in Jewface," *Race and the Modern Artist*, ed. Heather Hathaway, Josef Jarab, Jeffrey Melnick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 126–139; Adam Zachary Newton, *Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Catherine Rottenberg, *Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth University Press, 2008); Eichler-Levine, *Suffer the Little Children*. See also Rebecca T. Alpert, *Out of Left Field: Jews and Black Baseball* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch, *Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Marni Davis, *Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908–1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Milly Heyd, *Mutual Reflections: Jews and Blacks in American Art* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999); and Abraham Melamed, *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture: A History of the Other*, trans. Betty Sigler Rozen (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

- 51 This discourse is pinpointed from within the critical literature as “a story told by Jews about interracial relationships” and “a narrative of intergroup activity that speaks mainly to the desires of specific Jews” by Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 4, and *Black-Jewish Relations on Trial*, 11. Exceptions include the philosopher Laurence Mordekhai Thomas’s *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Cornel West’s forthcoming book on Abraham Joshua Heschel; and the videographer/independent scholar Robert Philipson’s *The Identity Question: Blacks and Jews in Europe and America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), whose pedestrian title anticipates a mostly derivative book; by comparison, Anna Deveare Smith’s performance piece *Fires in the Mirror* (1993) and the fiction of John Edgar Wideman occupy singularly creative niches.
- 52 Nuance is called for here inasmuch as much of this scholarship self-identifies as either “American Studies” or “Multiculturalism Studies” but not as “Jewish Studies,” although it certainly could be thus classed. Consider two very different recent projects: Andrew Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma: The Return of the Exiled* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000) argues for the inclusion of new Jewish writers under the multiculturalist banner not necessarily because their work explores the interethnic or intercultural but because “Jewish” itself should count as “multicultural.” Contrariwise, Sander Gilman remarks, “And yet this multicultural theme seems to have its limits in emphasizing the boundaries between the groups rather than the possibility of hybridity (to be found, for example, in the intertwined history of jazz and klezmer in the United States)” (*Multiculturalism and the Jews* [New York: Routledge, 2006], 146). See also in this regard, Marla Brettschneider, ed., *The Narrow Bridge: Jewish Views on Multiculturalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996) and David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel, eds., *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), especially Heschel’s essay, “Jewish Studies as Counterhistory,” 101–113.
- 53 <http://tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/131850/americas-blackest-jewish-writer> (May 23, 2013). Compare an article by Liel Leibovitz from the same magazine, “Why ‘Black-ish’ Is the Best Jewish Sitcom That Was Never Made” <http://tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/187238/why-blackish-is-the-best-jewish-sitcom-that-was-never-made> (November 26, 2014).
- 54 Emily Budick’s term in reference to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*; and, as Freedman suggests, the secret to Sacha Baron Cohen’s subversive Jewish mischief in film and on television.

Gender Poetics in Jewish American Poetry

KATHRYN HELLERSTEIN

This essay addresses the question of how Jewish women writing poetry in the United States figured a gender poetics. Choosing from works written in English and Yiddish, from the mid-nineteenth into the late twentieth century, it investigates how six poets – Penina Moise, Adah Isaacs Menken, Emma Lazarus, Celia Dropkin, Adrienne Rich, and Marge Piercy – shaped language and form to embody the meanings of sex, gender, and Jewishness in poetry. In their various ways, these poets developed a gender poetics that resists tradition and convention, that attends to female voices in the Bible and in the liturgy, and that articulates the female body.

Jewish women began to write and publish poetry in America as early as the first decades of the nineteenth century. Among the first poems written in English are those by Penina Moise, who was born into a Sephardic family in Charleston, South Carolina. At the age of twenty-four, Moise wrote a poem protesting anti-Jewish riots in Germany. She also composed other political poems and satirical, often humorous, verse on poverty, love, and death. Her best-known works are a collection of 190 hymns, published in 1856 by the Charleston Reform congregation Beth Elohim. Moise composed these hymns in an English stanza reminiscent of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*; many of these songs remained in the *Hebrew Union Prayer Book* and the *Reform Union Hymnal* through the twentieth century. Some eleven years earlier, Moise wrote a poem, “Miriam,” that exemplifies her concern with gender. Published in 1845, in *The Charleston Book: A Miscellany in Prose and Verse*, a collection of works by Christian and Jewish South Carolina writers, this poem retells the story of the biblical sister of Moses. This “Miriam the beautiful, the bright star of the sea,” with grace and beauty, accompanies her brother through each phase of the Exodus from Egypt. The poem lingers over Miriam’s role as the protective older sister of the infant Moses floating on the Nile, who watches the baby rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter with Moses’ own mother, Zipporah, to serve as the infant’s wet nurse. But in the penultimate stanza, the poem

changes tone to chastise Miriam as a “rash lady of the sea” who spoke ill of Moses’ wife at Hazeroth (Numbers 12:1–15), and yet whose leprosy was cured and “loveliness” restored only by “thy brother’s prayer for thee.” The final stanza narrates the death of Miriam at Kadesh in the desert of Zin (Numbers 20:1), giving more emphasis to her departure than does the Bible itself:

A wail is in the wilderness, a deep and solemn wail,
The prophetess who soared beyond mortality’s dark pale,
Has to the *spirit’s promised land* departed pure and free.
Farewell, inspired Miriam, thou lost star of the sea!¹

In contrast to Moise’s hymns, which are spoken in a passionate, collective first person that is usually not explicitly gendered, “Miriam” is spoken in a voice that addresses the prophetess in the second person, in a tone that admires and admonishes, celebrates and mourns. By addressing the ancient prophetess directly, Moise makes the legendary figure from the sacred text into a recognizable and even familiar personage in the poet’s own world. Through the poet’s authoritative, yet distinctly female voice in English, Moise shaped a gendered Jewish poetics. Writing as a woman, Moise offers the reader an interpretation of a female character in Scripture and thereby assumes the conventionally male role in Judaism of Torah commentator. Moreover, by writing in the American vernacular English, Moise was able to address not only a Jewish but a gentile readership. Even the poem’s prosody reveals Moise’s gendered Jewish poetics. The quatrains of iambic heptameter rhymed couplets, or fourteeners, is a Renaissance English verse form that had been adapted into a ballad or hymn stanza in eighteenth century England.² In “Miriam,” Moise thus expresses a nineteenth century Jewish woman poet’s identity as an American poet, who could convert the language and prosody of Britain, with its Anglican liturgical underpinnings, into a New World genre that was also Jewish.

Each of the nine quatrains ends with a refrain that names Miriam with a variant of “star of the sea”: “bright,” “fair maiden,” “brightener,” “fair star,” “day-star,” “enlightener,” and “lost star.” Moise explains this refrain in a footnote to the poem, in which she claims, without citing a source – and, it seems, mistakenly – that the Hebrew name, “Miriam,” “signifies star of the sea, lady of the sea, the exalted, the brightener, the enlightener.”³ By thus translating the Hebrew name into an English epithet,⁴ Moise transformed the biblical cadence into an American stanza, the character Miriam from a supporting role into the “star” of the poem, and shaped a web of identities – gendered, religious, sexual, and national – the strands of which we will see form new

poetic cloth in the poetry of Adah Isaacs Menken, Moise's slightly younger but shorter-lived contemporary.

Adah Isaacs Menken was ostentatiously unconventional both as a woman and as a Jew. The precise details of her life are unestablished, but we know that she was born Adelaide McCord, near New Orleans.⁵ A precocious young girl, she performed on stage as a professional actor and dancer with her sister and voraciously studied and translated Latin, Greek, and Hebrew poetry into English. She seems to have converted to Judaism, or at least assumed a Jewish identity, when she married her second husband, Alexander Isaac Menken, a musician and the son of a successful German Jewish businessman in Cincinnati, and took a variant of his name for the stage.⁶ An actress, dancer, and all-around bohemian free spirit, Menken lived a peripatetic life throughout the United States and Europe and constantly wrote poetry during her travels. In her autobiographical "Notes of Her Life in Her Own Hand," she claimed to be the daughter of French nobility.⁷

Considering the complexity of Menken's personal identity, it is not surprising that her poems on Jewish subjects or in the voice of a Jewess create an equally complicated "Jewish" feminist poetics. Her early Jewish poems were fairly conventional reflections on traditional themes such as Rosh Hashanah and Mount Sinai and appeared in Isaac Mayer Wise's *The Israelite*, in Cincinnati, and the *Jewish Messenger*, in New York. But it was in her later "wild soul-poems,"⁸ that Menken expressed a poetics of Jewish feminism. Menken wrote these poems in the long lines and free rhythms of Whitman's innovative prosody,⁹ which she encountered through her acquaintance with Whitman himself. As Eiselein, the editor of the critical edition of her works, writes, Menken was "the first poet and the only woman poet before the twentieth century to follow the revolution in prosody started by Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855)."¹⁰ Menken's prosody was a complex and even unpredictable mixture of poetic forms. She employed "images and rhythms gleaned from Ossian, the Old Testament, and popular oratory, in particular the sermon and the campaign or reform speech" and cast her lines into parallelism anaphora (repetition of initial words or phrases) and conduplicatio (words repeated in successive lines to emphasize emotions). At times, she also inserted lines of iambic pentameter or other conventional meters.¹¹

In her essay "The Affinity of Poetry and Religion," Menken writes that, because "the religion of the Jews" stems not from "the reason, the imagination, or the poetry of the human mind,"¹² but from "an external revelation" by God of the Law to Moses on Sinai, the poetry of the Jews consists of "translations of the highest, most sublime, and God-like feelings of men."¹³

One such tradition-bound poem was printed in the *Jewish Messenger*, titled in Hebrew “ראש השנה” (Rosh Hashanah), dated “New Orleans, Tishri, 5618” (September 1857), and “Affectionately Inscribed to the ‘Dear Ones at Home.’” In this poem, written in unrhymed iambic pentameter, Menken asks her Jewish in-laws, “Are ye grown wiser, better than ye were / When last the New Year’s day was here?” The poem continues by warning those who “In thoughtless gaiety forget the past; / And yet, with equal thoughtlessness regard / The untried future,” that they will miss the significance of the Jewish New Year. Rosh Hashanah, Menken explains, is the occasion for Jews to remember their good and bad deeds and to prepare for a better future, in which one should be aware “that man lives not for self, / And self alone.” Through such contemplation, a Jew can tap “that holy love for all the good / And beautiful of life, which gives to man, / ... the power / To rise above the chain which, for awhile, / In bondage holds the immortal soul.” Redemption will come from “The purity of feeling... / ... that assimilates / Degenerate man to those bright angels / Who sing praises round the throne of Him, / The Most High, the Great Jehovah!”¹⁴ In the poem’s theme of the Jews’ need for reflection so as to approach God, Menken echoes her Christian milieu. This same milieu is reflected in metaphors like “The knell / Of the Old Year,” and her invocation of “Jehovah,” the Anglicized Tetragrammaton that no Jew would ever utter. Yet she also spelled out “Rosh Hashanah” in Hebrew letters in the title and dated the poem according to the Hebrew calendar (Tishri 5618) and thereby marked her intention to write an identifiably Jewish poem, even if it was woven with the threads of a Christian sensibility.

Menken’s “wild soul-poems” are also marked as Jewish by their titles, such as “Hear, O Israel!” and “Judith.” These poems express a Jewish poetics that is even more complex.¹⁵ While the two-part epigraph of “Hear, O Israel!” claims that the poem is translated “from the Hebrew,” a subsequent quotation, “And they shall be my people, and I will be their God” (Jeremiah 2:38), suggests that Menken was writing a persona poem. The first of the four sections of the poem is, in fact, spoken in the voice of God himself, who calls upon Israel to “plead my cause against the ungodly nation!” Sections 2, 3, and 4, though, are spoken in the voice of a prophetic poet, who returns to his/her people Israel as a penitent. Quoting Psalms, Daniel, Deuteronomy, Genesis, Exodus, and other biblical books, the prophetic poet adjures the people to “Rise up, O Israel!” and follow him/her “back to God.” The prophet promises to lead “O my people! Back to freedom!” and “thou Chosen of God, back to the pastures of Right and Life!”¹⁶ and attacks “tyrants of the red hands!” who threaten to bury the Jews in “kennel graves.” By repeating the phrase “We, the Children

of Israel” and “the God of our nation,” Menken accentuates her identification with the Jewish people, but even more extremely, she sees herself as a poet-prophet chosen for her role by God himself: “But the God of all Israel set His seal of fire on my breast, and lighted up, with inspiration the soul that pants for the Freedom of a nation!” This soul, depicted by the feminine pronoun, goes on to defend the Jewish people: “With eager wings she fluttered above the blood-stained bayonet-points of the millions, who are trampling upon the strong throats of God’s people.” The poem ends with hope, as “The sentry cries: ‘All’s well!’ from Hope’s tower!” and “Courage! Courage! / The Lord of Hosts is in the field, / The God of Jacob is our shield!”¹⁷

The poem that most explicitly affirms a Jewish and female poetics is “Judith,” in which Menken again takes on the voice of a prophet. Judith is the protagonist in the Book of Judith, a deuterocanonical text that survives in Greek in the Septuagint but is not included in the Hebrew Bible. It is, however, part of the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christian Old Testament. Judith, whose name is the feminine form of the Hebrew Judah, is a “pious, wealthy, and beautiful widow . . . who lead[s] an ascetic and solitary life”¹⁸ in the besieged Israelite town of Bethulia. When the Assyrian enemy general Holophernes attacks the Jews, Judith decides to save her people by using feminine wiles to seduce him. She goes to Holophernes’s camp, presents herself to him as a prophetess, and after he, seized by lust, falls into a drunken stupor, she grabs his sword and beheads him. The Israelites then go on to defeat the Assyrians, and Judith returns to her home and lives out a long life.¹⁹ In subsequent Jewish tradition, Judith reappears in Hebrew historical narratives, liturgical poems, Talmudic commentaries, and even legal codes. These medieval versions link Judith with Hanukah; she is also associated with Queen Esther, the heroine of Purim, who similarly rescued the Jews from hostile rulers.²⁰ It is not clear whether Menken knew of Judith through the Catholic Old Testament or from Jewish folk literature and custom, but her poem, a dramatic monologue, assumes the voice of the ancient heroine in order to speak of mid-nineteenth century Jewish and feminist concerns.

Menken opens “Judith” with a militant epigraph from Revelations 2:16: “Repent, or I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight thee with the sword of my mouth.” In the first of the three sections of the poem, its speaker assesses the current military situation, as though she were a general, as well as being “the prophet.” She predicts that “the Philistines [who have] spread themselves in the valley of Rephaim / . . . shall yet be delivered into my hands. / For the God of Battles has gone before me!” and explains how she was chosen: “But the seventh angel woke me, and giving me a sword of flame, points

to the blood-ribbed cloud, that lifts his reeking head above the mountain. / Thus I am the prophet. / I see the dawn that heralds to my waiting soul the advent of power." The power she has been granted is to "give voice to graves" of the living, dying, sinning, loving, despairing, and deserted. Although the situation is military and political, Judith has the power to make the dead speak and to lend articulation to those who are silenced.

The trope of voice and silence dominates Menken's poem. The drama of the poem is that of speech, and the prophet makes the ability to speak and to give voice to truth the focus of the poem's action. She warns the Philistines, in part II, "Stand back" and "Practice what ye preach to me." Their sin is that they are "living burning lies." Although she threatens them with "the battle axe" that she holds, her true weapon is "the sword of the mouth," with which she will slaughter the serpentlike Philistines with "your jeweled heads, and your gleaming eyes, and your hissing tongues." After she has defeated them and returns "this sword to the angel," Menken writes, the sword will "glimmer with the light of truth."

The power of the word and the sword to vanquish liars and snakes shifts, in part III, to a scene of erotic, violent desire. Warning her listeners, "Stand back!" she proclaims, "I am no Magdalene waiting to kiss the hem of your garment." Instead, she proclaims,

It is mid-day.
See ye not what is written on my forehead?
I am Judith!
I wait for the head of my Holofernes!

Following this announcement of her identity and of her mission, "written on her forehead," Judith evokes her prescribed act of vengeance:

Ere the last tremble of the conscious death-agony shall have shuddered, I will show it to ye with the long black hair clinging to the glazed eyes, and the great mouth opened in search of voice, and the strong throat all hot and reeking with blood, that will thrill me with wild unspeakable joy as it courses down my bare body and dabbles my cold feet!

In this overdramatic vision of Judith's beheading Holofernes, Menken uses the eroticism of Judith's nude body and bare feet to heighten the goriness of Holofernes's severed head, unseeing eyes, and "the great mouth in search of voice." The poet then expands upon Judith's sensual response by infusing it with bloodthirsty cannibalism:

My sensuous soul will quake with the burden of so much bliss.
Oh, what wild passionate kisses will I draw up from that bleeding mouth!

I will strangle this pallid throat of mine on the sweet blood!
I will revel in my passion.
At midnight I will feast on it in the darkness.

As Judith contemplates devouring her would-be seducer, the enemy general, she explains her reasons for both her action and her anticipated response:

“For it was that which thrilled its crimson tides of reckless passion through the blue veins of my life, and made them leap up in the wild sweetness of Love and agony of Revenge!”

But this explanation is not satisfying. Was it Judith’s passion for love and revenge that gave her purpose in murdering Holofernes? Strangely, Menken changes from the future tense, in Judith’s description of her anticipated murder, to the past tense, in her explanation. Why change from future to past? And what are the referents of the pronouns “it” and “that”? Her passion? Her desire for revenge? The blood and flesh of Holofernes? The roiling syntax of the poem does not clearly point to an answer, but rather conveys the heated headlong motion of the voice of the dramatic persona, and her appetite: “I am starving for this feast.” Menken concludes the poem by transforming the bloody and erotic scene into a threat:

Oh forget not that I am Judith!
And I know where sleeps Holofernes.²¹

What does the reader make of this persona poem that evokes the legendary character of the Jewess Judith? Menken changes the Septuagint’s version of the refined and pious widow who acts courageously in order to rescue her besieged people into a frantic, bloodthirsty, and lusty prophet and murderess who, hungry for vengeance, plots her revenge. It is fair to say that Menken does not intend for the reader to take this persona as a literal expression of her own identity as a Jew and a woman. What the poem does convey, however, is the possibility for a Jewish woman to react against a threat with unrestrained anger, to find power in a divinely inspired voice, to share that power of articulation with others who have been oppressed and silenced, and to reveal a voracious sexual desire and appetite that transgress the boundaries of politesse. I would argue that Menken intended her “wild soul-poem” “Judith” to shock her readers, even to scare them, and to make them reconsider their expectations of the capabilities of a female Jewish poet.

For all Menken’s “thunderous” “declarations of Jewish identity,”²² however, what is more shocking is Eiselein’s revelation in his introduction to the edited volume of Menken’s work that she plagiarized from her contemporaries

and their poems, including Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Penina Moise's hymns.²³ Eiselein interprets this breach as "ambivalence" and "a desire to impress others, or deep-seated doubts about her to be discovered."²⁴ Plagiarism is, as Eiselein points out, an act of ventriloquism in which an author surrenders her own identity by assuming another's voice as her own. Menken's plagiarism of Moise's hymns can be seen as a desire for an unquestionable Jewish poetics, driven by Menken's own awareness of the ambiguity of her own Jewish identity.

The strong Jewish identity of Emma Lazarus offers a stark contrast. Lazarus was born into a wealthy family among the Jewish elite in America. Her father's Sephardic progenitors and her mother's German ancestors were among the Jews who arrived in colonial America and had lived in New York City since the American Revolution.²⁵ Growing up in New York and Newport, Rhode Island, Lazarus was educated by private tutors and began to write seriously as a young girl, publishing a book of poems privately at age seventeen. Between 1866 and 1882, she corresponded with Ralph Waldo Emerson, and her essays, letters, and short stories, in addition to her poems, appeared in American literary journals. Her book of translations of Heinrich Heine came out in 1881, as did a book of her own poems, *Songs of a Semite: The Dance to Death and Other Poems*, in 1882. In 1883, while traveling in Europe, Lazarus met Robert Browning and William Morris, among others; she again traveled throughout Europe between 1885 and 1887. She died of cancer in New York in 1887.

Her biography clearly identifies Lazarus as both an American and a Jew, and from the beginning, her poetry engaged the problem of Jewish poetics in a straightforward way. Her gender poetics, however, is less obvious. For example, in 1867, Lazarus wrote "In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport," as a response to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1858 poem "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport." In that poem, Longfellow, an American Christian philo-Semite, declares as he stands in the colonial-era cemetery, that America's earliest Jews survive only in the monuments to their once-living faith. Lazarus responds to Longfellow in the collective voice of American Jewry as she traverses the cemetery to enter the Touro Synagogue, the oldest American Jewish house of worship, built in 1759. From within the synagogue, the poet asserts that Judaism, although momentarily dormant, continues because "the sacred shrine is holy yet, / With its lone floors where reverent feet once trod." She cautions her listeners, "Take off your shoes as by the burning bush, / Before the mystery of death and God." Hallowing the American synagogue as if it were the sacred ground where Moses stood before the burning bush, Lazarus replaces the now-silenced voices of colonial Jews with vivid images of biblical

glories – “the patriarch with his flocks,” Moses reading “Jehovah’s written law,” “the rich court of royal Solomon.” But in contrast to the biblical progenitors, she notes, “our softened voices” and “our footsteps” produce only “mournful echoes” and “unnatural sound.”²⁶ Although the Jews of mid-nineteenth century America may have retreated from active worship, and even if they may appear silenced and diminished in the shadow of their heritage, they live on, she asserts, unlike the Jews in Longfellow’s poem, dead and buried in prefigurative obsolescence.

Lazarus challenges Longfellow, the American literary giant of the mid-nineteenth century,²⁷ on several levels. As a young poet, Lazarus contests the authority of this prominent American figure at the peak of his reputation and powers. As a Jewish poet, Lazarus answers Longfellow’s unselfconsciously Christian perspective on the obsolescence of Jews in America with a Jewish poetics that asserts the persistence of an ongoing tradition that is very much alive. More subtly, though, Lazarus writes as a woman poet. Although the gender poetics may appear to be subterranean in this early poem, the very fact that Lazarus wrote the poem can be seen as an expression of gender poetics. Gender often expresses itself in what is *not* said, that is, in Lazarus’s unspoken assumption that she, as a woman poet, can speak with authority about Jewish practice and belief to an American audience. Implicit in the authority Lazarus assumes as author of poems on Judaism are the right and ability of a woman to write about Judaism and the Jewish people in America, even in addressing a Christian reader. Such confidence – of a Jewish poet and of a woman poet – reflects the changes in American Judaism in the 1850s that accompanied the establishment and rise of the Reform movement. Although Lazarus and her family were not affiliated with this new Reform Judaism, and although Reform Judaism did not adopt gender equality until the mid-twentieth century, I would argue that the atmosphere of change allowed for a Jewish woman like Lazarus to speak authoritatively for American Jews to a gentile American audience.

Fifteen years later, in “The New Year: Rosh-Hashanah, 5643,” Lazarus invokes an even more powerful, vibrant Jewish tradition in the American context. In this 1882 poem, Lazarus writes that the true New Year occurs “not while the snow-shroud round dead earth is rolled,” – that is, not in wintry January, as it does according to the Christian calendar – but rather in the autumn harvest season, “when orchards burn their lamps of fiery gold,” and when “the grape glows like a jewel, and the corn / A sea of beauty and abundance lies.” Lazarus instructs her reader, “Look where the mother of the months uplifts / In the green clearness of the unsunned West, / Her ivory horn of plenty, dropping

gifts, / Cool, harvest-feeding dews, fine-winnowed light; / Tired labor with fruition, joy and rest / Profusely to requite,” and then commands “Israel,” that is, the Jewish people, to “blow . . . the sacred cornet” and thus, by sounding the ritual shofar, “call / Back to thy courts whatever faint heart throb / With thine ancestral blood, thy need craves all.” Through the feminized personification of the moon (“mother of months”), this poem connects the Jewish New Year to the darkness of the present moment.

In fact, the autumn of 1882 was fraught with pogroms in Eastern Europe; it was “the red, dark year” that is now “dead,” and “the year just born / Leads on from the anguish wrought by priests and mob, / To what undreamed-of morn?” This new year is “greater with portent and with promise” than at any time “since on the holy height, / The Temple’s marble walls of white and green / Carved like the sea-waves, fell, and the world’s light / Went out in darkness.” The promise of redemption from the “vast steppes” of Russia that the New Year holds is couched in imagery that evokes both the American continent and the return of the Jews to the land of Israel:

Even as the Prophet promised, so your tent
Hath been enlarged onto earth’s farthest rim.
To snow-capped Sierras from vast steppes ye went,
Through fire and blood and tempest-tossing wave,
For freedom to proclaim and worship Him,
Mighty to slay and save.

In America, the Jews have a vigorous voice to “proclaim and worship” God. Addressing her Jewish readers, Lazarus recounts how, in the diaspora, they kept the faith, holding “the scroll” “above flood and fire” and, “in a cynic age of crumbling faiths, / Lived to bear witness to the living Lord, / Or died of thousands of deaths.” And presciently, some fourteen years before Theodor Herzl published *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*, 1896), Lazarus proclaims that Jewish refugees from European anti-Semitism would part “in two divided streams,” “one rolling homeward to its ancient source, / One rushing sunward with fresh will, new heart. / By each the truth is spread, the law unfurled, / Each separate soul contains the nation’s force, / And both embrace the world.” Here Lazarus gives expression to the double nationalism of Jews in America and in a future nation of their own. The poem ends with imagery of the Rosh Hashanah holiday observance, commanding its readers, “Kindle the silver candle’s seven rays” and “offer the first fruits of the clustered bowers, / The garnered spoil of bees.” The poet joins the seven-branched menorah of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem and the prescribed biblical offerings with

the honey customary at European and American holiday tables to emphasize the connection between the ancient traditions and the contemporary world of 1882. In celebrating the holiday, the poet argues, Jews in America prove “how strength of supreme sufferings still is ours / For Truth and Law and Love.”²⁸ This poetics of Judaism and nationalism is characterized by a mastery of the sestet stanza and a measured, classical diction in English. As a Jewish woman poet, mastering the prosody of English poetry in an American context in order to depict a key Jewish religious moment at a time of political crisis, Lazarus assumed her position of authority as spokeswoman for the Jews of both Europe and America.

One year later, Lazarus lent the gender poetics of her Jewish voice to the foreground of what became her most famous sonnet, “The New Colossus,” written in 1883 and inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in 1903. As Shira Wolosky has argued,²⁹ the sonnet recasts the classical Greek Colossus of Rhodes in the form of the Mother of Exile, an American version of Deborah, the mother of Israel in Judges, who welcomes “the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” In contrast to Menken’s swaggering Judith, the Mother of Exile “cries” with “silent lips.” Her powerful words of welcome to the “tired,” the “poor,” the “huddled masses,” and the “wretched refuse” are all voiced by the poet-narrator, not by the dramatic persona; and her invitation to “the homeless, tempest-tost” is communicated not through utterance but with the gesture of the raised lamp “beside the golden door.”³⁰

In another sonnet, “1492,” Lazarus figures that pivotal year, in which the Jews were expelled from Spain and Columbus discovered America, as a potent female personification, the “Mother of Change and Fate.” The poem turns on the irony that this “two-faced year” determined how the Jewish people, exiled once again – “hounded,” “refused,” and “abhorred” – would find refuge in “a virgin world where doors of sunset part, / Saying, ‘Ho, all who weary, enter here!’”³¹ The feminized and even subtly eroticized representation of a fortunate historical coincidence that propels Jewish history to its next chapter is a perfect example of Lazarus’s Jewish and gender poetics.

The silent protagonist of yet another sonnet, “Venus of the Louvre,” provided the occasion for Lazarus to conjoin her aesthetic appreciation of “the foam-born mother of love, transfixed to stone” with her awareness of struggle of Jewish poets writing in the gentile world. To do this, she conjured the sorrow of the earlier nineteenth century German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine, who unwillingly converted to Christianity in order to pursue a profession from which Jews were banned. When, in the last line, she describes a Jewish poet, drawn passionately to gentile culture, who mourns with “one ardent heart,

one poet's brain, / For vanished Hellas and Hebraic pain," Lazarus actually speaks of both herself and Heine. These silent female figures – the "Mother of Exiles," the "Mother of Change and Fate," and the "mother of Love" – exemplify the working of Lazarus's Jewish gender poetics in poems invoking Jewish history and identity.³² However, while Lazarus's Jewish poetics emerges from a strong voice and communal identity, her purely feminist poetics exists in the conditions of silence and isolation. The sonnet "Echoes" depicts a woman poet, but not even remotely a Jewish poet, who is able to sing not according to the militant conventions of male poets, but in "a wild voice wooed and heard, / Answering at once from heaven and earth and wave." The voice of this female poet, "late-born and woman-souled," can be heard only in a romantic version of nature and belongs to a being who is "in love with solitude in song."³³ The interplay between Jewish and gender poetics in Lazarus's poetry is a constant balancing of foreground and background, of explicit and implicit expression. Such a fluid and changeable dynamic of Jewish and gender poetics may indicate an unease of identity, a mutable and unstable struggle between religious and sexual being.

The Jewish and feminist poetics of the next generation of immigrants to America becomes even more sexually radical. One woman among the "huddled masses" welcomed to the New York Harbor by Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus" was Celia Dropkin. Dropkin, born in Bobruisk, White Russia, was educated in both traditional Jewish subjects and secular subjects. She began writing poetry in Russian as a child and later attended and graduated from European secondary school, or gymnasium. She then studied in Kiev and Warsaw, married, bore the first of her five children, and joined her husband in the United States in 1912. In 1917, Dropkin translated her Russian poems into Yiddish and subsequently began writing poetry in Yiddish. Her poems were published in the modernist Yiddish publications of *Di yunge* and the introspectivists through the 1930s. In 1935 she published her book of poetry, *In heysn vint: Lider* (In the Hot Wind: Poems), and posthumously, in 1959, her children published an expanded edition of her book, *In heysn vint: Lider, dertseylungen, bilder* (In the Hot Wind: Poems, Stories, Paintings).

Dropkin's poetry is characterized by its erotic content. The poems do not explicitly address Jewish subjects. Rather, they call into question the assumptions of her Yiddish readers about relationships between men and women. Yet where they seem to be universal in content, these poems, in fact, address Jewish conventions of sexuality and seek to detach a woman's sexual life from the traditional expectations of modesty and procreation. Dropkin connects liberated sexual expression to the act of a woman writing poetry. "Di

tsirkus dame" (The Circus Lady) is narrated in the first person by a persona who describes how she dances "among the daggers / Set in the arena / With their points erect." Fully aware of her audience, "Holding their breaths," the speaker tells that "the points gleam / Fiery, in a circle, / And no one knows how the falling calls to me." The narrator then relinquishes her consciousness of the audience and describes her full immersion in the erotic dance itself:

I grow tired, dancing among you,
Daggers of cold steel.
I want my blood to heat you through and through.
You, unsheathed points,
I want to fall on you.³⁴

As if her awareness of the gaze of the audience upon her had prevented her from recognizing the danger of her dance, once she focuses only on the phallic dagger blades and her deliberate movement between them, the speaker comes to desire her own death, which will inevitably result from her creative act. That death, however, does not happen in the poem. Instead of enacting her own destruction, the woman poet articulates her desire to succumb to her art in order to keep her audience entranced. The figure of the circus dancer is the least Jewish role one could imagine for a Jewish woman, for she reveals her body to the gaze of all eyes and, in doing so, transgresses *tsnies*, the conventions of sexual modesty that keep a woman's sexuality within the laws of marriage and procreation.

This rebellion against Jewish customs and values continues in Dropkin's "Odem" (Adam). This poem reverses assumptions about sexuality established in the Hebrew Bible and in *halakha*. The woman speaking in this poem, who is not Eve, addresses a young man who has been the passive object of many women's appetites. Proceeding through her own life, the speaker tells "Young Adam" how she found him "Spoiled, / Stroked by many women's hands." This woman has her own designs on this young man, and she reminds him that "before I had placed my lips on you, / You begged me / With a face more pale and tender / Than the tenderest lily: / – Don't bite me, don't bite me." Like the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that Eve ate in Genesis, this tender young man has already been bitten. The speaker, seeing "that your body / Was entirely covered with teeth marks," bites into him herself. In this reverse scenario of the Garden of Eden, the woman has long since known what the Divine would keep from Adam and Eve. She devours this Adam, who is victimized by his feminine innocence.

Dropkin's emphasis, though, is not on the scriptural text, but rather on the dynamics of sexual roles. In its second section the poem depicts the woman and her lover in an act of coitus that elicits an archetypal simile:

Above me, you flared
Your narrow nostrils,
And drew nearer to me,
Like a hot horizon to the field.

No longer passive and effeminate, Adam now assumes a dominating position above the speaker in what we understand is the sex act. The speaker compares him to "a hot horizon" and herself to "the field." With this simile of the man as sky and the woman as earth, Dropkin calls forth conventional tropes of gender-assigned fertility, of sowing and growing, but with a difference. In Genesis 2:5, the earth remains barren, because God "had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground." In contrast, Dropkin's stanza eroticizes the landscape, emphasizing not fertility and the associated commandments to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:22 and 1:28), but rather sexual passion. It is the heat of the horizon pressing down on the field, drawing near, yet ever receding into the distance, that charges the stanza with a sexuality that challenges the traditional procreative roles for men and women in Judaism.

In the third section of "Adam," the act of the imagination – the power to create similes – moves to the foreground. Here, the poem switches from the female dramatic persona to a scripted dialogue between two speakers, "He" and "She." With anxious questions, "When shall I come to you again?" and "And you? Won't you be longing?," the male speaker has lost the dominance of the second section. In her answer to the first question, "When you are longing," the female speaker assigns agency to continue the relationship back to the questioner: His longing, not her preference, will determine when he sees her again. But in her response to his second question about whether she will long for him, her apparent passivity reverses, and now the female speaker assumes the active and dominant position:

She: Don't worry about me,
I am used to living with images,
You will always be alive to me,
And even if you never open my door,
You will not hide from me.³⁵

Through her own imagination, the female speaker asserts her independence from any need for the actual man. Her ability to make "images," which is the

act of making poetry, will keep him “alive” to her and give her continual access to him, even if he decides to hide or physically withdraw. Thus, the speaker of the first two parts of the poem and the female character within the third section are both revealed to be the woman poet. She derives her ability to depict a sexual encounter and the emotional aftermath from the archetypes embedded in the biblical text of Genesis, and she uses the artistry of language – the creation of simile – as well as the genres of narration, lyric poetry, and drama to reconceive and transgress the accepted terms of traditional sexual relationships. While Scripture and literature give a woman the means to express her sexuality, the sexual act thus described enables her to write a Yiddish poem. Celia Dropkin creates a poetics of female Jewish identity in poems that call up and subvert the customs and commandments of traditional Judaism governing women’s sexuality – modesty and procreation – and retools their subversion into a force that fuels a Jewish woman’s ability to write poetry. By writing in the Ashkenazic Jewish vernacular Yiddish, within a modernist cultural milieu in early twentieth century New York, Dropkin further layers the poetics of Jewish female identity. The language itself is Jewish, as are its speakers and readers. The Jewishness of the poetics of Yiddish is all but a given. It is the subversion of gender in this poetry – by Dropkin and by her contemporaries Anna Margolin, Malka Heifetz Tussman, and other Yiddish poets in America – that undermines the assumed hierarchies of gender within traditional Jewish sources and practice and creates a poetics of female identity that differs in essence from that in earlier poems written by women in English.³⁶

The gender poetics of Jewish American poets writing in English changes later in the twentieth century. While the Yiddish poets undermined gender hierarchies, women poets writing in English carried this subversion further. Although the genealogy is not straightforward, there are tendrils of connection between the Yiddish poets and the poets who wrote in English. Beginning in the mid-1970s, these connections grew through the concurrent swell of interest in Yiddish literature by American scholars and translators and the rise of feminist poetry in America.

Two very distinct women poets, who became prominent during the formative years of feminist poetry, Adrienne Rich and Marge Piercy, turned to a Jewish poetics in the 1980s. Adrienne Rich, born in Baltimore and educated at Radcliffe College, began publishing “decorous” formalist poetry in *A Change of World* (1951), which won the Yale Younger Poets Award.³⁷ Her 1963 book *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* included poems that depicted a powerful but suppressed feminist rage, such as “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.” In *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), Rich’s poetry challenged assumptions about gender, sexuality,

identity, and politics. From this book onward, through her twenty-fourth collection of poems, *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth* (2007), and in her ten collections of essays, Rich wrote as a feminist, a lesbian, a political activist, and a seeker of social justice. As early as 1960, however, she began to address the issue of her vexed Jewish identity.

In her 1982 essay, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity," she writes, "In a long poem written in 1960, when I was thirty-one years old, I described myself as 'Split at the root, neither Gentile nor Jew, / Yankee nor Rebel.' I was still trying to have it both ways: to be neither / nor, trying to live (with my Jewish husband and three children more Jewish in ancestry than I) in the predominantly gentile Yankee academic world of Cambridge, Massachusetts."³⁸ Rich's father, born in Birmingham, Alabama, was the son of an Ashkenazic immigrant and a Sephardic Mississippian – and her mother was "a white southern Protestant woman."³⁹

"In Jewish law," Rich states, "I cannot count myself a Jew. If it is true that 'we think back through our mothers if we are women' (Virginia Woolf) – and I myself have affirmed this – then even according to lesbian theory, I cannot (or need not?) count myself a Jew."⁴⁰ Rich affirmed her rejection of Judaism: "At different times in my life I have wanted to push away one or the other burden of inheritance, to say merely, *I am a woman; I am a lesbian*. If I call myself only through my mother, is it because I pass more easily through a world where being a lesbian often seems like outsiderhood enough? According to Nazi logic, my own Jewish grandparents would have made me a *Mischling*, *first degree* – nonexempt from the Final Solution."⁴¹ And yet, despite her baptism in the Episcopal church in Baltimore, where she grew up, and the skepticism her Jewish father taught her about all religions, Rich, at age sixteen, watching the newsreels of "the Allied liberation of the Nazi concentration camps," felt silenced and confused about her identity:

But it came to me that every one of those piles of corpses, mountains of shoes and clothing had contained, simply, individuals, who had believed, as I now believed of myself, that they were intended to live out a life of some kind of meaning. . . . And I . . . was connected to those dead by something – not just mortality but a taboo name, a hated identity. . . . What I remember were the films and having questions that I could not even phrase, such as *Are those men and women "them" or "us"?*⁴²

After her chance encounter with a Jewish seamstress, a survivor, in Cambridge, in the course of which she denied that she was Jewish, Rich confronted her father, "Why haven't you told me that I am Jewish? Why do you never talk

about being a Jew?" Her father's response, "I am a scientist, a deist. I have no use for organized religion. . . . I am a person, not simply a Jew," left her, she writes, "high and dry, split at the root, gasping for clarity, for air."⁴³ The essay concludes with "no conclusions." While, in the 1970s, she came to regard "Judaism simply as another strand of patriarchy" and "might have said (as my father had said in other language): *I am a woman, not a Jew*," by 1982, she began to "feel the history of denial within me like an injury, a scar."⁴⁴

Rich's poems over this period mirror this ambivalence through gender and Jewish poetics. In her 1955 poem "At the Jewish New Year," Rich considers whether and how to observe the Rosh Hashanah holiday. Beginning with what seems a contradictory echo of Lazarus's "The New Year: Rosh Hashanah 5643," Rich's poem begins by saying that in "more than five thousand years," of history, "we have little to tell / On this or any feast / Except of the terrible past." Where Lazarus had delineated the dialogue between gentile and Jewish history, Rich's poem, also invoking the collective "we," articulates the varieties of denial by American Jews: "Some of us have replied / In the bitterness of youth / Or the qualms of middle-age: / . . . 'Why, then, we choose to forget. / Let our forgetting begin / With those age-old arguments / In which their minds were wound / Like musty phylacteries; / And we choose to forget as well / Those cherished histories / That made our old men fond, / And already are strange to us.'" Not only do American Jews choose to forget Jewish tradition, but those of "us" who are "'too rational to cry out / Or trample underfoot / What after all preserves / A certain savor yet – / Though torn up by the roots'" will "'compromise / With the terror and the guilt'" by regarding "'the mythology, the names / That, however Time has corrupted / Their ancient purity / Still burn like yellow flames, / But their fire is not for us.'" From this further rejection of such an uneasy sentimentality, the poem settles into an ambivalent acceptance of the obligation to acknowledge Rosh Hashanah: In whatever ways the speaker and the Jews she speaks for may "choose / To deny or to remember," "the new year must renew / This day, as for our kind / Over five thousand years, / The task of being ourselves." The poem does not make clear what "being ourselves" means in this context. Unlike Lazarus's poem, which ends with an affirmation of Jewish traditions and the contemporary world, Rich's poem concludes inconclusively with, first, an admonishment: "Whatever we strain to forget, / Our memory must be long," and then, a weak blessing: "May the taste of honey linger / Under the bitterest tongue."⁴⁵

As evidence of her continuing concern with how Jewish themes fit into her feminist poetics, we should note that Rich included in her 1969 book *Leaflets* a

1966 political poem called “Jerusalem” and her translation of a Yiddish poem by Kadya Molodowsky (“Poems of Women,” originally commissioned for the Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg’s 1969 anthology *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*). However, the poem that best expresses Rich’s dilemma of being caught between Jewish poetics and gender poetics is “Yom Kippur 1984,” published in *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986).

“Yom Kippur 1984” directly addresses the problem of gender poetics and Jewish poetics by juxtaposing the issues of individual and communal identity, sexual and religious, female and male. The poem opens with quotations from “Prelude” by Robinson Jeffers and from Leviticus 23:29. Jeffers’s line, “I drew solitude over me, on the long shore,” opposes the biblical commandment regarding the obligation to observe the Day of Atonement, “For whoever does not afflict his soul throughout this day, shall be cut off from his people.” Through these lines – respectively, extolling the poet’s romantic solitude in nature and threatening the disobedient Jew with isolation from community – Rich addresses the struggle of the Jew who feels “lonely or afraid / far from your own or those you have called your own” and of “a woman in solitude: a queer woman or man” who finds her- or himself alone in menacing circumstances – “in the empty street, on the empty beach, in the desert.” “What is a Jew in solitude?” she asks repeatedly. The question encompasses a range of problems conjoining identity, gender, and poetry. How can a Jew be a Jew without identifying with or adhering to the traditions and the community? How can a woman, especially a lesbian, be a Jew or participate in the Jewish community, when the Bible itself seems to deny women agency? How can a lesbian Jew, a Jewish lesbian, a Jewish poet, a lesbian poet write in the same American tradition as the misogynist, misanthropic poet Robinson Jeffers, or as the generous lover of the democratic multitude, Walt Whitman? Rich states, “But I have a nightmare to tell: I am trying to say / that to be with my people is my dearest wish / but that I also love strangers / that I crave separateness / . . . This is the day of atonement; but do my people forgive me?” Rich invokes an example that begins by appearing to refer to herself but ends as a horrific story about another Jewish lesbian: “Jew deluded that she’s escaped the tribe, the laws of her exclusion, the men too holy to touch her hand; Jew who has turned her back / on *midrash* and *mitzvah* (yet wears the *chai* on a thong between her breasts) hiking alone / found with a swastika carved in her back at the foot of the cliffs (did she die as queer or as Jew?).” Deliberately importing the Hebrew words “*midrash*,” “*mitzvah*,” and “*chai*” (rabbinic interpretation of the Bible, commandment, life), Rich invests this episode with a Jewish poetics not found elsewhere in her poetry. By immediately following this diction with the word

“swastika” in the shocking turn of the story of the woman’s murder, Rich creates a thick moment in which Jewish and gender poetics collide.

The poem ends with an apocalyptic vision, in which “the winter flood-tides wrench the tower from the rock, crumble the prophet’s headland, and the farms slide into the sea / when leviathan is endangered and Jonah become revenger / when center and edges are crushed together, the extremities crushed together, the extremities crushed together on which the world was founded.” She turns this vision of the end of days from a comment on environmental disaster – earthquakes and global warming – into a political comment on Jerusalem: “when our souls crash together, Arab and Jew, howling our loneliness within the tribes / when the refugee child and the exile’s child re-open the blasted and forbidden city.” From natural disaster and human desecration of the natural world, to the Jewish/Muslim nationalism in Jerusalem, to a commonality of both peoples – which is the refugee’s child and which is the exile’s child? – Rich returns to the question of queer gender: “when we who refuse to be women and men as women and men are chartered, tell our stories of solitude spent in multitude.” Queer women and men define their gender outside and against the laws stated in Leviticus. Their stories of “solitude spent in multitude” are the paradox of Judaism and gender, of Judeo-Christian normative society and culture, to which multitude the queer woman or man cannot belong. The ability of such a Jew, or such a woman, to tell her story in a postapocalyptic “newborn and haunted” world will force a redefinition of solitude and of community.⁴⁶

In contrast to Adrienne Rich’s uprooting of the assumptions about how a Jewish poet and a woman poet can write, Marge Piercy offers a constructive revision of Jewish and gender poetics. Piercy, born into working-class Detroit in 1936, began to publish poetry and fiction in the 1960s that was informed by her feminism and involvement in the anti-Vietnam War and Students for Democratic Society (SDS) movements. Among her eighteen volumes of poems and seventeen novels, Piercy’s 1980 collection *The Moon Is Always Female* is “a classic text of the feminist movement,”⁴⁷ characterized by poems such as “The sabbath of mutual respect,” an ode to “Habondia,” the Celtic goddess of abundance and fertility, and other mythical foremothers, including the Greek Artemis and Aphrodite, the Babylonian Ishtar, and the Northwest Semitic goddess of war, Anath, as well as the Talmud’s female demon Lilith, in order to argue for the right of women to choose whether or not to bear children.⁴⁸

Later that decade, Piercy’s poetry began to focus on Jewish traditions and culminated in *The Art of Blessing the Day* (1999), a book that embraces Jewish culture and religious practice. The book is divided into six sections, each titled

with a Hebrew term naming a category of Jewish tradition: “Mishpocheh (Family),” “The Chuppah (Marriage),” “Tikkun Olam (Repair the World),” “Toldot, Midrashim (Of History and Interpretation),” “Tefillah (Prayer),” and “Ha-Shanah (The Year).”⁴⁹ Although Piercy’s many Jewish themed poems merit consideration for their humor, poignancy, eroticism, and cultural complexity, I will end this essay by focusing on the poems in the section “Tefillah (Prayer).” Piercy includes a note stating that these poems were “written for P’nai Or Shabbat morning Siddur, Or Chadash”: That is, they were commissioned for the Sabbath prayer book for a Jewish Renewal congregation.⁵⁰ These poems are liturgical or meditative and interpret or adapt the major prayers in the Sabbath service, such as “Amidah: On our feet we speak to you” and “Kaddish.” In these prayer poems, Piercy writes in a collective and gender-neutral or -inclusive voice, correcting, as it were, the assumed masculinity of the traditional Hebrew prayers. For example, in “Amidah: On our feet we speak to you,” Piercy replaces the traditional prayer’s invocation, “Blessed are You, Lord our God and the God of our Fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” with the following: “Bless what brought us through / the sea and the fire; / ... you have taught us to ... / know ourselves as the body born from Abraham and Sarah, born out of rock and desert. / We reach back through two hundred arches of hips / long dust, carrying their memories inside us / to live again in our life, Isaac and Rebecca, / Rachel, Jacob, Leah. We say words shaped / by ancient use like steps worn into rock.” Piercy’s corrective poetics of gender and Judaism equalizes female and male and universalizes the ritual of blessing the God of Israel in terms of a twentieth century spiritual journey that incorporates environmental crises (“we are caught in history like whales in polar ice”). Piercy’s feminist poetics comes through here in the imagery of childbirth – “we,” the Jews reciting the prayer, are “born” from the patriarchs and matriarchs, from “rock and desert,” and literally through the “arches of hips” of generations of women.⁵¹ The very words of the traditional prayer rewritten by Piercy literally embody the experiences of Jews and of women throughout the centuries. The poet figures these “words” in the simile of generations of trudging feet that mold steps into a rock.

This liturgical poetics, reconfiguring both gender and Judaism, circles back to the Americanizing Jewish hymns that Penina Moise composed in English in a Protestant stanza in the early nineteenth century. As Moise transformed Jewish prayers by translating and versifying them into English, Piercy reconfigures the prayers into modern poetry inflected by late-twentieth century concepts of feminism and spirituality. In contrast to Rich, whose poetry resists

and yet cannot ignore the pull of Judaism and its clash with feminism and queer sexuality, Piercy's poems engage the tradition in order to change it. Rich reluctantly allows the ideas behind Jewish peoplehood to enter her poems, and the few words from Jewish languages that enter with these ideas are symbolic and unglossed – midrash, mitzvah, chai. Piercy, in contrast, cites, translates, and renews the traditional words to create a particularly American Jewish and feminist poetics.

Notes

- 1 Penina Moise, "Miriam," in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Jules Chametzsky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 70–71.
- 2 Timothy Steele, *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), 203–204, 206–207.
- 3 Moise, *Jewish American Literature*, 70, n. 1.
- 4 Moise may have selected the translation of *mir-yam* as "star of the sea" by deriving the meaning of *mir* from *or* (light), and *yam* (sea, ocean).
- 5 Gregory Eiselein, "Introduction," in Adah Isaacs Menken, *Infelicia and Other Writings*, ed. Gregory Eiselein (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Literary Texts), 15.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 7 *Ibid.*, Menken, "Some Notes of Her Life in Her Own Hand," 199–209. Several versions of her biography were published during and after her lifetime, including a brief satirical extravaganza by Mark Twain. See Mark Twain, "The Menken – Written Especially for Gentlemen," in *Infelicitas and Other Writings*, 197–199.
- 8 Menken, "Some Notes of Her Life; Eiselein, "Introduction," 24.
- 9 Whitman's free verse was derived from translations of the Psalms in the 1611 King James Bible. See Steele, *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing*, 261.
- 10 Eiselein, "Introduction," in *Infelicia and Other Writings*, 24.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 24–25.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 186.
- 13 Menken, "Affinity of Poetry and Religion," 187.
- 14 *Ibid.*, "Rosh Hashanah," 141.
- 15 Eiselein states that these poems were written between 1857 and 1859, while Adah was married to Alexander Isaac Menken. *Ibid.*; Eiselein, "Introduction," 33.
- 16 *Ibid.*, Menken, "Hear, O Israel!," 92.
- 17 Menken, "Hear, O Israel!," 94–95.
- 18 Deborah Levine Gera, *Judith* (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2014), 3.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 19–20.
- 21 Menken, "Judith," in *Infelicia and Other Writings*, 50–52.
- 22 *Ibid.*, Eiselein, "Introduction," 30.
- 23 Eiselein, "Introduction," 31.
- 24 *Ibid.*

- 25 Gregory Eiselein, "Introduction," in *Emma Lazarus: Selected Poems and Other Writings*, ed. Gregory Eiselein (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002), 15–34. See also Esther Schor, *Emma Lazarus* (New York: Random House, 2006), 3–11.
- 26 Emma Lazarus, "In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport," in *Jewish American Literature*, 103–104.
- 27 On Longfellow's life, works, and reputation, see the biography and bibliography on the Poetry Foundation Web site: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/henry-wadsworth-longfellow>.
- 28 Lazarus, "The Jewish New Year," in *Selected Poems and Other Writings*, 175–176.
- 29 Shira Wolosky, "An American-Jewish Typology: Emma Lazarus and the Figure of Christ," *Prooftexts* 16:2 (May 1996), 113–125.
- 30 Lazarus, "The New Colossus," in *Selected Poems and Other Writings*, 233.
- 31 "1492," 233–234.
- 32 "The Venus of the Louvre," 239.
- 33 "Echoes," 96–97.
- 34 Celia Dropkin, "The Circus Lady," trans. Kathryn Hellerstein, in *Jewish American Literature*, 260.
- 35 Ibid., Dropkin, "Adam," trans. Kathryn Hellerstein, 260–261.
- 36 For more on Dropkin, Margolin, and Tussman, see Kathryn Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish 1586–1987* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 243–322 and 347–393.
- 37 "Adrienne Rich, Biography," The Poetry Foundation. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/adrienne-rich>.
- 38 Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 101.
- 39 Ibid., 102.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid., 103.
- 42 Ibid., 106–107.
- 43 Ibid., 110.
- 44 Ibid., 122–123.
- 45 Adrienne Rich, "At the Jewish New Year," in *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950–1984* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 189–190.
- 46 Adrienne Rich, "Yom Kippur 1984," in *Your Native Land, Your Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 75–78.
- 47 "Marge Piercy, Biography," *Poems and Poets*, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/marge-piercy>.
- 48 Marge Piercy, "The Sabbath of Mutual Respect," in *The Moon Is Always Female* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 104–107.
- 49 Marge Piercy, *The Art of Blessing the Day* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), vii–x.
- 50 "Tefillah (Prayer)," 127.
- 51 "Amidah: On Our Feet We Speak to You," 135.

Performance: Queerly Jewish/Jewishly Queer in the American Theater

ALISA SOLOMON

Mart Crowley's drama *Boys in the Band* is often cited as the first significant gay-themed play to find success among a mainstream American audience. Opening Off-Broadway in April 1968, the two-act glimpse into the lives of a group of bitterly bantering gay men ran for more than one thousand performances and was made into a Hollywood film only two years later.

The action takes place over a single evening in a Manhattan apartment. Friends gather for a birthday party, and the unexpected appearance of the host's presumably straight college buddy sets off a round of manipulations and rebukes. The guests – and audience – wait a long time for the arrival of Harold, the man whose birthday they are celebrating. He enters at the top of the second act and is scolded by the host for being late and stoned. "What I am, Michael," he retorts, "is a thirty-two year old ugly pock-marked Jew fairy."¹

Throughout the act, Harold's Jewishness is repeatedly invoked: a few Yiddishisms, a mocking friend's offer to sing him "Happy Birthday" to the tune of "Hava Nagila," and Harold's sarcastic reply to a guest who bids him farewell by saying he hopes to see him again: "How about a year from Shavuoth?" Even the list of dramatis personae describes Harold as having an "unusual Semitic face." While several of the characters are pigeonholed into overly familiar categories – the guilt-ridden Catholic, the flaming queen, the painstakingly proper African American – Harold is the only one whose ethnicity is explicitly bonded to his homosexuality, as if "Jew fairy" were a species of its own. Harold is also the most detached character in the group, refusing to be sucked into the boozy whirlpool of a malicious party game. Both insider and outsider, participant and observer, he is as defiant as he is self-loathing about who he is as a gay man and as a Jew.

In his favorable review of the premiere for the *New York Times*, Clive Barnes picked up on the "Jew fairy" aura that Harold casts over the play as a whole, describing the urban tone of the play as "little more than a mixture of Jewish humor and homosexual humor seen through the bottom of a dry martini

glass.” In both cases, the jokes sting, using wit, wordplay, innuendo, and self-deprecation to fling anxiety outward – to express superiority by quipping smartly about one’s inferiority. “Jews and homosexuals are the outstanding creative minorities in contemporary urban culture,” Susan Sontag had influentially written in “Notes on Camp” only a few years earlier. But where Sontag distinguished between “the two pioneering forces of modern sensibility,” they merge within Harold: “Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony.”²

As the breakthrough play in one of several genealogies one might trace through queer and Jewish performance, *Boys in the Band* highlights a trope that has sustained surprising power. The “Jew fairy,” typically male and usually secular (though sometimes lesbian or trans-, and occasionally religiously observant), recurs in numerous plays and performance pieces and provides a useful starting point for examining the intersection of queer Jewish – and Jewish queer – expression on various kinds of American stages.

Such overlap – and in particular, the fusing of moral seriousness and campiness – in a variety of formal and nontraditional performance genres is the focus of this survey.³

The trope harkens back – and on stage, often answers back – to long-standing anti-Semitic associations between Jewishness and gender dysfunction and/or sexual perversion.⁴ As the editors of *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* note, “modern Jewish and homosexual identities emerged as traces of each other.”⁵ The very distinction between homo- and heterosexual as a defining characteristic of a person was asserted in the nineteenth century by the same scientific discourses that sought to secularize Jewish difference in racial terms. Jewishness, the editors argue, “became a category of gender as much as race,”⁶ as men were figured as soft, effeminate, wimpy (the same stereotypes that attached to gay men), and women as domineering, sexually voracious, and masculine (the same ones applied to lesbians). What is more, both anti-Semitic and homophobic rhetoric warned of the Jew’s and homosexual’s predatory ability to pass unnoticed, to masquerade as “normal,” and characterized dissembling itself – a propensity for *acting* – as an inborn attribute of Jews and of queers.⁷ The stage, then, has been an overdetermined space for displaying and deconstructing these terms.

Queer on Stage before *Boys in the Band*

Nowhere is this conflation more evident, perhaps, than in the scandal over an early representation of sympathetic lesbian desire on the commercial

stage: the 1922 Broadway production, in English, of Sholem Asch's 1907 Yiddish play *Got fun nekome* (*God of Vengeance*), a moral melodrama in which the daughter of a brothel keeper evades his plan to marry her off to a Talmud scholar by running away with a woman in his employ. The play had been performed to great acclaim in Yiddish theaters around the world, including in New York, and the Broadway production was meant as a crossover vehicle for the celebrated Yiddish actor-director Rudolf Schildkraut.

In a Broadway season that featured Jewish characters achieving ordinariness or respectability within an American mainstream or amid British anti-Semitism – in Anne Nichols's *Abie's Irish Rose*, Howard Rose's *Rosa Machree*, and John Galsworthy's *Loyalties* – the Asch play threatened to fan old associations between Jewishness and sexual depravity. Newspaper reviews of the production emphasized its being out of place in America, ascribing to its Jewish provenance an “alien” and “Oriental” quality and declaring the play “hopelessly foreign to our Anglo-Saxon taste and understanding.”⁸ In other words, the presence of prostitutes (visible in numerous plays at the time) and same-sex eroticism (on unperturbed display in contemporaneous “pansy” revues and drag balls) was not, in and of itself, the problem; rather, the idea of obscenity denounced in the press relied on an embedded idea of the foreignness and sexual perversion of Jews.

Two weeks after the play opened, the producers and the cast were arrested on charges of promulgating obscenity; the trial went forward after the show closed, concluding with a guilty verdict and imposing \$200 fines on Schildkraut and the producer.

This scandal arguably set the stage for agitation a couple of seasons later in 1926 against sexually explicit plays – Mae West's *Sex*, John Colton's *The Shanghai Gesture*, and Edward Sheldon and Charles MacArthur's *Lulu Belle*. It resulted in New York State's 1927 Wales Padlock law, which prohibited plays “depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy or prostitution.” Not revoked until 1967, it effectively suppressed sympathetic treatment of LGBT themes for decades. (Meanwhile, theatrical censorship was even stricter in other cities, including Boston and Chicago.)⁹

Nonetheless, queer subtext, at the very least, crept into the anxious dramas of the postwar period, as, on the one hand (as Allan Bérubé has demonstrated) new ideas of sexual identity had been unleashed during the war, and, on the other, the en masse return of GIs displaced women from the workplace and imposed strict gender roles. Plays by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Robert Anderson, and others through the 1940s and 1950s hinted at homosexuality – and, if only implicitly, condemned homophobia. Out-and-proud

LGBT characters – Jewish or otherwise – remained off-limits in this period, which saw the targeting of homosexuals by the House Un-American Activities Committee and the passage all across the nation of “sexual psychopath” laws authorizing the arrest of “deviants” – and, at the same time, saw the publication of the best-selling Kinsey Report revealing a wider range of human sexual practice than typically admitted, and the emergence of gay and lesbian groups such as the Mattachine Society (1950) and the Daughters of Bilitis (1955) that provided social connection and bases for political organizing. One of the Mattachine Society’s stated goals was to “educate homosexuals and heterosexuals toward an ethical homosexual culture paralleling the cultures of Negro, Mexican and Jewish peoples.”¹⁰

The culture – and political solidity – of Jewish people in America was, of course, well established by that point. While the closet door remained firmly slammed on queers, American Jews, generally, were enjoying unprecedented access to universities, neighborhoods, and professions to which they had been previously barred. The stage, for the most part, reflected how – in the historian Edward Shapiro’s words – Jews were being accepted, as “no longer an exotic ethnic and religious minority, but an integral part of American culture.”¹¹ Plays highlighting Jewish characters and experiences emphasized their place in the body politic and, more widely, in the Family of Man. Even *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1955) by Albert Hackett and Frances Goodrich universalized Jewish experience.¹² It wasn’t until 1964 that the mainstream stage reveled in two presentations of Jewish difference – the surprise blockbuster success of *Fiddler on the Roof* (albeit offering that difference as a legacy of the past that pointed toward Jewish fulfillment in America)¹³ and in *Funny Girl*, which introduced the world to the outsized stardom of Barbra Streisand, who, with her unfixed nose, ungainly gestures, and Brooklyn accent, parodies conventional femininity and thereby “knits together queerness and Jewishness,” as Stacy Wolf put it.¹⁴

If Jewish and queer communal trajectories were tracing different paths in the postwar era, they intersected, of course, in the experiences of LGBT Jews. That overlap became visible as the gay liberation movement began pressing for radical inclusion and as queer art rode the wave of the counterculture (with significant Jewish participation and sometimes, leadership in both of these connected spheres). *Boys in the Band* – with its forthright presentation of gay men who do not “bump themselves off at the end of the story,” as one of its characters puts it – preceded the Stonewall rebellion that is often cited as a catalyzing event of the LGBT movement. And by then, queer experimental performance was gallivanting across new stages at early off-off-Broadway

spaces such as the Caffè Cino and La Mama Experimental Club in New York. Specifically Jewish queer organizing could be seen most clearly, perhaps, in the proliferation of LGBT synagogues across the United States, beginning in Los Angeles in 1972 and soon springing up in Boston, Chicago, New York, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.¹⁵

Queer Jewish activists and artists often cited their Jewishness – the experience of otherness, the refusal to “pass,” the history of persecution – as a spur to their participation in LGBT causes and expression. Queer Jewish theater makers began to bring the fullness of their lives to their work, too, whether conforming to conventional dramatic forms or blowing them open in the explosion of experimental theater.

Queer in the Family, Biological and Chosen

If the United States were to declare a national dramaturgy – akin to the bald eagle and the rose as its emblematic bird and flower – it would be the family-based problem play. From Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) to Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* (2007), numerous oft-produced works build their action on the domestic squabbles, misfortunes, or conflicts that unwind within the four walls of a single household. Jewish families have long occupied both dramatic and comic versions of this genre in works by Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, Neil Simon, and Wendy Wasserstein, to name only a few. It is no surprise, then, that the Jewish family has been the setting for LGBT-themed works, as well. And no surprise, either, that, like plays by and/or about straight people in the commercial and mainstream theater (which has come to include the nonprofit regional stages and much of Off-Broadway), these plays predominantly represent the experiences of upper-middle-class urban white men.

As works of narrative realism, such plays are driven by empathy as a primary mechanism of engagement, and post-Stonewall plays with LGBT characters often went a long way simply by asserting that LGBT people exist and belong in American families – and in American family dramas – and can be as relatable as anyone else. This style, which presumes psychological dimension to its characters, often presents as a given a character's gay or lesbian identity, seeking to make it visible and sympathetic.

In many LGBT family plays, a central conflict involves the family's rejection – and, in comedies, eventual acceptance – of the protagonist's homosexuality. An early, prominent example is Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*, a watershed work that began at New York's La Mama in 1978. Built of

three one-acts, the first, *International Stud*, introduced the protagonist, Arnold Beckoff (played by Fierstein), as a lonely drag performer who speaks directly to the audience about his life with wit, warmth, and plenty of pathos. From that work, through *Fugue in a Nursery* (1979) and *Widows and Children First* (1979), we see Arnold struggle in a relationship with a man who marries a woman, lose his true love to a fatal gay bashing, and take in a gay adolescent boy with plans to adopt him. And through all of this, he scraps with his mother, who objects to his sexuality and, in a wrenching climactic scene, declares it an affront that Arnold would dare to say Kaddish for his dead partner just as she does for her late husband. As a single evening, *Torch Song* opened at the gay Off-Broadway theater the Gline, in 1982 and then moved to Broadway (where it won two Tonys; it was later made into a film). If it stood out in the commercial theater for its frankness about sexuality (and its unabashed embrace of male femininity), in the La Mama context, its forthright Jewishness was unusual. But in either venue, the two identities could not be separated from each other, not in Arnold's expression and sense of self, nor in the very staging. In a famous scene, Arnold visits a backroom bar, where he has anonymous sex; while he is penetrated by an unseen partner, he delivers a long, talky monologue and even manages to light a cigarette. As he rocks lightly back and forth in the sex act, he looks as if he might be *shukeling* – bobbing in prayer.

All unhappy family plays are unhappy in their own ways, but this loose rubric can include a range of works in which a gay, lesbian, or trans- character plays at least some part in the domestic disruptions and/or reconciliations of a Jewish household, among them Richard Greenberg's *The American Plan* (2009), Jennifer Maisel's *The Last Seder* (2012), Judy Meiskin's *Hanukkah in the Back Country* (2013), Susan Miller's *Silverstein & Co.* (1972), Sarah Schulman's *Empathy* (1992), Jonathan Tolin's *The Twilight of the Golds* (1993), and the particularly acerbic comedies, David Greenspan's *Dead Mother; or Shirley not All in Vain* (1991) and Nicky Silver's *The Food Chain* (1993) and *The Lyons* (2011). Often in such works, it is the gay or lesbian character's Jewishness that signals and substantiates his/her fraught tie to family, the locus of Jewish (ethnic) identification. Sometimes, as in the musical comedy *My Mother's Lesbian Jewish Wiccan Wedding* (2009) by David Hein and Irene Carl Sankoff, these plays tell a coming-out story in which the protagonist deepens her/his Jewish identity as s/he accepts her/his sexuality.

Jon Maran's *A Strange and Separate People* (2011) is a rare case of a work exploring gay identity within a religiously Orthodox context; another, David Zellnik's one-act *For Elise* (2011), portrays a cosmopolitan Holocaust survivor contending with her two grandsons – one gay and secular, the other, straight

and newly Hasidic. And Itta Chana Englander's *I'm Not Like You* (2014) considers the friendship between an HIV-positive Orthodox man and his childhood buddy who has come out as gay. In these works, the dramatic agon is familial as well as theological.

As in life, on stage LGBT kinship networks, or "chosen families," confronted biological families in the wrenching context of the AIDS crisis. In the galvanizing activist play *The Normal Heart* (1985) by Larry Kramer, for example, the Jewish protagonist, Ned Weeks, battles institutional and familial homophobia alike in his efforts to bring attention, service, and succor to the young men dying in droves. Only minutes into the first act, the firebrand hero (Kramer's alter ego) appeals to Jewish history as he compares the media's lack of attention to a mysterious new disease affecting gay men to its failure to report on the Holocaust. The moment plays for a laugh even as it sets up a somber sense of foreboding: Ned is ranting to a man he is going out with for the first time. "Jews, Dachau, Final Solution," the man says in response; "what kind of date is this?"¹⁶ We see Ned as obsessed and hyperbolic – and also as right. In *The Normal Heart* – as well as in Kramer's later memory play, *The Destiny of Me* (1992), which explores the autobiographical character's upbringing in Jewish suburbia of the 1940s and 1950s – Ned explicitly derives his moral legitimacy and his righteousness (albeit in a fraught, even traumatizing, family) from his Jewishness.

That identification functions in another way, too, in *The Normal Heart*, as does the Jewishness of central characters in other landmark plays dealing with AIDS, William Hoffman's *As Is* (1985) and William Finn's and James Lapine's *Falsettos* (1992). In all three of these very different works (Hoffman's is a realistic relationship drama; Finn's a chamber musical, culminating in a bar mitzvah at hospital bedside), the protagonist is a gay Jew who is the healthy lover of a gentile man with AIDS – an attractive, successful young man in the prime of his life. The ministering Jewish boyfriend provides a vector of empathy for straight audience members, as he performs within the familiar trope of fretting and fussing Jewish wife. Spectators can identify with his fear and anguish and thus recognize the love between him and his partner, whose gayness is pronounced as his most defining feature in contrast to the ethnic boyfriend. Placed into a familiar dramatic framework, gay (white, well-to-do) men were shown to be no different from straight people.

That same dynamic is productively inverted in Tony Kushner's watershed two-part epic *Angels in America*. (Part I, *Millennium Approaches*, premiered in Los Angeles in 1990 and opened on Broadway in 1993, followed there several months later by Part II, *Perestroika*.) In this monumental work that raises

complex questions about the nature of responsibility – on personal, social, and political levels – the Jewish partner, Louis, flees from his ailing WASP boyfriend, Prior.

Amid a diverse list of major dramatis personae (WASP, Mormon, and African American) the play presents a wide range of Jewish characters and images – the self-dramatizing anxious boyfriend Louis, the closeted archconservative Roy Cohn, the ghost of radical Jewish Ethel Rosenberg, a wizened and weary rabbi who opens the play with a eulogy. Together, they trace the bumpy arc of Jewish American politics from the postwar era to the Reaganite 1980s. Kushner mobilizes – and then queers – familiar Jewish tropes and themes, finding inspiration in the course of both Jewish American rise and resistance, as WASPy Prior, the self-described stereotypical gay man at the center of the play, becomes a metaphorical Jew.¹⁷

Echoing the aghast critics of *God of Vengeance* some decades earlier, conservatives reviled *Angels* for its Jewishness as much as – or even more than – its celebration of gay life and leftist vision, and most of all for the association among the three. The play “is not for White Bread America,” warned one such critic. “It’s for people who eat bagels and lox, dress in drag, and hate Ronald Reagan.”¹⁸

Thoroughly Jewish and thoroughly queer, *Angels* is also a profoundly American play (whose subtitle is “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes”). The action suggests that democratic progress requires – and has always required – both integration of minorities into the national fold *and* fundamental interrogation of the fold itself. Whether Prior’s assertion that “we will be citizens” that nearly closes the play points toward a radical prophecy for America or, rather, calls for assimilation into a liberal ideal of tolerance has been debated since its premiere.¹⁹ Either way, the play had a part in reopening a long-standing argument within LGBT organizing (a once-familiar dialectic in Jewish American experience) – whether to press for full inclusion as people just like everyone else or to work to change institutional structures themselves to permit a fuller range of human difference: gay rights or gay liberation? *Angels* opts for both – that is why it both operates in the mode of narrative realism and constantly breaks that containing form with its visits from ghosts, scenes in heaven (one – though often cut in production – written in Yiddish), fantasy sequences on frozen tundra, and angel crashing through a ceiling.

The play’s colossal success (the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, Tony Award) coincided with the emergence of queer theory, a field that not incidentally found some of its leading voices among Jewish scholars. (It was Judith Butler, for one, who examined gender as a function of performativity, showing how,

as with the unfixable category of “Jew,” the doer is constituted by the deed; it was Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who defined the “epistemology of the closet” through an analogy with the coming-out story of Esther.)²⁰

This coincided, too, with a new surge of queer performance outside traditional theaters. In the 1980s, low-budget shows sprang up on tiny noncommercial stages in the back of bars, in small and community-run spaces such as Dixon Place and the WOW Café in New York, the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, and Highways in Los Angeles, often highlighting the work of LGBT artists. Some queer performers (feminists among them, especially) preferred such spaces because they did not presume or insist upon realism, a form these artists regarded as inescapably heteronormative. Breaking the fourth wall was one way to burst through the social and representational conventions of gender and sexuality – a “queer” project if ever there was one. Queerness, as the theorist Michael Warner has asserted, “gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual.”²¹ In the queer-theatrical context, this challenge to normalization has long fostered the flaunting – and sometimes the flamboyant exaggeration – of otherwise repressed stereotypical behavior: over-the-top drag queens and drag kings, for example, in the queer tradition; the showy display of old “stage Jew” qualities such as whiny or accented speech and flapping hands in, for example, performances by David Greenspan, or in the ghosting references to Jewish “womanhood gone awry” (as Carol Ockman describes stereotypical Jewish femininity)²² in works by such disparate performers as Sandra Bernhard, Jennifer Miller, and Rachel Rosenthal. And acerbically, the two combine in hilarious histrionic excess in Paul Rudnick’s *Pride and Joy* (2008), a monologue for one Helen Nadler, in which, in a stream of one-liners, she boasts to the Massapequa chapter of “Parents of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, the Transgendered, the Questioning, the Curious, the Creatively Concerned and Others” that she is the most accepting mother in recorded history for tolerating her three children, a lesbian, a transsexual, and a scatologically inclined leatherman.

Solo Performance

Solo performance art has been an especially hospitable genre for the investigation of queer conundrums, not least those involving Jewish expression and inquiry, as it is a form that, highlighting the author/actor’s corporeal presence, often highlights the complicated construction of the self. With roots in modern art and in dissent – traceable at least as far back as Dada and Cabaret

Voltaire and to revolutionary Russian constructivism – early performance art challenged the idea of the permanence and the commodification of the art object by valorizing the evanescence of event-based work and merrily transgressed artistic and/or social norms. The genre began to rise to prominence in the United States in the late twentieth century in conjunction with a range of developments that were aesthetic as well as economic, social, and political, and the solo show in which the author/performer tells about her/his own life has been a particularly robust subgenre.²³

With authors themselves asserted as both the subject matter and – in their bodily presence – the site of the performance, such work is often self-problematizing, highlighting the gap between actor and character to raise questions about the coherence and social construction of the very identity it asserts. Inexpensive to produce – no large casts of actors to pay, no large theaters to rent, no U-Hauls to hire to bring the scenery when the show goes on the road – performance art has been open to writers whose work was less likely to be supported by mainstream theaters, which tended to be more hide-bound, aesthetically and otherwise.

Jews working in this form could not help but bring to bear their Jewishness (whatever its shape), whether writing exclusively about their own lives or extrapolating from them to write fictional characters for their solo performances. Richard Elovich's *Someone Else in Queens Is Queer* (1992) used several voices to tell, essentially, the story of Gordie Benjamin's erotic and artistic awakening in the context of unyielding familial-cultural bonds. "It doesn't matter that I don't believe in what is behind the thoroughly routinized practices," he admits to his lover. "I do them anyway – saying the *Shma* every morning, putting on *Tefillin*, going to *Shul* – it isn't my thought, I am trapped in it. The technology of the family is doing my thinking for me. When I jerk off, there are generations of my dead relatives watching me."²⁴

Those strains of campiness and urgency that Sontag observed among gays and among Jews in the mid-1960s combine in this work, too, in pieces like *Old, Jewish, and Queer* (1997) by Naomi Newman (a founding member of A Traveling Jewish Theater), in which she portrays an actor staving off her fear of aging by embodying a resolute senior, a resentful teenager, a vaudevillian, and a gay man, all in language peppered with Yiddish and Hebrew. Tania Katan recounts – with a surprising measure of raw hilarity, drawing on both Jewish and campily queer traditions of humor – her bout with cancer in *Saving Tania's Privates* (2011). Sara Felder, typically billed as "San Francisco's best loved Jewish lesbian juggler," meshes wry personal narration, political commentary, and high-skilled circus tricks to explore the nexus of queer-Jewish identity.

In *June Bride* (1995), she details the obstacles she and her partner overcame in order to celebrate a traditional Jewish marriage; in the telling, Felder juggles knives while contemplating circumcision, worms her way out of a straitjacket while describing her coming out experience, and tosses balls, scarves, and other objects through the air as the audience hears how she juggles her identity as a lesbian and a Jew. In *Out of Sight* (2006), she presents a critique of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory (an increasingly common subject for queer performance that challenges Zionism as a "normative" element of Jewish American identity) in the context of her upbringing and the unconditional love for Israel espoused by her mother, a Holocaust survivor. Felder describes the conflict she faces in coming out as a dissenter from Zion, while juggling machetes as she balances atop a board that teeters upon a roller.

Lisa Kron also queerly takes up, profoundly, the experience of being the child of a survivor, weaving together the private and the public, the comic and traumatic in her acclaimed solo performance, *2.5 Minute Ride* (1996). Kron, also a playwright, began her career at New York's WOW Café, which spawned the merry and mordant troupe The Five Lesbian Brothers, of which she is a member. Her searing solo piece juxtaposes three journeys that, on the surface, bear little relationship to each other: a family outing from their Michigan home to an Ohio amusement park, where Kron's elderly diabetic father loves to ride the scariest roller coasters; the highly negotiated trip Kron makes, with her girlfriend, to her brother's Orthodox marriage ("I'm just going to go to that wedding and pretend I'm watching a National Geographic special," Kron quotes her mother as saying); and a tour to Auschwitz she takes with her father, whose parents perished there after he fled Germany as a child in 1937 on the Kindertransport. In this often humorous set of stories, Kron explores the incongruities of Jewish American life, the wellsprings of human fortitude, the lifelong assembling and maintenance of a moral core, the insistence of the everyday within the persistence of trauma, the burden of postmemory, and the necessary but never fully attainable effort to understand another person's experience.

Deb Margolin ("queer" by virtue of her perspective and gawky Jewishness, rather than her sexuality) has infused Jewish culture and imagery into the collectively created plays of Split Britches, the influential majority lesbian troupe that comprised Margolin, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver. She translated *West Side Story*'s "I Like to Be in America" into Yiddish for Shaw and Weaver to sing in the troupe's play, *Upwardly Mobile Home* (1985), for instance, and portrayed a rabbi in their *Beauty and the Beast* (1982). Her solo work – distinguished by its quirky humor, poetic language, metaphysical questions, and

sense of wonderment – often foregrounds her Jewishness as the rich soil in which those tendencies took root. Most ardently, in *Oh Wholly Night & Other Jewish Solecisms* (1996), she declares, “I love being Jewish . . . I love the stereotypes” and explains how as a girl, she understood that being Jewish meant bearing “a series of exquisite burdens,” not least of which was waiting for the Messiah. Bidden to be open to the Messiah’s arrival at any moment and moved by the state of constant anticipation, she recognizes messianic promise in the extraordinariness of everyday life.²⁵

Queer Yiddishkayt

Margolin was among the earliest of contemporary artists to “queer” Jewish works, looking specifically to the Yiddish canon for reflections of their own concerns at the turn of the twenty-first century, and, especially, a parallel proud sense of alterity within their own heritage. The explosion of “Queer Yiddishkayt” in the 1990s took many forms, first in the surge of new klezmer music by bands like the Klezmatics and the (punning all-female ensemble) Isle of Klezbos.²⁶ Theater artists also found queer impulses in Yiddish material. The late 1990s saw several different adaptations of Sholem Asch’s *Got fun nekome* (*God of Vengeance*, 1907). While it is not possible to assign any of its characters a lesbian identity in the contemporary sense, the depiction of same-sex desire and of an unsentimentalized Yiddish world inspired new versions by the playwright Donald Margulies and by the translator Caraid O’Brien, as well as a play combining transcripts of the obscenity trial with scenes from Asch’s drama, *The People vs. The God of Vengeance* (2000), by Rebecca Taichman. Taichman has been working on a fuller development of these themes with the playwright Paula Vogel in *Rehearsing Vengeance*, slated for a 2015 premiere at the La Jolla Playhouse.²⁷ Tony Kushner wrote *A Dybbuk* (1995), based on S. An-sky’s folkloric work; his adaptation lays bare the inherent homoeroticism within the all-male world of the yeshiva, as well as between the two fathers who set off the play’s action by pledging their children in marriage as a consummation of their own love.²⁸ More recently, Sarah Schulman has adapted Isaac Bashevis Singer’s *Enemies: A Love Story* for the stage (queer not in depicting homosexuality per se, but in the sexual compulsiveness of its protagonist).

Beyond the canon of literary drama, Queer Yiddishkayt has found expression through – and contributed to the life of – what Jeffrey Shandler calls “post-vernacular” Yiddish, a mode in which the symbolic fact of saying something in Yiddish is more important than the content of the utterance. A recent theatrical instance is Dan Fishback’s *The Material World* (2012), an ambitious musical

play that occupies two simultaneous periods. It is set in a boarding house in New York in 1921, but some of its occupants are living in 2011. There they mingle, in the kitchen over breakfast, in bedrooms for chats, or study sessions about the Zohar: a Jewish family of recent immigrants chased from Russia by pogroms (some of whom want to return and join the triumphant Bolsheviks), a nerdy gay man intent on fomenting revolution by means of Facebook posts, Madonna, and Britney Spears, all of them seeking their own way to save the world. In a climactic scene, the protagonist, young Gittel, “a 12-year-old Jewish socialist revolutionary,” as the script defines her, takes Madonna to meet her institutionalized uncle Kasriel, said to be one of the greatest kabbalists of all time. He spews obscenities in Yiddish – with Gittel translating – before joining the pop star in singing one of her hit tunes: “*Alle mentshn, kum un tants un zing / Alle mentshn, shtey oyf un tu dayn zakh*” [Everybody, come on, dance and sing / Everybody, get up and do your thing].

In its invocation of Yiddish and in its very form, the play makes palpable what recent scholars have come to call “queer temporality”: an alternative to the forward-marching sense of time, marked out by normative life cycle events and biological reproduction.²⁹ Similarly, as Shandler has noted, Queer Yiddishkayt proposes a transmission of culture from one generation to another that does not depend on, or even assume, the nuclear family as its primary vector. With its asynchronous characters and its calling into question whether progressive politics are always, indeed, progressing, the play places Jewish American history in queer time.

Queer New Jews

Fishback, born in 1981, is part of a new generation of queer Jews who began to investigate the nature of their Jewishness through a decidedly queer lens – one that focuses on disruption and fragmentation not only of sexual and gender identities, but also of Jewishness itself. They belong to the variously named cohort of Jewish Americans – the “Heebster,” “post-Halakhic,” or “New” Jews – who are less affiliated with communal institutions than their parents and grandparents, and who are exploring and inventing their own forms of ethnic/religious definition within a celebratory multicultural realm.³⁰ They take, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp have characterized it, “Jewishness as contingent and contextual rather than definitive and presumptive.”

While performance – and the arts more generally – has served as a primary means of articulating this stance, queer theory has provided a framework for

the crafting and claiming of such fluid forms of self-fashioning. These artists are creatively engaging what José Muñoz has called “disidentification” – a strategy employed by queers of color (and by these queer Jews, too) that scrambles and then remakes the codes of both the dominant culture and the relevant minority group. Rejecting the binary of assimilation/ethnic nationalism, it uses those codes as “raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.”³¹

In the context of Queer New Jews, this has meant seizing and renovating markedly Jewish texts and practices. Sometimes those texts are thoroughly secular: The Man Meat Collective (a troupe that met through the New York activist organization Jews for Racial and Economic Justice) frolics through gender-queered and politically satirical parodies of Golden Age Broadway musicals. In Austin, Texas, the Lipschtick Collective combines 1970s-style glitter drag with Jewish vaudeville and the new burlesque as a means, they proclaim on their Web site, of “questioning the assumptions and complicating the norms of feminism, patriotism, and Judaism.”

And sometimes, the work reaches powerfully into the religious realm as queer new Jews take to performance to reimagine Jewish rituals and festival observances – not to ridicule or dismiss them, but to imbue them with new efficacy for confronting contemporary concerns. Tobaron Waxman’s *Opshernish* (2000), a five-hour performance/installation at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, retrieved the *opshern* – a three-year-old boy’s ritual first haircut, which initiates him into religious study and observance – to facilitate, as the artist wrote, “an exodus from an infancy of self-awareness and away from kinship-based models of identity formation altogether.” In Philadelphia in 1999, Emily Nepon won a Drag King contest with her portrayal of a chubby bar mitzvah boy – at once a parody and an examination of the codes through which one is said to become a man. A group of U.S. musicians and theater makers teamed up to present *Queer Jewish Wedding* at the Rejewvenation festival in Toronto in 2005, a cycle of songs set around the dramatized stories of gay and lesbian couples, set under a huppah and performed in Yiddish.

Christmas, on the other hand, comes in for queering in a variety of satirical Jewish performances, the crowning example of which is *Oy Vey in a Manger* (2007), the raunchy and raucous revue by the Kinsey Sicks, the self-described “dragapella beauty-shop quartet,” whose name draws playfully on the Kinsey Report’s famous scale of sexual behavior, six indicating exclusive homosexuality. The four highly coiffed and bedecked performers (two of whom are Jewish – one, a Yiddishist and rabbi) parody the December holidays in songs,

wisecracks, and seismic slow burns. “I’m giving birth to the son of God,” Mary tells her friend. The friend replies, “You and every other Jewish mother.”

In excellent harmonies, they offer new versions of classic carols – “Lusty the Snowman,” “God Bless Ye Femmy Lesbians,” “Jews Better Watch Out.” Chanukah is not neglected:

“I had a little facial / I made it out of clay / And when it’s dry and ready / I look like Beyoncé.”

On a regular basis for more than a decade, Amichai Lau-Lavie, a rabbinical student and the director of the creative form of observance *Storah*telling: Jewish Ritual Theater, has been deploying similar double-entendres and other tropes of drag performance, to the more complex ends of delivering earnest yet downright raunchy homilies in the bewigged and bejeweled persona of Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross. Thoroughly melding “Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony,” the rebbetzin is the widow of six late Hungarian husbands (all named Gross), who delivers sincere advice about making a meaningful Jewish life. For instance, in the cabaretlike act “Sabbath Queen,” the rebbetzin extols the joys of the weekly day of rest and the special mitzvah of having sex on the Sabbath, emphasizing how great it is to feel the *shabbosdik* – stress on the last syllable – “so very deep inside you.” The work simultaneously promotes and upends traditional observance. No surprise that to the rebbetzin, the Jewish calendar’s “most holy holiday” is Purim.

With its built-in penchant for drag, topsy-turvy, and the carnivalesque – and not least, Esther’s coming-out-of-the-closet story as a core narrative – Purim has been queer from the start, numerous contemporary revelers have claimed, seizing its spirit of transgression and masquerade for, well, more of the same. The annual Purimspil produced in New York City by the Af Tzelokhis Purim Brigade (named after the Yiddish phrase meaning to do something out of spite or precisely because someone doesn’t want you to do it; to provoke) was founded by two queer Yiddishists – the singer and educator Adrienne Cooper and the radical theater maker Jenny Romaine. The project has been sponsored by the grassroots activist organization Jews for Racial and Economic Justice in partnership with various allied social justice groups around the city to produce a topical extravaganza that draws hundreds of partiers each year. While the activist focus varies – “Giant Puppet Purim Ball against the Death Penalty” (2002), “Rehearsal for the Downfall of Shoeshine: An Immigrant Justice Purim Spectacular!” (2004), “Roti and Homentashen: The Palace Workers Revolt! A Purim Carnival Spectacular” (2007) – the combination of puppets, pageantry, satirical skits, circus acts, raucous live music, and dancing is always

fueled by self-consciously queer use of cross-dressing, gender bending, and blunt attacks on the normative.

The 2003 instance was only the most explicit in its fundamental queerness, declaring its nonkosher (*treyf*) status in its punk-aggressive title: “Suck My Treyf Gender: A Queer, Anti-Imperialist, Anti-Occupation Purim Cabaret.” This production issued a manifesto declaring that on Purim,

binaries, dichotomies, opposites are emphasized, exaggerated and celebrated. We masquerade as Good vs. Evil, Male vs. Female, Oppressed vs. Oppressor, but the goal is not to reinforce these dichotomies, but to realize that they are false separations, that there is a beautiful space in between all opposites, and that is the space where we live as happy, healthy beings. It is in between the extremes, somewhere between “male” and “female,” healing our experiences of oppression while checking ourselves on the power we have to oppress others, that we walk Hashem’s path.

The credo might not represent every style of performance in which queer and Jewish concerns play on and off one another – not to mention the view of every queer Jewish theater artist – but it does powerfully assert the audacious clarity of queer Jewish performance today, while celebrating the undying force of the Jew fairy.

Notes

- 1 Mart McCowely, *Boys in the Band* (New York: Samuel French, 1968), 48.
- 2 Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Delta, 1966), 290.
- 3 This approach leaves out a considerable number of queer and/or Jewish writers and performers whose work does not as directly address the intersection of queer and Jewish tropes and identities – and, given space constraints, also some who do. The rich and large category of Jewish stand-up comedians and nightclub performers, who have travestied conventional notions of gender and/or sex, from Milton Berle and Belle Barth to Sarah Silverman, is not addressed here, nor the entire category of queer spectatorial takes on presumably “straight” performances. For a wider view, especially of pre-Stonewall work, see Warren Hoffman, *The Passing Game: Queering Jewish American Culture* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009).
- 4 On anti-Semitic associations between Jews and perversion, see David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Paul Breines, *Tough Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991); Georg Mosse, *The Image of Man: the Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and *Nationalism and Sexuality*:

- Middle-class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).
- 5 Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 3.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 7 The 1940 Nazi propaganda film *Der ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew*) draws the most notorious and calamitous association between Jews and dissembling, charging that Jews pass unnoticed, hatching their nefarious plots. Sander Gilman has argued (in a lecture at New York's Jewish Museum in November 1996) that as Jews assimilated into Western Europe, the process of self-transformation came to be seen as "inherently Jewish" and a capacity for mimicry as a "sign of Jewishness."
- 8 Reviews of *God of Vengeance*: Burns Mantle, "Father in Double Role Gets Ovation: Sire of Jewish Actor Stars in Ugly Drama," *New York Daily News* (December 21, 1922); James Craig, "The God of Vengeance," *Mail* (December 20, 1922); Kenneth MacGowan, "The New Play," *Globe* (December 20, 1922); Maida Castellum, "The Stage," *Call* (December 21, 1922).
- 9 On the Wales Padlock law and censorship more generally, see John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 10 The Mattachine Society's "missions and purposes" can be found in Harry Hay, *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 131. See also Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011); John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2007).
- 11 Edward S. Shapiro, *The Jewish People in America, Vol. 5: A Time for Healing: American Jewry since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 15.
- 12 On the universalizing of Anne Frank, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jeffrey Shandler, eds., *Anne Frank Unbound: Media, Imagination, Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); and Lawrence Langer, "The Americanization of the Holocaust on Stage and Screen," in *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 157–178.
- 13 On the Americanizing impulses of *Fiddler on the Roof* see Alisa Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013); and Seth Wolitz, "The Americanization of Tevye, or Boarding the Jewish Mayflower," *American Quarterly* 40:4 (December 1988): 514–536.
- 14 Stacy Wolf, "Barbra's 'Funny Girl' Body," in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, ed. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 247.
- 15 Among numerous works that recount and analyze LGBT Jewish experiences and contexts, see David Shneer and Caryn Aviv, *Queer Jews* (New York: Psychology Press, 2002); Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); Dana Evan Kaplan, *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, especially 206–257); Christi Balka and Andy Rose, *Twice Blessed on Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).

- 16 Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart* (New York: New American Library, 1985), 52.
- 17 The particularly Jewish aspects of *Angels in America* are discussed in Jonathan Freedman, "Angels, Monsters, and Jews: Intersections of Queer and Jewish Identity in Kushner's *Angels in America*," *PMLA* 113:1 (January 1988): 90–102; Alisa Solomon, "Wrestling with Angels: A Jewish Fantasia" in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 118–133.
- 18 Richard Grenier, "With Roy, Ethel, and 'Angels,'" *Washington Times* (April 18, 1993), B3.
- 19 See David Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation," *Theatre Journal* 47:2 (May 1995): 207–227.
- 20 Their foundational works are Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
- 21 Michael Warner, "Introduction," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvi.
- 22 Carol Ockman, "When Is a Jewish Star Just a Star? Interpreting Images of Sarah Bernhardt," in *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, ed. Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 138.
- 23 On the history and nature of performance art, see Rosalee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, 3rd ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011); and on the New York scene of the late 1980s forward C. Carr, *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).
- 24 Richard Elovich, *Someone Else from Queens Is Queer*, *Theater* 24:2 (Summer 1993): 60.
- 25 Deb Margolin, *Oh Wholly Night & Other Jewish Solecism*, in *Of All the Nerve: Deb Margolin SOLO*, ed. Lynda Hart (New York and London: Cassell, 1999), 143, 140.
- 26 See Jeffrey Shandler, "Queer Yiddishkeit: Practice and Theory," *Shofar* 25:1 (Fall 2006): 90–113; Eve Sicular, "'A yingl mit a yingl hot epes a tam': The Celluloid Closet of Yiddish Film," *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 16:1 (1994): 40, 44.
- 27 For analyses of *God of Vengeance*, see Warren Hoffman, *The Passing Game*, 19–44; Harley Erdman, "Jewish Anxiety in 'Days of Judgment': Community Conflict, Antisemitism, and the God of Vengeance Obscenity Case," *Theatre Survey* 40:1 (May 1999): 51–74; and Alisa Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 111–121.
- 28 The definitive queer reading of *The Dybbuk* is Naomi Seidman, "The Ghosts of Queer Loves Past: Ansky's 'Dybbuk' and the Sexual Transformation of Ashkenaz," in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*: 228–245.
- 29 On queer temporality, see Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
- 30 On the "new" Jews, see Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, *The Continuity of Discontinuity: How Young Jews Are Connecting, Creating, and Organizing Their Own*

Jewish Lives (New York: Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, 2007); Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "The New Jews: Reflections on Emerging Cultural Practices." Conference presentation for Re-Thinking Jewish Communities and Networks in an Age of Looser Connections, December 2005, <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/web/yeshiva.pdf>

31 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 31.

Jewish American Comic Books and Graphic Novels

LAURENCE ROTH

Over the last twenty years, the production and consumption of comic books in the United States have been commercially standardized for a new millennial and postmillennial audience. Marvel Comics is now a division of the Walt Disney Company, and their products are aggressively cross marketed in various media; independent comics publishers like Drawn and Quarterly and Fantagraphics regularly compete with imprints such as Pantheon and Schocken Books for the prestige projects that now describe the publishing category “graphic novel,” and almost every Barnes and Noble and BAM outlet prominently features a graphic novel section, which is often dominated by manga, Japanese comics, and usually located between children’s books and young adult fiction. Comics have been thoroughly incorporated into the American culture industries, and their commercial stability and economic success seem both self-evident and unremarkable to the latest generation of American readers. Yet this is merely the latest incarnation of a series of changes in the business and marketing of comic books over the last seventy-five years, and a quick review of these is a crucial prologue to understanding Jewish American comics and the contemporary cultural discourse about them.¹

For much of its history, long-form comics, as Charles Hatfield terms the half-tabloid eighteen- to twenty-four-page magazine style comic books,² constituted a lucrative but delimited share of media consumers. True, the youth driven sales that described the Golden Age of comics (1938–1955) and made them a mass market phenomenon, that powered the renewed efflorescence of superhero comics during the Silver Age (1956–1968), and that aided and abetted counterculture consumers’ infatuation with alternative comix in the 1960s and 1970s helped push comics onto a larger social and cultural stage in the United States. Through radio, television, and film adaptations as well as through the cultural anxiety about youth cultures that the news media and various social authorities stoked, comic books became a national though not

a respectable mainstream phenomenon. Nevertheless, there were still only so many kinds of comics readers to be served. In general, any ethnic or subcultural distinctions were subsumed under the more important because more profitable genre distinctions that determined how comics were marketed. From their beginnings in the Depression, comic books were published by small, undercapitalized, and often short-lived houses that specialized in various genres (superhero, romance, funny animals, war stories, teen humor, horror, etc.) and a few large publishers such as Dell whose products were distributed primarily through already existing modes of distribution employed by magazines and newspapers. As a result, they were sold in newsstands, drug stores, and similar outlets aimed at general audiences. This held true even for the so-called big two, Marvel Comics and DC Comics, despite their exponential growth during the Silver Age.

It is not until the late 1960s and early 1970s, concomitant with the rise of alternative comix, that comics were sold and bought within a “direct market,” a system Scott McCloud describes as “the direct sales of nonreturnable comic books to comics specialty stores, a system championed in its early days by convention promoter Phil Seuling.”³ These specialty stores (in the beginning often head shops where drug paraphernalia and rock posters were also sold) provided outlets for new alternative comix and, as comic book sales shifted away from newsstands and toward adult audiences, connected a growing fan readership with older comics that were prized as collectibles.⁴ The rise of comic book shops, though specific to the needs and dynamics of the medium’s creators and consumers, resembles the broader commodification and commercialization of the counterculture and other social movements of the time, as witness the proliferation of organic food stores, clothing boutiques, and specialty bookstores such as feminist bookstores, African American bookstores, LGBTQ bookstores, and Jewish bookstores. Like these businesses, comic book shops helped focus and satiate that era’s consumer demands; self-publishing writer-artists, small-press and independent publishers, and even the large commercial houses could now serve very particular audiences and tastes.

As Hatfield notes, this development provided an engine for cultural and formal ferment in U.S. comics and, most notably, “informed and *disciplined* its clientele” by educating and assimilating them to the purposes and meaning of buying and selling comic books.⁵ Through their layout and environment comic book shops encouraged and made tangible certain types of consumer literacy and identity. And given that alternative comics recycled and ironized ethnic stereotypes and trafficked in collective and individual self-explanation,

self-justification, and self-parody, such disciplining was bound up in, and helped shape, “the emerging multicultural consensus of the 1960s and 1970s,” to borrow Dean Franco’s wording.⁶ That is, these new comic book shops, like the ethnic and specialty bookstores of the time, provided spaces and places in the public sphere where the contemporary discourse about public recognition of group cultures, and of individual affiliation with them, was made materially visible for consumers. The political, social, and economic changes wrought by the civil rights and ethnic pride movements, second wave feminism, the New Left, and mass culture fandoms were evidenced not only by the presence of such stores, but also by the idiosyncratic ways they sorted their stock and the novel subject and genre categories featured on their sales floors.⁷ Thus a materialist view of the comic book business suggests that comic book shops, through their mediation of the medium’s formal and cultural *differences*, and so of the burgeoning discourse about U.S. multiculturalism, helped make possible and purchasable the very subject “Jewish American comic books and graphic novels.” Awareness of the late coalescence of this subject category as a commercial and critical entity helps focus the particular interpretive issues this essay will address. For as Franco points out, the multicultural recognition of the value of cultural difference “is never value free; rather it is value-vexed, overwritten with cultural signifiers that construct the scene of recognition itself by providing a set of terms whereby recognition can take place.”⁸

In what follows I quickly trace the history of Jewish American comic books and graphic novels through the successive terms and arguments formulated by critics, scholars, and comics writer-artists that helped assemble that subject category. I begin with Will Eisner’s foundational work, *A Contract with God* (1978), and the responses to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* in the 1980s and early 1990s. Moving through the late twentieth century and into the past decade, I show how the assertion of a Jewish American comics focuses attention on formal and cultural innovations while also, sometimes proleptically, surfacing various patterns of meaning about the perceived roles and functions of Jewishness in America. Ultimately, critical discussions that enable readers to see in comics the cultural difference of Jewish superheroes, Jewish trauma, Jewish bodies, and Jewish places have become a fashionable new way of granting cultural legitimacy and social prestige to Jewish American identity. But they have incited as well a more complicated and diverse view of Jewish American self-construction and cultural production.

Eisner and Spiegelman: Figuring a Jewish American Comics

The work of Will Eisner and Art Spiegelman helped launch a number of significant discussions about Jewishness in comics and in America. Both found inspiration in alternative comix, yet each found his unique creative niche by employing the innovations of alternative comix to tell stories about two of the three Jewish experiences in the first part of the twentieth century that proved compelling to a mass American readership and exploitable to general publishers: the social and psychological hardships of acculturation and the traumas of the Holocaust. (The third is Israel and the struggle for Jewish national and cultural self-determination.) That combination of formal experimentation and popular content proved a powerful formula, one whose ironies and ambiguities were quickly drafted in service of contemporary discourses about Jewish identity and comics.

Eisner was one of the most lauded figures in the world of comics and graphic novels, perhaps best known for creating the Spirit, a dapper, night-stalking masked detective who made Eisner famous in the early 1940s. After retiring the Spirit in 1952, Eisner dropped out of the comics world and turned to educational and commercial work. But in 1972, as he recounted in a 1990 essay in the *New York Times Book Review*, he attended his first comic book convention: "I met the new breed of comic cartoonists for the first time. Long-haired, wild-eyed and intense, they spoke the language of comics. It was a language that gave voice to their protest and social ideas. I wanted to be part of the excitement again."⁹ Inspired, Eisner took up specifically Jewish characters and topics in a new comics form for which he employed the name "graphic novel." Eisner, of course, was not the first to use "graphic novel" to describe comic books that employ the narrative strategies and character development of full-length literary fiction. But such a new mode of popular literature provided the right vehicle through which to tell stories about the world of his childhood, and it offered him an opportunity to use the creative potential inherent in the comics medium as analogous to, and a commentary on, the creative potential inherent in contemporary Jewish culture and religiosity. Eisner drew on his own experiences as the son of Jewish immigrants to show how the language of comics art – of "sequential art" as he called it – could not only give voice to complex, socially aware characters and stories, but also marshal powerful arguments about collective self-representation.

In the four books based on his life growing up in the Bronx, *A Contract with God* (1978), *A Life Force* (1988), *To the Heart of the Storm* (1991), and *Dropsie Avenue: The Neighborhood* (1995), Eisner illustrates a hard-boiled take on life and religion and evokes literary realism, even a kind of naturalism. In all of them life is a matter of conflict and survival, and humans often behave as if they were only higher order animals. The rain-soaked chiaroscuro, the vertical emphasis, and the off-kilter point of view of Eisner's street-scene and tenement panels – the famous Eisnershpritz (a term coined by Harvey Kurtzman, the founder of *Mad*), which Eisner developed for the Spirit stories – is used in the Bronx cycle to cast a dark shadow on the meaning of heroism in comics and among immigrant Jews. It often reflects the emotional and moral lives of the characters, including “Willie,” a thinly disguised version of the young Eisner, who is shown in these works learning the ins and outs of a burgeoning comic book industry. In *Contract* especially, the urban setting limits the characters' horizons, traps them. Through the characters in these stories readers learn, as Eisner claimed all people learned during the Depression, “how little control we have over human destiny – despite our technology and innovation,”¹⁰ an assertion that also seems an unintentional verdict about his own career as a comics creator. As for God and Judaism, Eisner observed in an interview that “most religions I'm familiar with assure us that there exists a compact between man and deity under which each has certain obligations. Well, so far I have yet to be convinced that both parties have truly lived up to and delivered on this agreement.”¹¹

Eisner's melding of the vocabulary of comics with film noir composition and such social, theological, and existential commentary in *A Contract with God* evidenced a visual critique of American exceptionalism, the cultural chauvinism that fueled the rise of the superhero comics he helped develop, and of a Jewish exceptionalism, a sense of ethnic uniqueness, hard pressed by the immigrant experience. Others were taking comic books in similar directions; Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*, first published in 1976, also visualizes an antiheroic Jewish everyman in American life. But Eisner's signal accomplishment in making Jewish comics materially visible and a discursive subject was his fortuitous and unique yoking of subject matter to form: In order to survive in an ever-changing open market, Eisner seems to argue (in line with the prevailing ethos of alternative comix), both comic books and Jews must progress beyond heroics and toward aesthetic, cultural, and social renegotiation and redevelopment. Eisner contributed to the deepening of comics characters and narratives by making public and private memory – of the Depression, of Jewish acculturation,

of a comics writer-artist's education – the indispensable subject of his stories. Remembering, renegotiating, surviving is the pattern inked by the life force moving through Eisner's Bronx and his graphic novels. He thus showed how the self-reflexivity of the comics form offers an analogue to the self-reflexivity of group identity. Both underline the protean nature of the comics medium and social reality.

While Eisner was working on his Bronx cycle, Art Spiegelman was creating *Maus*, and whereas acknowledgment of Eisner's legacy gradually took shape in the late 1990s,¹² Spiegelman's project immediately galvanized a nascent discourse about Jews and comics. On one level this was an obvious consequence of *Maus*'s subject matter. Even as the first half of *Maus* appeared between 1980 and 1985 as a serial in *Raw*, the alternative comic magazine published and edited by Spiegelman and his wife, Francoise Mouly, it attracted shocked attention for being a comic strip about the Holocaust and for being so self-consciously literary.¹³ Ken Tucker's 1985 review in the *New York Times* of the *Raw* installments provoked intense public interest in a Holocaust story whose "protagonists are drawn as mice" and that treats comics "as a narrative form capable of telling enthralling stories as the novel or the movies, as a medium for the discussion of political issues and social causes, and as an experimental, often abstract art form."¹⁴ This critical fascination with Spiegelman's amalgam of a historical Jewish trauma with formal innovation quickly yoked *Maus* to questions about art and historical, autobiographical, or ethnic representations. That was apparent from the first in the ruckus about *Maus*'s classification both on the *New York Times* best seller list, where it was originally classified as fiction (then changed to non-fiction), and in bookstores, the majority of which had no dedicated section for a work like *Maus*.

On another level, though, *Maus* was quickly appreciated as a complex, even disconcerting *text* about Jews that arrived just as humanities scholars in the United States were reassessing academic study of history, memory, and narrative in light of continental philosophy and its linguistic turn. Joshua Brown's declaration in his 1988 review of *Maus I* in *Oral History Review* that "*Maus* captures the terrible relationship between the lost world of European Jewry and the present"¹⁵ was true in ways unanticipated by his essay's specific focus on how *Maus* addressed the "hazards and holes in the reconstruction of history."¹⁶ The initial critical discussion of *Maus* tackled the way Spiegelman's work illuminated issues related to Holocaust writing (as in "Holocaust *Laughter*?," Terrence Des Pres's 1987 essay that explored "comic ambiguity" in *Maus*),¹⁷ the reshaping of popular arts to accommodate historical complexity (as in

Miles Orvell's 1992 article "Writing Posthistorically: *Krazy Kat*, *Maus*, and the Contemporary Fiction Cartoon"), and especially the construction of memory and postmemory (as theorized most famously in Marianne Hirsch's "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory," published in 1993). Equally quick to appear, however, were critical analyses that while attentive to post-structural skepticism about essentialisms or the limits of representation, nevertheless drafted the "terrible relationship" between the Jewish past and present to help fix a particular Jewish American identity on comic books. Indeed, that the relationship was so abject and vexed proved crucial to situating it as a critically and culturally useful interpretive focal point. In his chapter "Culture" in *American Space, Jewish Time* (1988, 1996) Stephen Whitfield abjures the idea that there is "a common theme or subject matter that binds American Jewish culture,"¹⁸ or that American Jewish cultural productions will sustain or enrich "the legacy of Judaic culture."¹⁹ Still, he sees in the formal characteristics of these productions a "penchant to breach the gap between high culture and popular or folk art,"²⁰ as witness the work of Jules Feiffer and *Maus*, which lent comics "psychological nuance" and upended established cultural hierarchies.²¹ In Whitfield's chapter the very inscrutability of a connection between Jewish past and present enables speculation about a type of Jewish American cultural identity that betrays itself formally in the work of Jewish artists. The examples of Feiffer and Spiegelman consequently provide a warrant for psychosocial readings of Jewish American comic books.

An early articulation of such a reading of Jewish American comics was Paul Buhle's "Of Mice and Menschen: Jewish Comics Come of Age," which appeared in *Tikkun* in 1992. Ostensibly a review essay of Pekar's *The New American Splendor Anthology* (1991), Spiegelman's *Maus I*, and Spiegelman and Mouly's *Raw 3* (1991), it is in fact a pocket history of Jews and comics from the turn of the twentieth century to these three publications. Buhle asserts in his introductory argument that Spiegelman "experiments with form, like so many Jewish modernists of the century; he and the other artists . . . in *Raw* magazine are as determined to expand the comic genre as Yiddish writers once were to stretch their folkish language to the limits of modern literature."²² Pekar, he claims, "endlessly rewrites, in scripts that a variety of artists illustrate, the old plot-line of immanent critique from the American Jewish novel, that increasing material success has not necessarily brought either wisdom or morality."²³ Both remain true "to a large if mostly hidden legacy of Jewish comic form," a seemingly self-evident expression of Jewishness that reworks older "folkloric and historical-religious traditions in new ways" and that appropriates vernacular forms such as the comic strip "to explore the world around them,

manners and morals, as boldly and imaginatively as any social critic, novelist, or filmmaker.”²⁴

A more critical and prescient view of Jewishness in *Maus* was Michael Rothberg’s “We Were Talking Jewish: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* as ‘Holocaust’ Production” (1994). Rothberg sees *Maus* as representing “a new strand of Jewish American self-construction”²⁵ and argues that “the power and originality of Spiegelman’s effort derive[s] quite specifically from this shock of obscenity which demands that we confront ‘the Holocaust’ as visual representation, as one more commodity in the American culture industry.”²⁶ For Rothberg the interpretive space opened up by *Maus* is a product of Spiegelman’s use of his medium to critique “popular productions of Jewishness and the Holocaust,”²⁷ and so its formal contradictions and ironies “register[s] the uneasiness at the heart of Jewish identities, as well as their susceptibility to change over time.”²⁸ As in Eisner’s Bronx cycle, the self-reflexivity of *Maus* treats the comics form as a means to renegotiate and redevelop identity, both to document and to question what it means to “talk Jewish” in comic books and in America. Just as important, Rothberg also lays out the various issues *Maus* raises for Jewish American self-construction in comic books: representations of the Jew’s body and in particular Jewish women’s bodies;²⁹ staging and interrogating Jewish power, “especially the cultural capital won through the re-presentation of the Holocaust”;³⁰ recognition that such interrogation of the Holocaust “implicitly challenges that tragedy’s dialectical double – the legitimacy of Israeli incursions into Arab land”;³¹ and self-consciousness about comic books as a “space of identification” that both reproduces and recasts history.³² Rothberg’s list impressively anticipates, by giving voice to the arguments and terms that enable their recognition, exactly the sorts of topics and concerns that will define Jewish American comic books and graphic novels in the first decades of the new millennium.

And so in a relatively short span of time, from 1978 to 1994, a Jewish American comics was figured and materialized, taking shape both in critical conversations and on bookstore and comic shop sales floors. The initiating comics creators are Eisner and Spiegelman (who was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992), and to a lesser extent Feiffer and Pekar. Interest in these four seeded the first fruits of contemporaneous journalistic and scholarly rediscovery and recuperation: identifying Jews who helped create and recreate the comic book industry during the Golden and Silver Ages, considering the aesthetic and cultural uses of “Jewish graphic novels” indebted to the innovations of alternative comix, and revaluing the popular in Jewish American communal and literary self-regard.

Urtexts, Subtexts, and Contexts for Jewish American Comics

One of the first attempts to catalog the contributions of Jews to the U.S. comic strip and comic book industries was the exhibition “Jewish Cartoonists and the American Experience” at the Ohio State University Cartoon Research Library during the summer of 1999. Cocurated by Lucy Shelton Caswell and Helena Frenkil Schlam, the exhibition primarily focused on the way that comics offered Jewish artists, most of whom were first-generation Americans, the “possibility of contributing to American culture” and “a means of self definition as well as a way to maintain a sense of being Jewish.”³³ In the expanded version of the exhibition catalog’s essay that appeared in 2001, Schlam takes a biological approach to inclusion in her list of Jewish comics notables. She notes that for immigrant outsiders entrance to a developing industry was easier than entrance to established industries and professions, and she cites the discovery in a 1960 study of comic strip creators that “10 percent of the sample of cartoonists in the study were Jewish even though they made up only 3.24 percent of the U.S. population at that time.”³⁴ Starting in the late nineteenth century, Schlam begins her list with Frederick Burr Oppen and moves forward with quick summaries detailing the accomplishments of comic strip creators such as Milt Gross, Rube Goldberg, Al Capp, and Hilda Terry; of Eisner and fellow comic book creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Bob Kane, Jack Kirby, and Stan Lee; of Harvey Kurtzman, the creator of the seminal humor comic *Mad*, and his editors Al Jaffe, Al Feldstein, and Mort Drucker; of Feiffer and Spiegelman; of political cartoonists such as Herbert L. Block and *New Yorker* cartoonists such as Saul Steinberg, William Steig, Roz Chast, and Bruce Eric Kaplan; and two comics artists whose work at that time evinced overtly Jewish content, Paul Palnik and Ben Katchor, creator of *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer*, a weekly comic strip in the *Forward*; author of the graphic novel *The Jew of New York* (1998); and recipient in 2000 of a MacArthur Award.

Schlam and Caswell’s exhibition, though not as well known as later museum exhibitions about Jews and comics, effectively laid out the parameters of a developing canon. Nevertheless, for mass audiences the subject category still seemed thinly populated until the publication of Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* in 2000. Chabon’s novel became the strong precursor story about Jews and the superhero genre against which many contemporary retellings and interpretations of Jewish contributions to comics art and narratives measured themselves. Chabon’s story of how Sammy Clay and his cousin Josef Kavalier created the Escapist, a superhero

comic book character modeled on Superman, Harry Houdini, and the Golem of Prague, helped explain how a generation of middle-class New York Jews born around 1915 become key players in the production, circulation, and consumption of a new form in popular literature, the comic book, and of a new genre, the superhero comic. Throughout the novel, the cousins' education – in sexual self-knowledge, in the cutthroat economics of the American culture industries, in strategies of autoliberation – and their emotional and spiritual crises are given material expression through the development and maturation of their art and of themselves as artists. A major result is Josef's creation of a 2,256 page comic book titled *The Golem*, whose scope and psychological complexity become the fictional predecessor of the literary "graphic novel."

Chabon's novel reignited interest in the work of Jewish comics artists from the Depression era generation who were portrayed in it, and in the ostensible Jewishness of comic book superheroes such as Superman, Spiderman, the Thing, and other characters from Marvel and DC Comics. Eisner, Siegel, Shuster, Lee, Kirby, and Kane, as well as Joe Kubert and Gil Kane, were among the first to be reintroduced to mass audiences and lauded for their contributions to Jewish cultural production. Their early work was transformed into urtexts for a trove of hidden Jewish subtexts in comics. Journalists filed articles in American Jewish magazines and newspapers citing *Amazing Adventures* in order to assert that "superheroes are a surprising manifestation of the venerable Jewish tradition of repairing the world";³⁵ that "Superman actualized the adolescent power fantasies of its creators" and illustrates the connection between superheroes and the Golem of Prague;³⁶ and that Chabon's novel and the subsequent appearance of the Escapist as a real comic book series published by Dark Horse Comics "references not only the appeal of escapism but also comics as a medium suited for Jewish metamorphosis."³⁷ These same writers also structured their narratives to underline the maturation of comics, emphasizing the rise of graphic novels for "mature audiences"³⁸ and the importance of Spiegelman's *Maus* in "demonstrating that graphic novels were an independent medium for telling personal stories";³⁹ and the rise of "'the Bronze Age' of comics," so-called because "it is free of rose colored gloss and glitter, and reflects the realities of the world in which we live."⁴⁰

Eventually, Jewish American scholars also appropriated *Amazing Adventures* as a useful commentary on Jews and comics. In contrast to the praise that journalists heaped on the superheroes created by Jews, scholars used Chabon's novel to critique *comic books* as reflecting a desire to escape the ethnic, sexual, economic, and physical markers of Jewish identity,⁴¹ and "a turn away from history ... an interruption to memory, a holding action against the incursions

of the past.”⁴² Like the journalists, however, scholars also valorized the *graphic novel*, described as an “art form,”⁴³ “the comic book’s full-form version ... perhaps best known for its greater degree of literary sophistication and (arguably) aesthetic ambition,”⁴⁴ and therefore, as in Josef Kavalier’s example, the appropriate vehicle for “graphic artists” to explore Jewish self-fashioning and the instability of representation.⁴⁵ A welcome outcome of this scholarship was rediscovery of writer-artists such as Aline Kominsky-Crumb, in particular her “Goldie, A Neurotic Woman” in *Wimmen’s Comix #1* (1972) and her collaborative work with her husband, R. Crumb, in *Self Loathing Comics* (1995, 1997), both of which illustrated how the Jewish woman’s body had become a part of the emerging discourse about Jewish American comic books and graphic novels. Still, in much of that scholarship *Maus* implicitly remained the literary, adult benchmark for Jewish American comics. Together, journalists and scholars, each postulating a kind of special relationship between Jews/Jewishness and comics publishing, helped establish a recurrent narrative theme: Comics begin in the 1930s as adolescent American Jewish power fantasies, but have since grown up, thanks to the groundbreaking work of Eisner, Pekar, Spiegelman, Kominsky-Crumb, and Katchor, into a complex and sophisticated maturity.

This theme placed Jews at the center of the inception and development of the comics industry. It thus lent Jewish identity renewed cultural legitimacy and social prestige just as Jewish American philanthropies and cultural outreach organizations, in light of the highly contentious findings of the 1990 and 2000 National Jewish Population Surveys that young Jews were supposedly assimilating in record numbers, had consciously decided to co-opt “cool” Jewish cultural productions as vehicles for and examples of Jewish cultural renewal.⁴⁶ As a result, exhibitions about Jews and comics quickly became standard fare at Jewish museums. One of the first of these exhibitions dismayed Spiegelman, who elected to withdraw from the 2006 “Masters of American Comics” show when the comic book and graphic novel part of it was mounted by the Jewish Museum in New York in what he saw as a historically shallow and “provincial show about the ethnography of comics.”⁴⁷ Nevertheless, they continue unabated, as witness “ZAP! POW! BAM! The Superhero: The Golden Age of Comic Books, 1938–1950,” a 2004 exhibition that originated at the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum in Atlanta and that was most recently mounted in 2013 at the Jewish Museum of Maryland.

The theme also abetted the reinscription in both American and Jewish American comics scholarship of the socially constructed divide between “low-brow” genre fiction and “highbrow” literary fiction. As my quotation marks

suggest, the terms “comic book” and “graphic novel” have both wittingly and unwittingly become shorthand for categorizing lowbrow and highbrow comics over the last decade, with graphic novels garnering an often unremarked or underanalyzed privilege as the more innovative of the two. Derek Parker Royal’s special issue of *MELUS* on multiethnic graphic narratives showed that some literary scholars are aware that by “privileging ‘alternative’ graphic narratives” as more literary, “we may be inadvertently marginalizing or ‘othering’ an entire community of writers, ethnic or otherwise, whose work resonates with multi-ethnic import.”⁴⁸

Yet the majority of critical work recovering and explaining that import has been taken up by fans, some of whom are comic book writers themselves, who seem to relish the speculative freedom granted by psychosocial readings of Golden and Silver Age superhero comic books. Their claims about the Jewish subtexts in them thus meet with varying degrees of success. Simcha Weinstein’s *Up, Up, and Oy Vey: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero* (2006), Danny Fingeroth’s *Disguised As Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (2007), and Harry Brod’s *Superman Is Jewish?: How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way* (2012) all argue for a Jewish influence on superhero comics that is predicated on their creators’ biographies, which is then reconstituted as a Jewish “sensibility” that reappears as hidden themes, tropes, or imagery in the comics themselves. These books, however, read primarily as personal attempts to assert a cool or secular Jewish American identity. Arie Kaplan’s *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (2008), a revised and expanded version of a series of articles that appeared in *Reform Judaism* from 2003 to 2004, is the most useful of these studies because it well documents the professional and social networks in which these creators worked. Kaplan thereby reveals specific information about the Jewish contexts of that work – that “Jack Kirby kept an unpublished drawing of the Thing in full rabbinical garb in his house,” which he showed to colleagues,⁴⁹ (96), and that Chris Claremont, who turned *X-Men* into a hit series, “went on a trip to Israel to live on a kibbutz for two months”⁵⁰ (116), where he was deeply affected by a viewing of the film *Judgment at Nuremberg* (117).⁵¹

The privileging of graphic novels has also, and more vexingly, cemented a predictable set of stories into the cultural and commercial center of Jewish American comics. These focus on abject Jewish pasts and the ways they inform Jewish American self-construction, that is, the Holocaust or the hardships of immigrant experience and American acculturation – which are precisely the kind of stories that also describe the mainstream of popular Jewish American

fiction for mass audiences, as I mentioned previously. The most celebrated examples here include the Holocaust-themed work of Joe Kubert, Miriam Katin, Martin Lemelman, Bernice Eisenstein, and of course Spiegelman; and the immigrant- and acculturation-focused work of James Sturm, Katchor, Eisner, and Joann Sfar, a French Jewish writer-artist whose translated works exploring the vicissitudes of Sephardic and European Jewish acculturation, *The Rabbi's Cat* and *Klezmer*, have become part of the discourse about Jewish American graphic novels.

But as Michael Rothberg intuited, the self-reflexivity and discursive gravity of such stories have also attracted scholars to comics that grapple with related issues in contemporary Jewish American self-construction, especially the Jewish body and the Israel-Palestine conflict. In some cases that has helped lessen the divide between high and low in Jewish American comics and in others made that divide even broader. In their introduction to *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches* (2008), Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman acknowledge "our preferred term *graphic novel* . . . still confuses many,"⁵² and though they call it a "genre," the essays in the volume reference both highbrow and lowbrow publications in the United States and Israel whose innovations "demonstrate the extraordinary possibilities among text and image and new avenues of expression in the emerging generation of Jewish artists."⁵³ The volume also lets two Jewish comics writer-artists speak for themselves: JT Waldman, who redeveloped the tired narratives and stale images of Jewish American religious texts in his *Megillat Esther* (2005) and who acknowledges that in his boyhood, Marvel's *X-Men* helped figure the "language of my dreams";⁵⁴ and Miriam Libicki, whose autobiographical *Jobnik!* (2008) explores a Jewish woman's identity as an American serving in the Israeli army at the time of the Oslo peace process and Yitzhak Rabin's assassination in 1995. Paul Buhle's *Jews and American Comics: An Illustrated History of an American Art Form* (2008), whose very title complicates the divide between high and low, expands and continues the argument laid out in "Of Mice and Menschen" to demonstrate how comic books and graphic novels by Jews illustrate "that Jews have for a century been on an extended journey to find themselves."⁵⁵ In documenting that still-self-evident expression of Jewishness and of the Jewish abject past, Buhle does, however, make an especially valuable contribution to a more egalitarian history of Jewish American comics by unearthing the work of Yiddish cartoonists and comic strip creators such as Leon Israel, Samuel Zagat, and Zuni Maud (not yet discovered in his 1992 essay), whose work appeared in the Yiddish press in the 1910s and 1920s.

Conversely, Stephen E. Tabachnik's *The Quest for Jewish Belief and Identity in the Graphic Novel* (2014) concerns itself only with "high-quality graphic novels concerning Jewish belief and identity rather than a look at the role Jews have played in the popular comics or a narrow study of a particular creator, subgenre, or style."⁵⁶ As a result, his study crystallizes the highbrow Jewish graphic novel as constituted by "artists and writers who have dealt with the important themes of Jewish belief and identity in their work" who employ "an old-new literary and artistic form (following Theodore Herzl's view of Israel as an old-new state)," based on comic books but "with the ability to inspire and to provoke new thinking as few other literary or visual genres can."⁵⁷ The chapters also reiterate a now-familiar roster of putatively highbrow subject matter and stories: *Maus* and the Holocaust, Jewish immigration and acculturation in America and Europe, the Israel-Palestine conflict, Jewish women's autobiography and bodies, and refigured Bible narratives. This does not mean that monographs like Tabachnik's are not valuable contributions, only that they are, by necessity, limited studies. Tabachnik, for example, offers incisive close readings of the too-often-overlooked work of Trina Robbins and Sharon Rudahl (both members of the editorial collective that founded *Wimmen's Comix* in 1972), as well as Diane Noomin, Vanessa Davis, and Miss Lasko-Gross. Yet these are just a few of the writer-artists who were included in the more wide-ranging exhibition "Graphic Details: Confessional Comics by Jewish Women" curated by Sarah Lightman and Michael Kaminer that opened at Yeshiva University Museum in 2011, the first to focus long-overdue attention on both established and emerging artists making these autobiographical comics.⁵⁸

Conclusion: Orthodox Comics, High and Low

Tabachnik's final chapter, "The Orthodox Graphic Novel," also illustrates one last issue that the stubborn divide between high and low in today's discourse about Jewish American comics presents to artists and scholars. Tabachnik is right that "the best graphic novels about Orthodoxy reinforce belief,"⁵⁹ and potentially his chapter offers a chance to uncover the contours and varieties of Orthodox belief in comic books produced by both mainstream American commercial publishers and independent Jewish publishers serving specifically Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox audiences. Instead, his examples of what such belief entails are narrowed down to just three works: Barry Deutsch's *Hereville: How Mirka Got Her Sword* (2012), Steve Sheinkin's *Rabbi Harvey* books (2006, 2008, 2010), and James Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing* (2003),

each marketed by its publishers under the category “graphic novel” and aimed at both Jewish and general audiences. What is occluded by such privileging of the graphic novel is a long-standing but marginalized canon of comics for young Orthodox-identified Jewish readers: Torah Umesorah’s *Best of Olomeinu Back Cover Stories* (*Series One: Part One*, 1970, and *Series Two: Part One*, 1971, both reprinted by Mahrwood Press), Leibel Estrin and Dovid Sears’s independently published *Mendy and the Golem* (1981–1983, revived in 2003 by Matt Brandstein), Joe Kubert’s *The Adventures of Yaakov and Isaac* (1984, also republished by Mahrwood Press), Al Wiesner’s self-published *Shaloman* (1988–2004), and Alan Oirich’s *Jewish Hero Corps* (2003). A number of these, and other recent additions to this canon, are also part of a transnational economy of comic books produced and published by American Israelis in Israel that are distributed by American Jewish publishers in the United States, thereby complicating the geographic meaning of a “Jewish American” comics.

The comic books and graphic novels published by Eric Mahr and his Mahrwood Press are significant examples of this economy and of the inventive combinations of ideology, ethnicity, and form found within them. *Shmuel HaNagid: Nagdila: A Tale of the Golden Age* (2005), *Rabbeinu Shmuel HaNagid: A Tale of the Golden Age 2* (2005), *Rambam: The Story of Rabbeinu Moshe Ben Maimon (Maimonides)* (2005), and *Rashi Hakadosh: A Light after the Dark Ages* (2007) combined rabbinic hagiography with aspects of the superhero genre and featured *haskamot*, letters of approbation by religious authorities attesting to their religious merit and educational worthiness. This made them not only religiously sanctioned Jewish books but also a new form of modern *hashkafa*, the traditional term for “perspective” that denotes a work’s Jewish historical and philosophical worldview and also is employed as a subject category describing ideologically driven types of popular Jewish writing. Consequently, a number of Orthodox-oriented Jewish American bookstores had to decide, for the first time, whether and where to place these books on their sales floors; most opted to incorporate them either wholly or as a subcategory in their children’s section. Hence the subject category “Orthodox Jewish American comic books” became possible and purchasable for a mass Jewish audience in the United States and Israel only recently, in the early 2000s.

These final examples reveal why comic books and graphic novels are especially resonant examples of the formal innovations and commercial changes that describe the history of Jewish American literature and its contemporary situation. More studies and discussions that take seriously juvenile-oriented comics from Jewish publishers such as Mahrwood and ArtScroll, or that expand the canon to include works like *Shabot 6000*, an Internet comic strip that

follows the adventures of an Orthodox robot, created by William Levin in 2004 (under the pseudonym Ben Baruch), will better enable critics and audiences to recognize the expanding representations and terms of Jewish American self-construction in this evolving medium. Mahrwood Press comics thus provide a fitting conclusion here, for they well illustrate the formal, social, cultural, and material contexts that need to be a part of any accounting not only of the meaning of Orthodox “belief” in comics, but also of what artists, scholars, and readers are talking about when they talk about the increasingly diverse and transnational canon of Jewish American comic books and graphic novels.

Notes

- 1 This essay contains parts of prior essays written by the author entitled “Drawing Contracts: Will Eisner’s Legacy,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 97:3 (Summer 2007): 463–484; “Contemporary American Jewish Comic Books: Abject Pasts, Heroic Futures,” in *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*, ed. Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 3–21; and “Innovation and Orthodox Comic Books: The Case of Mahrwood Press,” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 37:2 (Summer 2012): 131–156. Said prior material is included herein with the permissions of the University of Pennsylvania Press, <http://www.upenn.edu/pennpress>; Rutgers University Press, <http://rutgerspress.rutgers.edu>; and Oxford University Press, <https://global.oup.com/academic/?cc=us&lang=en&>.
- 2 Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 4.
- 3 Scott McCloud, *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2000), 66.
- 4 Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 21.
- 5 Ibid., 24. On the direct market system and cultural and formal ferment in U.S. comics see also Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 15–16.
- 6 Dean Franco, *Race, Rights, and Recognition: Jewish American Literature since 1969* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2012), 20.
- 7 Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 24.
- 8 Franco, *Race, Rights, and Recognition*, 10.
- 9 Will Eisner, “Getting the Last Laugh: My Life in Comics,” *New York Times Book Review* (January 14, 1990), 27.
- 10 Will Eisner, interview by Stefano Gorla, *Famiglia Cristiana* #38, September 23, 2001, <http://www.willeisner.com/shoptalk/shoptalk4.html>.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 The event that arguably dated that acknowledgment was the 1998 conference at the University of Massachusetts – Amherst convened in recognition of the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *A Contract with God*. It was sponsored by the departments

- of comparative literature, English, art history, and Judaic and Near Eastern studies in conjunction with the Words & Pictures Museum in Northampton, Massachusetts, and the Kitchen Sink Press.
- 13 Art Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 93.
 - 14 Ken Tucker, "Cats, Mice, and History: The Avant-Garde of the Comic Strip," *New York Times Book Review* (May 26, 1985).
 - 15 Joshua Brown, "Of Mice and Memory – *Maus*: A Survivor's Tale by Art Spiegelman," *Oral History Review* 16:1 (Spring 1988): 108.
 - 16 Ibid.
 - 17 Terrence Des Pres, "Holocaust *Laughter*?" in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 232.
 - 18 Stephen J. Whitfield, *American Space, Jewish Time: Essays in Modern Culture and Politics* (Armonk, NY, and London: North Castle Books, 1988, 1996), 49.
 - 19 Ibid., 63.
 - 20 Ibid., 50.
 - 21 Ibid., 58.
 - 22 Paul Buhle, "Of Mice and Menschen: Jewish Comics Come of Age," *Tikkun* 7:2 (March/April 1992): 9.
 - 23 Ibid.
 - 24 Ibid., 9–10.
 - 25 Michael Rothberg, "We Were Talking Jewish: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as 'Holocaust' Production," *Contemporary Literature* 35:4 (Winter 1994): 665.
 - 26 Ibid., 666.
 - 27 Ibid., 667.
 - 28 Ibid., 672.
 - 29 Ibid., 675–678.
 - 30 Ibid., 682.
 - 31 Ibid., 681.
 - 32 Ibid., 684–685.
 - 33 Helena Frenkil Schlam, "Contemporary Scribes: Jewish American Cartoonists," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 20:1 (2001): 112.
 - 34 Ibid., 95.
 - 35 Leah Finkelshteyn, "Thwak! To Our Enemies," *Hadassah Magazine* 84:10 (June/July 2003). http://www.hadassah.org/news/content/per_hadassah/archive/2003/03_JUN/art.htm.
 - 36 Arie Kaplan, "How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry. Part I: The Golden Age (1933–1955)," *Reform Judaism* 32:1 (Fall 2003). <http://www.ariekaplan.com/kingscomicspart1.htm>
 - 37 Tom Teicholz, "The Escapist: Jewish History Has Tradition of Escaping and Escapism," *Jewish Journal* (April 9, 2004). <http://www.jewishjournal.com/home/preview.php?id=12073>
 - 38 Finkelshteyn, "Thwak!"
 - 39 Teicholz, "The Escapist."
 - 40 Arie Kaplan, "Kings of Comics: How Jews Transformed the Comic Book Industry. Part III: The Bronze Age (1979–)," *Reform Judaism* 32:3 (Spring 2004): <http://www.ariekaplan.com/kingscomicspart3.htm>

- 41 Andrea Most, "Re-imagining the Jew's Body: From Self-Loathing to 'Grepts,'" in *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*, ed. Vincent Brook (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 20.
- 42 Lee Behlman, "The Escapist: Fantasy, Folklore, and the Pleasures of the Comic Book in Recent Jewish American Holocaust Fiction," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 22:3 (2004): 71.
- 43 Most, "Re-imagining the Jew's Body," 23.
- 44 Jeremy Dauber, "Comic Books, Tragic Stories: Will Eisner's American Jewish History," *AJS Review* 30:2 (November 2006): 277.
- 45 Most, "Re-imagining the Jew's Body," 27.
- 46 Laurence Roth, "Oppositional Culture and the 'New Jew' Brand: From Plotz to Heeb to Lost Tribe," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 25:4 (Summer 2007): 101.
- 47 Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*, 126.
- 48 Derek Parker Royal, "Introduction: Coloring America: Multi-Ethnic Engagements with Graphic Narrative," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 32:3 (2007): 14 and 16.
- 49 Arie Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (Dulles, VA: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 96.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 116.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 117.
- 52 Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman, ed., *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), xviii.
- 53 *Ibid.*, xiv.
- 54 *Ibid.*, ix.
- 55 Paul Buhle, *Jews and American Comics: An Illustrated History of an American Art Form* (New York and London: New Press, 2008), 12.
- 56 Stephen E. Tabachnik, *The Quest for Jewish Belief and Identity in the Graphic Novel* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014), 3–4.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 2 and 5.
- 58 The exhibit has recently and happily resulted in a book: Sarah Lightman, ed., *Graphic Details: Jewish Women's Confessional Comics in Essays and Interviews* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014).
- 59 Tabachnik, *The Quest*, 217.

Jewish American Popular Culture

STEPHEN J. WHITFIELD

What is Jewish American popular culture? The definition that offers the most hope of illumination is expansive. Whatever intellectual or artistic activity Jews have initiated in the United States in a vernacular form expresses that culture (or subculture). It need not bear any explicit traces of Judaism or ethnicity to be an expression of American Jewish culture. The Jews who have written graphic novels and comic books, the Jews who have composed popular songs or Broadway musicals, the Jews who have directed or written Hollywood movies need not have addressed directly the beliefs and experiences of the Jewish people to have contributed to its ideas and images.

One implication of this definition is that, from the perspective of the millennia that stretch back to the biblical era, Jewish American popular culture will not look especially Jewish. Those who have shaped it were not products of a ghetto or a shtetl and did not directly undergo the process of emancipation that was elsewhere a prelude to the promise of modernity. Jewish identity has been an accident of ancestry or a mandate for piety, a source of pride or a badge of shame, a sense of chosenness or a yearning for inclusion, an existential mystery or maybe nothing at all. But Jewish identity has been at most *partial*, and secular in accentuation; in the twentieth century, all Jewish communities would absorb – with varying levels of velocity – the powerful forces of assimilation. England's Jonathan Miller, for example, was a descendant of a long line of rabbis and Judaic scholars. He became an original (in both senses) member of the comedy troupe Beyond the Fringe, as well as a physician, and a director of plays and operas. In a British public school, Miller had once even coedited a humor magazine with another Jew (and another future physician), Oliver Sacks. "Not a Jew exactly" is how Miller has characterized himself. "Just Jew-ish. I don't go the whole hog."¹ Nor, one might add, did Franz Kafka. His fiction omits entirely the word "Jew," and yet his status among Jewish writers of the twentieth century has long been as secure as anyone's is (even if the canon no longer is, and even if his great subject was the condition of

insecurity). To exclude from consideration whatever does not portray Jews or whatever does not explore their religion blunts the effort to understand artists who created such works and would short-circuit the evaluation of Jewish American popular culture.

What justifies its scrutiny? The case must rest, ultimately, on the creativity of those who have contributed to Jewish American popular culture. The most talented among them have been innovative, doing what had not been done before, by honoring the monosyllabic modernist injunction of Ezra Pound: "Make it new!"² Because the freshness of their achievements has spawned admiration and emulation, their legacy can be a source of endless analysis and appreciation. But context affects text. Jewish popular artists have also enjoyed the advantage of operating within a society burdened with few aristocratic vestiges, making it easier to break the barriers that defined cultural niches in Europe. Formal subversiveness and democratic aspiration blur the lines of genre in the arts and of status in the society and therefore constitute the themes of this essay. They represent the best way to recognize American Jewish popular culture at its most dynamic and sublime.

It is a subset of the formlessness that has long marked the culture of the republic, the blend of spirit and matter, highbrow and lowbrow, the ethereal and the vulgar – signaled as early as Emerson's quip that Whitman represented a "remarkable mixture of the *Bhagvat-Geeta* and the *New York Herald*."³ In the United States, the boundaries that separated high culture from folk art or mass entertainment have been eroded, as artifacts have spilled over into divergent or new genres and styles. Categories and definitions imported from abroad have required revision, because Americans have made things up as they have gone along. The untrained have sometimes succeeded in cultural enterprises that elsewhere would have been untried. The sensation that the Russian-born Irving Berlin created with his first ubiquitous hit, "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (1911), cannot be exaggerated. But the song is not in ragtime. It is a march, and though Berlin was hailed as "The Ragtime King," he later admitted: "I never did find out what ragtime was."⁴ The most prolific and popular of twentieth century songwriters could neither read nor write music; no vocational counselor could have predicted or recommended such a career. When he remarried during the "Jazz Age," the *New York Times* misidentified him in its headline as a "Jazz Composer." Berlin actually hated jazz,⁵ and no entry on him appears in a comprehensive reference work such as Leonard Feather's *Encyclopedia of Jazz*.

Thus the Jew who personifies the creativity of American culture has often managed to swing both ways. No author-illustrator of children's books has been more honored than Maurice Sendak, the Brooklyn-born son of Polish

immigrants. His “American childhood [was] composed of disparate elements strangely concocted, a childhood colored with the memories – never lived by me – of *shtetl* life in Europe ... a conglomerate fantasy life perhaps of many first-generation children in America.” Yet Sendak also recalled “being bombarded with the full intoxicating gush of America in that convulsed decade called the thirties,” especially from the atelier of Walt Disney. Sendak would acknowledge the influence of William Blake as well as Disney, even as he felt compelled to write and draw out of personal obsessions rather than formulas. Books like *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), *In the Night Kitchen* (1970), and *Outside Over There* (1981) transformed a genre that rarely offered a full-time challenge to the most acute intelligences. Sendak endowed the field of children’s literature with an imaginative density and a powerful honesty that resemble what can be accomplished in more prestigious and exalted forms. *Outside Over There* was even marketed for adults as well as children. “I don’t write for children,” he once remarked. “I write. And somebody says, ‘That’s for children.’” The winner of the Hans Christian Andersen Medal and the Caldecott Medal nevertheless inspired British composers to transform both *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Outside Over There* into operas; for the latter Sendak designed the sets, costumes, and composed the libretto as well. He also designed the sets for productions of *The Magic Flute* and of Prokofiev’s *The Love for Three Oranges*.⁶

The single artifact that best exemplifies the mixed character of American Jewish popular culture is *Porgy and Bess* (1935). It is neither *milkhik* nor *fleyshik*, neither dairy nor meat. Thus the preeminent music reviewer Virgil Thomson dismissed *Porgy and Bess* at its premiere as an unsettling mingling “together of Israel [and] Africa,” marred by “gefiltefish orchestration.” He complained that George Gershwin did not know what an opera is.⁷ Teatro alla Scala would respectfully disagree: In 1954 *Porgy and Bess* became the first American opera to be performed there. Of course the composer himself labeled the work a “folk opera,” and the pianist Oscar Levant, putting a topspin on Thomson’s dismissal, called *Porgy and Bess* “a Jewish folk opera.”⁸ When Leonard Bernstein met Michael Tilson Thomas, the protégé who would become the future conductor of the San Francisco Symphony, they discovered a shared capacity to sing arias from *Porgy and Bess* – in Yiddish.⁹

Gershwin’s career displayed the desire to repudiate the limitations both of formal schooling (which ended in his early teens) and of Tin Pan Alley (which demanded crowd-pleasing hits). He started with popular tunes, like “Swanee” (1919). With lyrics by Irving Caesar, it was first belted out by Al Jolson and remained the composer’s single biggest song. Then came the triumph in

New York's Aeolian Hall of *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), with such luminaries as Jascha Heifetz, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and Fritz Kreisler in the audience, as jazz catapulted itself into the higher altitude and refined precincts of classical music. Gershwin finished his *Concerto in F* a year later. Yet the allure of the concert hall and the opera house worried MGM. Would he repudiate show business? Though he was writing a violin concerto, which Heifetz hoped would be his to introduce, Gershwin sent a reassuring telegram to a studio executive: "Rumors about highbrow music ridiculous. Stop. Am out to write hits."¹⁰ But a year later, Gershwin was dead, at the age of thirty-eight.

The arc of his career was somewhat reversed in the trajectory of Leonard Bernstein, who had composed a symphony before winning acclaim on Broadway. *West Side Story* (1957) pushed the envelope. He denied that it should be classified as an opera, but he also conjectured that "it's on its way to becoming one." On the Deutsche Grammophon version (1985), Bernstein conducted the complete score of *West Side Story* for the first time on a record, and he cast opera singers who sought to make convincing the musical aspirations within which the original Broadway production were only latent.¹¹ Educated at Harvard and at the Curtis School of Music, Bernstein was honed in serious music, becoming a composer of symphonies, ballet, and opera. He was the first important conductor to have been entirely American-trained as well as American-born, and it cannot have been coincidental that no one in American musical history moved so easily or so spectacularly into other genres. By 1953 he had become the first American to conduct at La Scala, but a year later he also wrote the score for *On the Waterfront*, which earned him an Oscar nomination. Bernstein was the only music director of the august New York Philharmonic to have worked in his youth on Tin Pan Alley, yclept Lenny Amber. (The surname in Yiddish is *bernshteyn*, which means "amber.")

Consider André Previn as a kind of *deutero*-Bernstein. While still a teenager, the Berlin-born Previn was already arranging film scores at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). He would eventually compose more than fifty film scores and would win four Oscars (including one for the adaptation of *Porgy and Bess*). Previn also became a jazz pianist adept enough to cut records of his own performances. The most gifted figures in Jewish American popular culture have tended to swing both ways, and Previn had also studied conducting under Pierre Monteux, whom he later succeeded at the podium of the London Symphony Orchestra. Somehow Previn found time to compose an opera, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1998), as well. In part because of his responsibilities as music director of both the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, one journalist described Previn's

conversational style as “a blend of English locutions, hipster slang, literary allusions and show biz familiarity.”¹² He managed to thrive in the recording studios of MGM, where something that the legendary producer Irving Thalberg once heard on a sound track so irritated him that he demanded to know what it was. Told that it was a minor chord, he immediately fired off an office memo to his music department: “No music in an MGM film is to contain a ‘minor chord.’”¹³

Broadway also obeyed its own rules, which have emphasized upbeat innocence and minimized the pain endemic to human existence. Musicals thus tend to be at the opposite end of the spectrum from say, *Endgame* (1957). In that play Samuel Beckett’s dialogue is characteristically succinct, as Hamm asks Clov what Nagg is doing. “He’s crying.” Hamm concludes: “Then he’s living.”¹⁴ Among the most admired of twentieth century poets, W. H. Auden discovered the rules of engagement when, however improbably, he was enlisted to provide the lyrics for *Man of La Mancha*, which Dale Wasserman wanted to adapt from his 1959 teleplay, *I, Don Quixote*. The Oxford-educated Auden was accustomed to collaborating with the likes of Igor Stravinsky and Christopher Isherwood, and Wasserman, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, had almost no formal schooling. Nor had he ever bothered to read the Cervantes novel. In the teleplay Wasserman had written, *Don Quixote* explains the mission of a knight as follows: “His duty” and “privilege” is “to dream the impossible dream. To fight the unbeatable foe.” These lines were so pithy that Wasserman assumed that a competent lyricist would use them to establish the Don’s credo; Auden missed their importance entirely. But the collaboration collapsed instead over a dispute about the ending of the musical. Auden, whose critical writings often cited Cervantes, insisted that “Don Quixote must repudiate his quest as he dies.” But Wasserman knew the affirmative lullaby of Broadway and challenged Auden: “Oh, no. In his final moments he reaffirms it.” “Quite impossible,” Auden replied. He was then fired, to be replaced by one Joe Darion. The musical for which Wasserman wrote the libretto went on to win a Tony for Best Musical in 1967; and without actually being based on *Don Quixote*, *Man of La Mancha* has been revived often enough to become one of the most popular musicals ever.¹⁵

Even though Jews have historically dominated Broadway musicals – in staging them, in financing them, in attending them – it remains a paradox that Jewish characters and topics were rare. Perhaps it is because, as one cultural historian conjectured, “the Jewishness of the musical theater creators was central to the popular culture they produced, even if it was not central to their lives.”¹⁶ That changed in 1964, when *Fiddler on the Roof* opened, starring a

rabbi's son, Zero Mostel, as Tevye. Before that, the Jews of Broadway generally sang and spoke (to borrow the phrase that reporters who cover national security agencies are obliged to use) "on condition of anonymity." When it closed in 1972, *Fiddler on the Roof* had not only run longer than any other musical, but had outlasted even the longest-running drama in the history of Broadway. Anyone wishing to stage *Fiddler on the Roof* must be licensed by Music Theatre International, which has reported that this adaptation of Sholem Aleichem has been consistently among the five most popular shows in the United States.¹⁷ But *Fiddler on the Roof* was *sui generis*, in that no other musical about Jews has ever remotely enjoyed its success.

The only exception, arguably, is *The Producers*, which Mel Brooks made polymorphic. It began as a 1968 film (initially entitled *Springtime for Hitler*) starring the ubiquitous Mostel, who had played in *The World of Sholem Aleichem* in the 1950s. As the Broadway producer Max Bialystock, a baffled Mostel rejects a script about a protagonist who wakes up to find himself transformed into a giant cockroach. With the help of his accountant, Leo Bloom (Gene Wilder), Bialystock finds a more suitable play to stage. Mostel had already played Leopold Bloom in the Off-Broadway production of *Ulysses in Nighttown* (1959), for which he won an Obie. Such in-jokes became more complicated when Brooks adapted the film into a 2001 Broadway musical *about* a Broadway musical (a "gay," neo-Nazi "romp"), that is, a musical *about* bad taste that is also *in* bad taste. *The Producers* musical won twelve Tony Awards. Or call it a *purimshpil*, with the world turned upside-down, spinning pell-Mell into manic, carnivalesque queasiness. Brooks also made a cinematic musical adapted from his Broadway production, and that version of *The Producers* opened in Germany in 2006. The reviewer for *Stern* magazine, Matthias Schmidt, reported that "people were applauding after the press screening. Some said there should have been more scenes from the *Springtime for Hitler* musical."¹⁸ Perhaps something got lost in translation.

Broadway's greatest and most fecund living figure, whose résumé began as the lyricist for *West Side Story*, is emblematic of the fluidity of cultural categories. Stephen Sondheim emerged largely out of the tradition of the musical. When he was fifteen, he submitted a musical he had just written to Oscar Hammerstein II, who pronounced it "terrible." But the librettist of *Show Boat* (1927), the Pulitzer Prize-winning *South Pacific* (1949), and other canonical works of Broadway then spent an afternoon showing Sondheim how to write lyrics and how to structure a musical. Sondheim went on, of course, to write music as well as lyrics and studied composition formally with Milton Babbitt after graduating as a music major at Williams College. He

won eight Tony Awards (more than any other composer) and eight Grammy Awards, as well as a Pulitzer Prize, for a prodigious variety of works, drawing upon Japanese music, the waltz, even pointillist painting. *Sweeney Todd* (1979) has been staged at the New York City Opera; *Follies* (1971) has been produced in a concert version at Lincoln Center, played by the New York Philharmonic. Though Sondheim has preferred “to write in dark colors about gut feelings,” he could echo the bordello madam who sings the song he wrote for the film, *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (1976), “I Never Do Anything Twice.” His favorite American musical (if that is what it is) is *Porgy and Bess*. And for all his debts to the Broadway musical (expressed most poignantly in *Follies*), Sondheim has acknowledged that he would rather listen to classical music, preferring Ravel and Rachmaninoff.¹⁹

Though Sondheim’s songs are flawless, Barbra Streisand asked him to rewrite three of them for her 1985 *The Broadway Album* (including “Send in the Clowns,” which took him only an evening to write anyway). *The Broadway Album* thus exemplified the definition of chutzpah. And even though Streisand cannot read music, she has been for much of her career the most popular female vocalist in American history. No female recording artist has sold more top-ten albums – which is not exactly what might have been predicted when she delivered her first public performance at the Orthodox girls’ yeshiva that she attended in Brooklyn. Streisand has also admitted that she “really can’t stand listening to pop music, though I know I should. Most of the time, I don’t listen to any music. When I do, it’s classical. My favorite piece is Mahler’s [unfinished] Tenth Symphony, and I also love Bartók’s Second Violin Concerto and Maria Callas singing Puccini.”²⁰ Streisand also forced lexicographers to add to the entry on chutzpah by cutting a classical album, in which she learned lieder by listening to their recorded versions. *Classical Barbra* (1976) impressed the pianist Glenn Gould. When he reviewed the album for *High Fidelity* magazine, Gould announced: “I’m a Streisand freak and make no bones about it. With the possible exception of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, no vocalist has brought me greater pleasure or more insight into the interpreter’s art. . . . The Streisand voice is one of the natural wonders of the age, an instrument of infinite diversity and timbral resource.”²¹ Her talent of course has been demonstrated beyond recordings, on stage and screen as well. One index of her versatility can be noted here: Streisand is among the very few artists to be able to put on a mantelpiece an Emmy, a Grammy, a Tony, and an Oscar.

The mingling of styles and levels, the blurring of lines, the uncertainty and instability of classification cannot be confined to music. Categorical elusiveness can also be detected in the visual arts. The Second Commandment

was once believed to be an inhibition, but that conjecture has long been discredited. The taboo seems not to have stunted the aspirations of Chagall and Modigliani, nor impoverished their graven images; and abstract expressionists such as Rothko, Gottlieb, and Newman were decisive in shifting the capital of contemporary art from Paris to New York. Seeing is believing, and in the United States Jews have devised visual languages that have altered popular culture.

Take Saul Bass. Before he came along the credits that introduced movies were perfunctory. But working in the 1950s and 1960s for such directors as Otto Preminger, Alfred Hitchcock, and Stanley Kubrick, Bass revolutionized the way that audiences could anticipate what was about to happen on the screen. He envisioned the opening frames of movies as clues for viewers, alerting them to the tone and emotional coloration as well as the narrative of what was to be projected. Bass could convert the credits into minimovies of their own (which were sometimes as memorable as what followed). The director John Frankenheimer called Bass “an Artist with a capital A.” Innovations in twentieth century painting undoubtedly influenced him to enlarge the boundaries of graphic design. The truncated limbs, the block anatomical forms that Bass used for *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) or *Exodus* (1960) owed something to cubist works like Picasso’s *Three Musicians*. But Bass could not be confined to the title sequences. As a visual consultant he also devised the most startling editing sequence in the history of the medium, the quick-cut shower scene in *Psycho* (1960), which Bass laid out for Hitchcock.²²

To exit a darkened movie house is to walk into a landscape that the work of another innovative graphic designer, Paul Rand, permeated. Perhaps more than anyone else, he established the iconography of modern corporate culture, blurring the line between “commerce” and “art” that once divided the bohemian neighborhoods of Montmartre and Greenwich Village from, say, Rand’s clients (IBM, Westinghouse, UPS, ABC, Apple). Born in Brooklyn as Peretz Rosenbaum, he designed not only corporate logos but also book jackets and advertisements – and served as a conduit for Russian constructivism and Weimar Bauhaus in American commercial art. In 1938, when Rand was only twenty-four, the nation’s leading graphic arts magazine was already praising him as “unhampered by traditions,” such as a proclivity for ornament. Eight years later, when the avant-garde *Direction* magazine put out its summer fiction issue, the cover that Rand designed showed a large D, which enclosed a gravestone marker – a cross, on which was hung a Wehrmacht helmet. That D-Day illustration conveyed both the certainty of German defeat and the incalculable sacrifice that was required to achieve that end.²³

Comic strips emerged from the demotic sectors of mass journalism and publishing, which aimed neither for prestige nor for durability. The scorn that defenders of such work have sought to counter has nevertheless been somewhat exaggerated. At midcentury a serious student of popular culture such as Robert Warshow of *Commentary* argued for the value of comics, and Vladimir Nabokov not only admired some comic strips but folded them into the intricacies of his own fiction.²⁴ John Steinbeck, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist who would win a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962, was insisting that Al Capp “may very possibly be the best writer in the world today.”²⁵ (When that claim was advanced, Hemingway, Faulkner, Mann, Beckett, and Eliot were very much around – but never mind.)

What is incontrovertible is that Al Capp (*né* Alfred Caplin) was once inescapable. *Li'l Abner*, which he created and drew, ran for forty-three years (1934–1977) and reached a maximum of more than ninety million readers of nine hundred newspapers throughout the world. He concocted the mock-festival called Sadie Hawkins Days (dances to which women could invite men), and he coined expressions that have enlivened American slang, including “hogwash,” “double whammy,” and “going bananas.” In 1968, when Dogpatch USA opened in Arkansas, Walt Disney was the only other cartoonist to have inaugurated a theme park. Few artists were more enterprising than Capp, whose comic strip spawned toys and advertisements, a Broadway musical, two Hollywood movies, and television shows. He imagined a creature that supplied almost all material needs, “the shmoo,” that in one year grossed an astonishing \$25 million in merchandising.²⁶ Capp, the grandson of a rabbi, also provided “intellectual pleasure” that is very rare for genre and, according to John Updike, “worked on the edge of what was possible in a lowbrow art form.”²⁷ Jules Feiffer became a far more sophisticated, psychologically astute cartoonist than Capp, whose right-wing politics he despised. But Feiffer acknowledged Capp as one of the greatest influences upon him.²⁸

The impact of comic books has not been limited to the children who were the intended readership. Schlock could also inspire some Jewish artists to make it new. One imaginative line went straight into pop art, as in the 1963 paintings of Roy Lichtenstein (*Whaam!*, *Drowning Girl*). Another line led to a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000). Chabon acknowledged a “deep debt I owe in this and everything else I've written to the work of the late Jack Kirby, the King of Comics,”²⁹ born Jacob Kurtzberg, the cocreator of Captain America and the X-Men and other characters. Some cartoonists also revealed a cultural ambitiousness all their

own. In 1992 Art Spiegelman became the first graphic novelist to win a Pulitzer Prize, for *Maus* (1986, 1991). In 1940 Will Eisner started with what he called “an illustrated novel,” *The Spirit*, about a masked crime fighter whom young fans including Spiegelman, Jules Feiffer, and John Updike cherished.³⁰ But Eisner moved on to widely admired graphic novels, culminating with a 2005 historical account of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the anti-Semitic forgery that is invoked in article 32 of the Hamas Charter. So boldly had Eisner burst the restrictions of the “funnies” that *The Plot*, which, alas, lacks one, brandished an introduction by Europe’s most accomplished intellectual, Umberto Eco. The *Protocols* had first appeared in book form exactly one murderous century earlier; that may be why Eco called the last of Eisner’s graphic novels “not [a] comic book but [a] tragic book.”³¹

If the case for the defiance and rearrangement of cultural categories had to depend upon one artist, the defense could rest by citing Saul Steinberg. He was, according to the critic Harold Rosenberg, “a frontiersman of genres, an artist who cannot be confined to a category. . . . One may think of Steinberg as a kind of writer, though there is only one of his kind.” In presenting his eerie modern parables of urban civilization and its discontents, “Steinberg’s compositions cross the borders between art and caricature, illustration, children’s art, *art brut*, satire, while conveying reminiscences of styles from Greek and Oriental to Cubist and Constructivist.” Rosenberg concluded that the cartoonist “tantalizes those who wish to separate high art from the mass media.”³² Steinberg’s work is remarkably varied, alluding to varied styles, and yet it is immediately recognizable as uniquely his. The artist himself also wondered how he ought to classify himself, sometimes calling himself “a journalist,” at other times “a writer who draws,” elsewhere (and least helpfully) a sort of “novelist.” The result is an anomaly, in which “a Steinberg” is, in one critic’s estimation, “virtually a genre in itself.”³³ The poet Charles Simic called Steinberg “one of the most original artists of the last century,” and of course not merely a cartoonist, but “a comic philosopher.” The chief art critic of the *New York Times*, Hilton Kramer, considered categories like “high-brow illustrator,” “metaphysical cartoonist,” and “novelist-draftsman-journalist-satirist,” before abandoning the oxymoronic labels.³⁴ Steinberg had no antecedents or epigone; he evidently had only admirers.

Kramer once noticed that even the public at a Steinberg exhibition reacts differently from the visitors who look at other works in art museums or galleries. Such an audience “does not *look* as much as it *reads*. It also smiles a lot,” Kramer wrote. “A Steinberg exhibition arches the back and concentrates the mind. It is an intellectual puzzle as well as a visual entertainment.

It abounds in ideas.”³⁵ He once filled four pages of the *New Yorker* with garlands of hand-drawn question marks. Perhaps that is why E. H. Gombrich once claimed that “there is perhaps no artist alive who knows more about the philosophy of representation than this humorist.”³⁶ No wonder then that Steinberg once claimed to regard drawing as “a way of reasoning on paper.”³⁷ He drew because he doubted that he could write – at least not in the languages of his childhood (Romanian, French, Yiddish), nor did he ever feel comfortable enough in his new tongue.³⁸

Displacement and disorientation were among Steinberg’s recurrent themes. The first nineteen years of his life were spent in what he dismissed as a “sewer” of a country; Romania did not get around to emancipating its Jews formally until 1923 (even after Russia did). In Bucharest, he later joked, “even dogs gazed at us reproachfully.” His was a life of exile. He studied in Milan and escaped the Holocaust by reaching Lisbon, then the Dominican Republic. In 1941, when he arrived in the United States, he bore a “slightly fake” passport marked with his own rubber stamp.³⁹ Steinberg was far luckier than those whom Jakov Lind described in the first line of his 1964 novella, *Soul of Wood*: “Those who had no papers entitling them to live lined up to die.”⁴⁰ Steinberg loved making up imaginary, elaborate government documents that meant nothing; he was a connoisseur of fictitious certificates. His economical lines sometimes morphed, he wrote, into “fine flourishes that can’t be deciphered, official stamps no one can read.”⁴¹

Though Steinberg professed to love the land that gave him refuge, something enigmatic hovers over his portrayals of America. To be sure, he relished the vernacular features of the artificial landscape – the kitsch of the automobile grilles, the jukeboxes, the diners. But he also sensed the sinister, the creepy emptiness that in his homeland the Iron Guard and elsewhere other totalitarian movements had promised to fill. The expatriate tried to figure out a quirky visual lexicon to illuminate political phrases that had become clichés, like “ship of state” and “pursuit of happiness.” Steinberg made himself into an anti-Disney, with urban streets patrolled by grim cops; frightening and freakish youths, wearing boots made for walking over you and your civilized, refined, aging kind. The face of Mickey Mouse, he once remarked, lacks “character or age; for me it represents the junk-food people, the TV children” whose “experiences, inferior as they are,” are “handed to them on a plate.” What he called a “sort of Mickey Mouse brutality that I see in the streets” is what darkened much of his final work.⁴² He would not have fully endorsed the sentiment that the graphic artist Milton Glaser conveyed in his 1977 rebus: “I ♥ New York.”

Steinberg's output was prodigious. He supplied the inside pages of the *New Yorker* with 1,150 cartoons and illustrations, as well as 89 covers – one of which became so famous that he came to resent an identity as “the guy who did the poster.” It was formally called “View of the World from Ninth Avenue” (March 29, 1976); the cosmopolite seemed to be mocking (or at least pointing out) the provincialism of his fellow New Yorkers. Steinberg managed to scale the barriers that divided commercial art – he designed Hallmark cards and calendars and Neiman-Marcus catalogs – from the Whitney Museum of American Art, where his idiosyncratic work was exhibited.⁴³

Popular entertainment was an evacuation route from the modesty of the conditions in which many Jews grew up. Examples are legion. Mordecai Moses Donen owned a dress shop in Columbia, South Carolina, where his son, Stanley, was subjected in public school to the sorts of anti-Semitic jibes that lingered a lifetime. One remedy was the sanctuary of a local movie house. He was nine years old when he watched Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire dance together in *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), but only in retrospect did Stanley Donen realize that this film “changed my life.” It would be spent mostly in Hollywood, where he codirected *On the Town* (1949), based on a score by Leonard Bernstein, and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). In 1998 Donen won an Oscar for lifetime achievement.⁴⁴ Growing up in another remote hamlet, Robert Zimmerman found in the blues as well as in country music and folk music an early escape from the limitations of Hibbing, Minnesota. A bar mitzvah gift changed his life too – a portable radio powerful enough to pick up stations as far away as Nashville and Shreveport. Often until two or three o'clock in the morning, he would be transfixed, listening to Hank Williams, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Johnny Ray. Summers were spent at Camp Herzl in northern Wisconsin. But late evenings were spent absorbing the melodies and mysteries that – as songwriter-singer Bob Dylan – he would incorporate, honor, and transcend.⁴⁵

Call such childhood experiences an introduction into the dream life. Or call the allure of a nation's vernacular culture integral to the process of Americanization. As early as 1905, Theodore Roosevelt grasped the speed with which acculturation was occurring among Jews, “who have come to our shores within the last twenty-five years as refugees reduced to the direst straits of penury and misery.” The president noted that “in a few years, men and women hitherto utterly unaccustomed to any of the privileges of citizenship have moved mightily upward toward the standard of loyal, self-respecting American citizenship,” contributing their “full share in the material, social and moral advancement of the nation.”⁴⁶ Of course not everyone was pleased.

As early as 1896, the historian Henry Adams, a grandson and great-grandson of presidents, complained that “we are in the hands of the Jews. They can do what they please with our values.” Nearly two decades later, he had not mastered his sense of dislocation: “The atmosphere really has become a Jew atmosphere. . . . It isolates me. I do not know the language, and my friends are as ignorant as I.” Indeed many of his fellow Americans “seem to be more Jewish every day.”⁴⁷

By the dawn of the twentieth century, they were indeed becoming more Jewish, because the mass migration from Eastern Europe coincided with the birth of mass entertainment. Thanks to the momentum of technical advances and inventiveness, popular culture was replacing folk culture and was eroding regional enclaves. Jews were conspicuous among the catalysts of this transformation, and as businessmen they quickly came to dominate the apparatus of popular entertainment that was permeating American life. They surmounted whatever commercial barriers had been erected; they seized opportunities that no one else had noticed. Theirs was a story of ethnic and economic triumph, though objections must be recorded here. “Artistically . . . the Jew is a menace,” the apprentice dramatist Thomas Wolfe wrote during the Jazz Age. The Jew “controls the theatre in New York.” Wolfe saw little hope of improvement because the audience consists so strikingly of “members of his race.” What they welcomed on the stage, what they craved, is “the sensual, the thinly veiled, or the materialistic.” The novelist conceded that Jewish writers did not invent tales of upward mobility. The United States makes social ascent idiomatic, and Americans have prided themselves on the opportunity their society has encouraged to rise from rags to riches – or at least to respectability. But Wolfe discerned “the strong zest [that] the Semitic audience has for this type of play.”⁴⁸ Its moral seemed to corroborate what Jews were experiencing in American society, which was the prospect within reach of material comfort and success – and in extreme cases, spectacular wealth.

The names of the new millionaires, Wolfe wrote, were “strange and forbidding”: Kahn, Gimbel, Fleischmann. Whether in the great department stores or in high finance, gentiles “are hopelessly outmatched at the beginning of any such rivalry with people to whom our greatest subtleties of trade seem banal; who have inherited all the shrewdness of five thousand years of trading.”⁴⁹ Wolfe did not mention that the fortune the Fleischmann family made selling yeast was partly invested in a start-up magazine, the *New Yorker*, destined to become an ornament of American culture. Nestled inside his anti-Semitism was a genuine insight into the sources of Jewish economic achievement. Renaissance Venice and Reformation Augsburg

and early modern London may have created the foundations of the capitalist system, a set of economic arrangements that were not intended to benefit the Jew. But they happen to “have created a commercial life whose conditions fit him like a glove.”⁵⁰

Among those who proved Wolfe’s point was Adolph Zukor, the founder of Paramount Pictures, who entitled his 1953 autobiography *The Public Is Never Wrong*. That was the credo of a commercial civilization. Irving Berlin insisted that “the mob is always right,”⁵¹ and appealing to its taste, and making money from that instinct, are what have driven popular culture. It cannot be disentangled from pecuniary motives, and those who were attracted to a life in the mass arts were generally less interested in reading reviews and criticism than in perusing royalty checks. Who can blame James Weldon Johnson, who cowrote “the Negro National Anthem,” “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” (1900), for realizing that the royalties he could earn from a few songs could double his salary as the principal of a Negro public school in Jacksonville, Florida?⁵² The lyricist Sammy Cahn, who translated “Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen” from the Yiddish into a huge hit for the Andrews Sisters and later wrote some of Frank Sinatra’s most popular songs, was once asked which came first – the melodies or the words. “The money!” was his emphatic reply. After a whole string of remarkable films, including the American Film Institute’s greatest comedy of all time, *Some Like It Hot* (1959), Billy Wilder was asked whether he would have made movies were it not for the financial rewards. He responded, “What do you think, I’m a sucker?”⁵³ Leave it to the *feinschmeckers* to exalt what Steinberg dismissed as “the nobility of art.”⁵⁴ And yet the glory of Jewish American popular culture could be called alchemy – the mystifying process by which eagerness to please the masses could be transformed into aesthetic delight and enduring pleasure.

Notes

The help of Sylvia Fuks-Fried is appreciated.

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Jewish Humor in America

MARC CAPLAN

When Jewish immigrants began arriving in America en masse from Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, they encountered many disruptive and transformative elements of everyday life; among these new features of the American scene, one characteristic was the pervasiveness of popular culture and entertainment, both in theaters and in recorded media such as sound recordings and film reels.¹ As with other ethnic groups, a commercial market for Jewish popular music – instrumental (klezmer), liturgical (cantorial), and popular song – had been established by the second decade of the twentieth century. An audience for such recordings in Eastern Europe also took root around the same time, along with actual ethnographic research into Yiddish folk song in its native habitat, but as with other new cultural productions such as newspapers, vaudeville, and even avant-garde poetry, popular culture in Yiddish in Eastern Europe had already begun to follow the lead of its American counterparts prior to the First World War. Among the genres of popular recordings to appear primarily in the United States during this era were Yiddish comedy skits timed to fit into the brief recorded formats of the day.

Relatively little information exists about these recordings, or the performers making them, precisely because they were considered to be disposable commodities aimed at a marginal audience. They nonetheless dramatize some of the significant cultural negotiations among languages, cultural codes, generational conflicts, and gender relations affecting Jews as much as other immigrants to the United States. For example, a 1924 recording by Gus Goldstein, *Der Mesader kedushin*² (roughly, “the wedding officiant”), presents a parodic immigrant marriage ceremony, divided into two parts: an opening section that mocks the traditional liturgy, and a second section that – similar to other of Goldstein’s recordings³ – offers a potpourri of dance melodies to poke fun at the intraethnic differences among Romanian, Lithuanian, and his own evidently Galician (judging from his spoken Yiddish) places of origin.

Beginning with the wedding march from *Lohengrin*, a fairly explicit indication of an American setting rather than a traditional European one, Goldstein launches into the spoken parody by confusing the wedding liturgy with the Mourner's kaddish; when asked whether he thinks the bride and groom are corpses he replies that getting married is as good as being dead. As he continues to confuse the wording of the blessings, referring at one point to the espoused as a *klyatshe* [old nag] before correcting himself to say *kale* [bride], one of the mothers-in-law exclaims, "Vey iz mir, bist' an expressman un nisht keyn reverend?" [Woe is me: are you an Expressman or a reverend?] The rapidity of Goldstein's delivery here both seems to be a consequence of the technical limitations of recording technology, to fit as many jokes as possible into a three-minute format, and harkens back stylistically to a traditional source for Goldstein's routine, the *badkhn*, or Jewish wedding jester.⁴ This juxtaposition of a traditional comic role with the technological specifications of popular entertainment thus locates the recording between historical temporalities as much as the use of English words such as "expressman" and "reverend" signify similar tensions linguistically. The dramatic highlight of the recording that reconciles these contradictions, however, occurs when the groom repeats the ritual wedding vows "Harey at mikedeyshes li" [Behold, you are consecrated to me] to the tune of "Yankee Doodle," rhyming the Hebrew verse with "You son of a gun, you belong to me"!

Given that marriage is the classic resolution for comic drama – tying up the narrative threads of the scenario with a presumably harmonious and happy ending, restoring social order, and promising biological as well as cultural continuity – Goldstein's use of the wedding premise provides a means of reconciling the generational gap between immigrant parents and assimilating children. Moreover, the marriage setting provides a familiar means of integrating the comic routine with a musical accompaniment, since klezmer music in Europe was conventionally celebratory music, reserved in particular for weddings. The incongruities of the resolution in Goldstein's recording nonetheless articulate the social incompatibilities separating parents from children and Europe from the United States, but also provide the material for the most comic moments in the skit. By connecting the wedding liturgy to the tune of "Yankee Doodle," rhyming liturgical Hebrew with the new English vernacular, this example of Yiddish American comedy underscores the discontinuities its marriage setting would otherwise attempt to render inconspicuous, while indicating, however unconsciously, that in the juxtaposition of Hebrew with English, the Yiddish language that facilitates the encounter of sacred and vernacular discourses is what will grow fainter and

more vestigial as American Jews grow more distant from the immigrant generation.

At the same time that Goldstein and his compatriots were dramatizing the anomalies of American life in Yiddish, from an immigrant perspective still functioning under the expectations of European Jewish culture, a parallel market for comic recordings about Jews among other ethnic groups had also taken root in Anglophone America. Now referred to colloquially as “Jewface,” the title of a retrospective compilation that called these recordings to public attention after nearly a century of obscurity,⁵ this vein of humor extends nineteenth century traditions of American minstrelsy – “Jewish” + “Blackface” = “Jewface” – to the same extent that recordings like *Der Mesader kedushin* recycle intraethnic Jewish stereotypes that had circulated in Eastern Europe. Jewface recordings reduce Hebrew vocabulary to a nonsensical minimum,⁶ and all that remains of Yiddish is a stereotypically Jewish accent that transforms the language from the European perception of a defective German into an American perception of a defective English. Thus one of the most prolific Jewish “dialect” comedians of the era, Monroe Silver, opens the *Jewface* compilation with the 1920 recording “Pittsburgh, PA,” a song about a party, whose guests all have names ending in the syllable “-berg” (Greenberg, Romberg, Blomberg, Bromberg, Bomberg, Hamburg, Goldberg, Ginsberg, Lindberg, Tinberg, Bimberg, Weissberg, Iceberg, etc). Although his pronunciation actually distorts the Yiddish pronunciation of the suffix in order to rhyme it with Pittsburgh [“Pittsboyg”], the effect of this rhyme is to transform Pittsburgh itself into a Jewish space.

Similar to the structure of Goldstein’s Yiddish performance, where singing the wedding vows to the tune of “Yankee Doodle” functions as a musical bridge and a temporal hyphen, at once connecting the two components of the recording and sundering the generations evoked in the skit, Silver’s song features a spoken break in the middle:⁷

Oh, listen, people, I forgot to tell you it was a golden anniversary. Steinberg bought a gold watch and tried to sell it to the host. Greenberg said he couldn’t come without bringing something gold so he brought his friend Goldberg. Mrs. Lindberg brought a goldenrod. Mr. Hamburg brought a bowl of goldfish. Mr. Ginsberg went up to the hostess and said, “here is a little present for you, that will be very useful” and he handed her a box of Gold Dust. . . powder. Mr. & Mrs. Weissberg, who gave the golden anniversary party, was not married 50 years, they were only married five years – but they needed the gold.

Using the same sonic associations that connect each of the party's guests via the "-berg" suffix, rendering their Jewish names essentially interchangeable, the comic patter around the word "gold" reiterates an association of Jews with money, even as the object of this humor is clearly to portray the Jews at the party as impoverished, endowed with more verbal cleverness than financial wherewithal. The chronological compression of a "golden anniversary" from fifty years to five furthermore suggests that no matter how young the Weissbergs would have still been after only five years of marriage, the Jewish accent and old country ways one is meant to ascribe to them will age them by a half-century; the chronological age of the characters becomes inaudible and irrelevant as long as the temporality of European immigration as well as its cultural and linguistic markers signify an earlier, increasingly remote era.

The purpose of Jewface recordings generally seems to enable Jewish listeners to demonstrate to themselves how far they have come from the greenhorn antics and broken English of newly arrived immigrants – at a historical moment when such immigrants were still arriving in the United States by the thousands every day – while fixing the greenhorn stereotype as an absurd and impotent caricature for the amusement of non-Jews. Such stereotypes, in tandem with the new commodities that promote them, suggest progress and upward mobility for Jews rejecting and projecting this image onto more newly arrived Jewish immigrants, but also the indelible fixity of these stereotypes for non-Jews who would wish to think that these stereotypes betray an essential feature of Jewish character, culture, and language. The psychological uses of this burlesque are simultaneously to castigate, indulge, and transfer the ambivalent feelings of the performer onto the body, language, and behavior of the Other. Despite what seems to be, from a contemporary perspective, an obvious racism and hostility (or, rather, several racisms and hostilities) motivating the burlesque of Jews along with African Americans, as well as other immigrants and minorities, minstrelsy remains a complicated performance tradition because although it insists in rhetorical terms on the absolute, immutable otherness of the object impersonated, it also betrays in the performance of difference the ultimate proximity, familiarity, and resemblance of that object to the performer of the impersonation. By preserving an image of the Jew as Other, Jewface gives both Jews and anti-Semites something to laugh about, and this formula in turn creates a newly American mode of representation for Jewish culture.

The general diminishment of most overtly derogatory ethnic humor that accompanied the gradual nationalization of popular entertainment networks such as cinema and radio during the 1920s,⁸ as well as the

legislated restriction of Jewish immigration, effectively signaled the end of both Jewface minstrelsy and Yiddish-language vaudeville in the United States. By the end of the 1930s, the majority of American Jews were, for the first time in history, born in the United States, and the eager young Jews whom Gus Goldstein had portrayed singing their wedding vows to the tune of “Yankee Doodle” would soon celebrate their actual golden anniversaries rather than the fools’ gold anniversary of Monroe Silver’s parody. Aside from increasingly struggling Yiddish theater venues on Second Avenue in New York City, what remains audible of Yiddish comedy in American popular culture is precisely the vestigial vocabulary that for the remainder of the twentieth century would continue to signify Jewishness for a broader audience. No longer Jewface, this “Yinglish” entertainment represents the life of American-born Jews whose familiarity with English-language popular culture matches and displaces their memory of Yiddish and traditional Jewish culture.⁹

The most representative performer of Yinglish music is the comedian, clarinetist, and bandleader Mickey Katz (1909–1985). Among the best examples of Katz’s work is “Duvid Crockett, King of Delancey Street” (1955), his parody of “Davey Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier” (1954). This recording is not only one of Katz’s best performances; it is also one of his most celebrated: Katz himself claimed in his autobiography that, by the imprecise reckoning of mid-1950s airplay, the song reached No. 2 on the national charts. More concretely, the record apparently sold approximately 200,000 copies and earned Katz a complimentary two-page article in *Time* magazine.¹⁰ Katz begins the song, singing the melody of the original in a “Jewish” accent:

Born in the wilds of Delancey Street
 Home of gefilte fish and kosher meat
 Handy *mit* a knife, oh *her zikh tsi (tsu)* [listen up!]
 He *‘flied* [plucked] him a chicken when he was only three.¹¹

This stanza distinguishes itself through the conjunction of parodic description, Yinglish – the English dialect spoken by the children of immigrants who understand Yiddish but have ceased to speak it regularly – and Jewish food terminology. Of these features, the most prominent characterization of the Lower East Side is Jewish food, gefilte fish and kosher meat. Indeed, food is often the centerpiece of Katz’s substitutions of Yiddish for English; food as a comic emblem of linguistic and therefore cultural instability had already been observable from the time of the great wave of Eastern European immigration at the turn of the century.¹²

The Yiddish linguist Uriel Weinreich (1926–1967) identifies the status of Yiddish for the children of immigrants as an “obsolescent” language. This concept in turn helps to characterize the use of Yiddish, particularly culinary vocabulary, in Katz’s celebratory parody. Weinreich writes, “The stylistic specialization of an obsolescent language and the association of it with intimate childhood experiences is conducive to the borrowing of its lexical elements into the younger people’s speech. . . . Particularly apt to be transferred are colorful idiomatic expressions, difficult to translate, with strong affective overtones, whether endearing, pejorative, or mildly obscene.”¹³ Obsolescent language most typically is the language of the kitchen, the bedroom, and the bathroom; in common with other immigrant languages in America, Yiddish survives among the grown-up children of immigrants as a jargon, typically, of food items and body parts, euphemisms, curses, and terms of affection. Distinct from other immigrant languages, however, just these vocabularies enter from Yiddish through Yinglish into a larger lexicon of American comedy and popular culture.

Weinreich’s linguistic insights suggest why Yinglish remains a source of intimacy and affection, but also physicality and embarrassment; the associations in an obsolescent vocabulary – or the memories of childhood in general – can move uneasily to more complicated, repressed connotations. Among these associations, it seems apparent in many of Katz’s performances that food terminology both substitutes for and calls to mind sexual innuendo. Far more explicit than “Duvid Crockett” in this connection are Katz’s lyrics to “She’ll Be Coming ‘round the Katzkills”:¹⁴

She’ll be coming from the butcher when she comes (x2)
 Oy, the butcher’s name is *Meysh un zi klaybt ba im dos fleysh* [she takes from him
 the meat]
 She’ll be coming from the butcher when she comes.

She’ll be coming from the *mikve* [ritual bath] when she comes (x2)
 They will kosher her *mit kheyshek* [with great desire], *di milkhike un di fleyshike*
 [the dairy with the meat]
 She’ll be coming from the *mikve* when she comes.

If food is typically confused with, or a substitute for, other types of desire, then the association in “Duvid Crockett” of Delancey Street with Jewish food indicates that the exogamous desire for marriage (in this version, to “a little *tsatskele* named Daisy-Freydl”) coincides with a nostalgic longing for home, for the Lower East Side neighborhood where a disproportionate percentage of Katz’s Jewish audience had lived. This desire is restimulated both by the

foods of the old neighborhood and by its language – a language understood and remembered, but no longer spoken. In this way, the performer encodes the conflict of identification for the children of Jewish immigrants, between the new “old home” of Lower Manhattan and the frontier of an uninflected American popular culture signified by the ballad of Davey Crockett that Katz parodies.

Indeed, the combination of “Davy Crockett’s” mainstream appeal – it was one of the most popular songs of the 1950s – and its nineteenth century theme would seem to make it translatable to a Jewish milieu only through parody. Nonetheless, by superimposing images of the Lower East Side onto a musical landscape of the American frontier, Katz succeeds in claiming for his own generation, the children of immigrants, the status of pioneers. In this sense, the journey undertaken by the children of immigrants, from the Lower East Side to the America outside New York, can be seen as heroic, as dangerous, as disorienting, as the journey their parents undertook from the Eastern European shtetl to the modern urban “shtetl” of downtown Manhattan. His parody thus deflates the Arcadian associations of the original song and ennobles the Jewish streets of Lower Manhattan, remaking them as both the point of origin for his generation and the point of contact for that generation’s engagement with American culture.

Musically, “Duvid Crockett” conveys its parodic intent by alternating between the original score and Katz’s characteristic “Judaizing” adaptations. For example, Katz begins the song with a chorus, singing in unaccented English, that performs the first line in the same major-key melody as the original ballad, then switches to the minor key at the end of the second line. As Mark Slobin explains, this tension between major and minor keys is one of the signal differences in Jewish American music between Eastern and Western European aesthetics: “A good deal of Russian, Ukrainian, Rumanian, and other folk music happens to be in minor,” Slobin writes, “while the bulk of Polish, Czech, Austrian, and other Central European music is in other modes, principally the major. The major clearly predominates in most of Western Europe. Not all Eastern songs are sad, nor all the Western melodies happy – the choice of mode is just one of the preferences that define style.”¹⁵ This essential contrast of major and minor keys is the fundamental musical indication of Katz’s “hyphenation” between Jewish and American cultures.

Minor keys, far from a Western association with melancholy and resignation, almost invariably signify in Katz’s parodies the transition into Yiddish lyrics and a Jewish frame of reference. Typically, an acceleration of tempo, or even a shift to a dance rhythm, accompanies this change in key, to emphasize

that what is transformed at this point in the performance is not mood, but mode – the sensibility becomes Jewish through the use of the music’s sonic materials. For example, in the final stanza of “Duvid Crockett,” Katz narrates what happens at Duvid’s honeymoon in Las Vegas:

He shot like a gambler, *eyner af der velt* [like a man of the world]
 Up came two sixes, *in d’r erd (dos) gelt* [to hell with the money]
 He felt very sad, that’s my opinion
 He would’ve said *kaddish* but he couldn’t find a *minyin* [prayer quorum].

After Duvid loses his money at the crap tables, when the music shifts to the minor key it conveys not sadness, but mockery; the proud honeymooner, *eyner af der velt*, must now return to Delancey Street, to an unassimilated Jewish environment signified by the choice of musical register as much as by dietary conventions or linguistic idiosyncrasy.

However emblematic Katz’s music is of the crossroads at which Jewish American culture found itself at the middle of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that it has receded into relative obscurity since then. The music parodies at which he excelled are by definition limited in appeal for only as long as the song being mocked remains memorable, and at the same time even the obsolescent Yiddish at the heart of his humor has been inaccessible for most non-Jews as well as subsequent generations for whom this terminology evoked few memories. His songs nonetheless represent the complexities of being Jewish in America during the great heyday of American comedy, when recognizably Jewish performers such as the Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, Sid Ceaser, and Gertrude Berg became representative figures for American comedy as a whole. Whereas performers such as Gus Goldstein and Mickey Katz created comedy addressed primarily to other Jews, and Monroe Silver along with other Jewface performers, whether Jewish or not, performed Jewish characters, often along with other stereotyped ethnicities, the Jewish component of these latter comedians’ work is less overt, though accordingly more significant of the role that Jews played in shaping American popular culture.

Perhaps the best representation of the way Jewish humor exerted a distinctive, if subterranean, presence in American culture, is, paradoxically, neither performed by a Jew nor specifically comic: Cab Calloway’s jazz standard “*Utt-a-zay* (The Tailor’s Song),” recorded in 1939. Although the song was written by the Jewish songwriter Buck Ram (1907–1991), in common with jazz music generally, the performance, rather than the words or the music, is what is memorable about this recording. Describing the memory of a melody sung by a Jewish tailor, with the Yiddish catchphrase *Ot azoy* (“Just like that”), Calloway

enacts the melody with his characteristic scat singing as an intersection of cantorial chanting and modal blues. In the second of these interpolations – at the middle of the song – Calloway reaches the lowest notes of his register, singing, “Oh, dig-dig-dig, d’you chop-chop-chop, are you hip to this jive that I’m laying to you?”¹⁶ Just as musically the performance is distinct as a superimposition of Jewish and African American singing styles, at this moment in the song, the foreignness of Jewish American speech, *ot azoy*, blends with the “foreignness” of the current urban African American argot, “are you hip to this jive?” The music then propels forward with a vamp from the horn section of Calloway’s orchestra that anticipates the rapid tempo and abrupt harmonic progressions of bebop; it may be noted that among the trumpeters playing with Calloway at the time was Dizzy Gillespie, one of the originators of bebop. This juxtaposition of Yiddish, jazz slang, and avant-garde experimentation signifies the status of a Jewish American style located at the crossroads between both ethnic and aesthetic outsiders and mainstream acceptance.

This liminal, heteroglossic, polyrhythmic, and polytonal position would remain the privileged space for Jewish humor during the second half of the twentieth century. Although comedy at this point would become recognized as one of the primary cultural discourses – perhaps *the* primary cultural discourse – dominated by American Jews, the paradox of Jewish American humor has been to perform a sense of ethnic and linguistic difference long after such distinctions had ceased to serve as a limitation to Jewish social mobility or participation in the wider culture. The comedian who most vociferously maintained the subversive stance of Jewish humor, and in turn exerted the greatest influence on subsequent performers and writers, was Lenny Bruce (1925–1966). Together with figures such as Shelley Berman (b. 1925), Mort Sahl (b. 1927), and Bob Newhart (b. 1929), Bruce can be considered among the first stand-up comedians in the current sense of the term; with the exception of Newhart, each of these performers is Jewish. Previously comedians had typically performed a recitation of unrelated jokes, often written by others, in a cabaret context between other types of brief performance. Thus the most successful early comedians on television, particularly Milton Berle (1908–2002) and Sid Caesar (1922–2014), appeared on variety shows that included scripted comic scenes and musical performances in addition to comic monologues. The stand-up comedian represents a different style and a different cultural temporality: Instead of unrelated jokes, these performers construct a narrative derived from autobiographical (or pseudoautobiographical) confessions, observations on current events (and, in the case of Sahl and Bruce, political commentary), as well as free associations and ad-libs.

Of the stand-up comedians who came of age during the 1950s, less than a half-decade after Berle or Caesar, yet as different from them as contemporaneous jazz music was from Tin Pan Alley songs composed a half-century earlier, Bruce was the most famous, the most controversial, and the most influential. He was not, however, the funniest, and whether this was because the topicality of his material ensured its brief shelf life, or because his resistance to editing his thoughts on stage resulted in as many comic misfires as successes, is ultimately irrelevant to his significance, which endures more as a symbol of comedy's potential to upset conventional thinking and create new avenues of self-expression than as a crafter or dispenser of jokes.¹⁷ Indeed, it is perhaps better to consider Bruce a "philosopher of comedy," reflecting in his performances on the nature and purpose of comedy, than a conventional on-stage funny man. In this regard, his definitive work can be found on the recording of a concert he delivered in February 1961 at Carnegie Hall, where he discusses the linguistic sources of his humor and the limitations they exert on his appeal:

I just come from a different generation. And I started to think that the people I relate best to, since my language is completely larded with hip idiom, Yiddish idiom – so whether the word is either *dig*, *bread*, or *cool*, or Jewish words, *farbissn*, or completely erudite words like *euphemistic* or *anthropomorphic* – so then, it's [square intonation] *what's bread mean, what's schmuck mean* [repeated with accelerating rapidity] so these *whatsitmeans*, with the exception of, perhaps, that group over 45 that relates because of business to a younger group – I will lose them, because the most erudite guy, all I have to do is hit one word that will set him off – what does *bread* mean? What does *putz* mean? And then he just missed the whole joke. . . . So I started thinking that I am going to make it so that people between 20 and 40, that's my audience . . . and I will take on 50 Berles, 50 Mort Sahl's, 8 Shelley Bermans, and Bob Newhart *knafkos*,¹⁸ and I'll put them here, here, and there, and I'll cut anybody in that area. . . . So you know what I'm going to do, dig? I'm going to have a thing where nobody over 40 is going to be allowed to see me!¹⁹

In contrast to Monroe Silver, who had used a "Jewish" intonation to imply subliminally that Yiddish-speaking immigrants were prematurely old, Lenny Bruce, like Cab Calloway, equates Yiddish with jazz idiom to suggest that Yiddish speakers, as members of a linguistic counterculture, could be considered forever young!

Beyond his juxtaposition of jazz lingo with Yiddish, Bruce's primary thematic preoccupations are the social significance of profanity and sex; the intersection of the two can be surmised from the second half of his Carnegie Hall

concert, titled “Las Vegas Tits & Ass.” These topics were both the source of his greatest countercultural influence and the seeds of his undoing: Simply for incorporating this vocabulary and broaching these subjects in his routines, within five years of his Carnegie Hall triumph Bruce had been barred from entering England and prohibited from performing in Australia and was banned from nearly every nightclub in the United States. The strain of intensifying legal prosecution as well as his accelerating drug addiction forestalled the question of whether he would have to exclude himself from performances once he passed the age limit he had placed on his humor. As the sports columnist Dick Schapp wrote in *Playboy* magazine, “One last four-letter word for Lenny: Dead. At forty. *That’s* obscene.”²⁰ Despite the ignominy of his last years, and the extraordinary fact that a comedian in those days could face significant jail time merely for using vocabulary now commonplace on cable television, Bruce’s influence on subsequent comedians – the most demonstrable of whom were Richard Pryor, George Carlin, and the comedy duo Cheech (Marin) and (Tommy) Chong, none of whom is Jewish – is even greater than his own performances.

Among the many people writing and performing in Bruce’s spirit, no one generated comparable controversy, or reflected more significantly on the status of Jews in America in the 1960s, than Philip Roth (b. 1933) in his novel *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Structuring the novel as a psychoanalytical monologue, but explicitly taking cues from Bruce’s stand-up comedy, and if anything exceeding Bruce’s scatological and sexually prurient rhetoric, Roth crafts a literary language based on the two most identifiably Jewish discourses of the twentieth century, and the Jewishness of his protagonist could no more be overlooked than – and indeed drew from the same frames of reference as – a Lenny Bruce routine, or a Mickey Katz parody. *Portnoy*, fittingly, emerges at one of the most significant moments in Jewish American culture; set in the year 1966, but published in 1969, it stands on both sides of the transformative experience of the Israeli Six-Day War, an event ironically prefigured in the novel’s climax when Alexander Portnoy, the protagonist, flees the breakdown of his sexual and emotional life during a trip to Italy and Greece, both explicit emblems of European civilization, only to embark upon further erotic misadventures in the still “virginal” political landscape of a pre-1967 Israel.

The heart of the novel is Portnoy’s neurotic, absurd pursuit of sexual liberation with non-Jewish women. As the protagonist tells his analyst:

What I’m saying, Doctor, is that I don’t seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds – as though through fucking I will

discover America. *Conquer America* – maybe that’s more like it. . . . Yes, I am a child of air raid drills, Doctor, I remember Corregidor and “The Cavalcade of America,” and that flag, fluttering on its pole, being raised at that heart-breaking angle over bloody Iwo Jima. . . . Well, we won, the enemy is dead in an alley back of the Wilhelmstrasse, and dead because I *prayed* him dead – and now I want what’s coming to me. My G.I. bill – real American ass! The cunt in country-’tis-of-thee! I pledge allegiance to the twat of the United States of America – and to the republic for which it stands. . . . Sweet land of *shikse*-tail, of thee I sing!²¹

The allegory of an ambivalent embrace of American culture embodied in this erotic entanglement in turn becomes the primary narrative premise for Jewish American comedy for the remainder of the century.²² Though taking as its premise the same topical focus on erotic freedom as Lenny Bruce’s comedy, Roth portrays this theme more as a frantic quest to escape the past, which Roth characterizes through immigrant language and parental values, than a plausible means of personal transcendence or political transformation. In keeping with proper joke-telling structure, Portnoy recounts his relations with three women: Kay Campbell, a “heartland” college sweetheart, whom he nicknames “The Pumpkin”; Sarah Abbott Maulsby, a New England patrician, whom he nicknames “The Pilgrim”; and Mary Jane Reed, a fashion model and sexual libertine from the coal-mining country of West Virginia, whom Portnoy nicknames “The Monkey.” Of these three, only “The Monkey,” his primary erotic interest, is more culturally marginalized than Portnoy himself.

This social disparity, unlike his other relationships, is figured in part as linguistic difference, which notably places Portnoy in a superior position to the ostensibly “uninflected” American woman he pursues. Thus commenting on a semiliterate note The Monkey has left for her cleaning lady, Portnoy states:

Three times I read the sentence through, and as happens with certain texts, each reading reveals new subtleties of meaning and implication, each reading augurs tribulations yet to be visited upon my ass. . . . Oh that z, that z between the two e’s of “pleze” [please] – this is a mind with the depths of a movie mar-quee!! . . . This woman is ineducable and beyond reclamation. By contrast to hers, my childhood took place in Brahmin Boston. What kind of business can the two of us have together? Monkey business! No business!²³

At the heart of his passion for The Monkey is Portnoy’s status as a gatekeeper to high culture and social respectability. In his most bucolic memory of their relationship, Portnoy teaches The Monkey William Butler Yeats’s sonnet “Leda and the Swan” (1924) – the sort of modernist work associated in postwar American consciousness more closely with left-wing Jewish venues

such as *Partisan Review* than the exclusionary Anglo-American elites among whom such poetry was originally conceived – and she responds by transforming Portnoy himself into a specifically Jewish version of Yeats’s divine Greek predator. “A Jew-swan! Hey!” she cried, and grabbed at my nose with the other hand. “The indifferent beak! I just understood more poem!... *Didn’t I?*”²⁴ Where prior to this novel Jewish linguistic difference in English, from Monroe Silver to Lenny Bruce, had been marked by the foreignness of Jewish language, in Portnoy’s relationship with The Monkey it is his unaccented fluency in English that can be figured as Jewish.

With his first non-Jewish girlfriend, The Pumpkin, it is the absence of a differentiating language between Jews and non-Jews that signals Portnoy’s anxiety. When he joins her family for a Thanksgiving dinner in Davenport, Iowa, Portnoy imagines the necessity of informing her father of his Jewishness, as if the most obvious fact of the novel would somehow be lost on him:

Shall I say it then, before we even get into the car? Yes, I must! I can’t go on living a lie! “Well, it sure is nice being here in Davenport, Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, what with my being Jewish and all.” Not quite ringing enough perhaps. “Well, as a friend of Kay’s, Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, and a Jew, I do want to thank you for inviting me – ” Stop pussyfooting! What then? Talk Yiddish? How? I’ve got twenty-five words to my name – half of them dirty, and the rest mispronounced! Shit, just shut up and get in the car. “Thank you, thank you,” I say, picking up my own bag, and we all head for the station wagon.²⁵

However much Portnoy dramatizes the fear and hostility that fuel his desire for non-Jewish women – less, perhaps, as erotic conquests than sexual acquisitions – there seems to be no corresponding apprehension among the non-Jews with whom he interacts. Without an interlocutor to absorb and answer his hostile anxiety, Portnoy is left to attack language itself, disfiguring the words that articulate distinctions between Jew and non-Jew by saying of his relationship with The Monkey, “she puts the id back in Yid, I put the oy back in goy.”²⁶ The self-reflexivity of these linguistic games underscores the unavailability of a Jewish language for Portnoy, however much his parents continue to inhabit a Yinglish culture for which contact with non-Jews remains fraught with apprehension, and for whom the difference between Jews and non-Jews can be identified as much through language, cuisine, and urban geography as by religion. Portnoy’s puns perform the linguistic function that his prodigious masturbation fulfills erotically, as a substitute for what remains unattainable in his emotional and intellectual life.

Despite the fantasies of vicious contempt that Portnoy projects onto the women he covets, he often experiences an even more incapacitating silence, or voicelessness, in their presence, which as much as misremembered Yiddish or hypercorrect English functions as a Jewish language in the novel:

I wonder if with my father dead [a phantasm Portnoy's mother provokes when his father is caught in a blizzard on the way home from work] I will have to get a job after school and Saturdays, and consequently give up skating at Irvington Park – give up skating with my *shikes* before I have even spoken a single word to one of them. I am afraid to open my mouth for fear that if I do no words will come out – or the *wrong* words. “Portnoy, yes, it’s an old French name, a corruption of *porte noir*, meaning black door or gate. Apparently in the Middle Ages in France the door to our family manor house was painted. . .” et cetera and so forth. No, no they will hear the *oy* at the end and the jig will be up. . . Oh, what’s the difference anyway, I can lie about my name, I can lie about my school, but how am I going to lie about this fucking nose?²⁷

Portnoy imagines that an indelibly Jewish physiognomy, in lieu of accent or syntax, precludes his ability to speak with the non-Jewish girls for whom he longs. Given the premise that his analyst has diagnosed his condition in an article titled “The Puzzled Penis,”²⁸ it is easy to recognize the penny-ante Freudianism of Portnoy’s anxiety about a “fucking nose,” dislocating both his sexual ravenousness and his impotence. His nose, perhaps the only consistent signifier identifying his Jewishness, functions symbolically as the id fueling his uncontainable drives and the superego prohibiting their consummation.

The Monkey, nonetheless, is virtually the only non-Jew who actually makes anti-Semitic references to Portnoy, and this is because they share a reciprocal desire, motivated by an analogous anxiety, for broader social acceptance via their relationship with one another. Given the role they each play as consummator of forbidden fantasies, The Monkey’s ability to respond to Portnoy’s hostility in equal measure to his sexuality indicates the inextricability of his self-destructive impulses from his capacity for self-gratification. At the heart of the novel’s pathos lies the unrecognized truth that Portnoy and The Monkey are driven apart by their overheated similarities, not their irreconcilable differences. Thus during one of their arguments in a taxi, she says of Portnoy, “You’ve got those black Hebe eyes, man, they say it [his disapproval of her] for you. *Tutti!*” At this moment, The Monkey not only is as articulate and perceptive as Portnoy in reading the “Jewish” body, but also commands an additional language, Italian – learned from her career overseas as a model – that he does not, and the power of her words deprives Portnoy of his voice. Not Portnoy,

but the taxi driver, Mr. Manny Schapiro, answers her provocation in kind by shouting, "Nazi bitch!" The cab driver's remark can therefore be understood as a displacement of Portnoy's resentment and desire for escape; answering the Monkey's provocation would require Portnoy to identify with the cab driver's Jewishness, and in turn with the world and the words of his parents.

The wedge that separates Portnoy from The Monkey, the temporal divide at which they remain stranded as a couple, is their seemingly negligible age difference. Portnoy – thirty-three, one of many parodically Christological references in the novel – and The Monkey, twenty-nine, are distant enough from one another to stand at opposite sides of a countercultural divide that their relationship is ostensibly intended to reconcile, for as much as Portnoy desires The Monkey and revels in her sexual availability, precisely the debauchery in which they engage becomes the pretext for his rejection of her:

Where am I? Tuxedoed. All civilized-up in my evening clothes ... as The Monkey emerges wearing the frock she has bought specifically for the occasion. What occasion? Where does she think we're going, to shoot a dirty movie? Doctor, it barely reaches her ass! It is crocheted of some kind of gold metallic yarn and covers nothing but a body stocking the color of her skin! And to top this modest outfit off, over her real head of hair she wears a wig inspired by Little Orphan Annie, an oversized aureole of black corkscrew curls, out of whose center pokes this dumb painted face. What a mean little mouth it gives her! She really is from West Virginia! The miner's daughter in the neon city! "And this," I think, "is how she is going with me to the Mayor's? Looking like a stripper?"²⁹

Although Portnoy sees his relationship with The Monkey as an embarrassment to his status as a social elite and a contradiction to his self-perception as an ethically minded public servant – the assistant commissioner of human opportunity to the newly elected New York City mayor John Lindsay – their entanglement underscores how middle-aged and middle-class his aspirations actually are, and how vulnerable he feels when sensing the proximity of civic duty and carnal craving. This confusion, or hypocrisy, was as much a feature of New York during the 1960s as the (quickly disillusioned) optimism of the Lindsay administration, and Portnoy mediates not only between the political positions represented by libertinism and liberalism, but also between the white, Protestant elites whose company he had sought and the urban, working-class ethnic groups from which Jews such as his parents had only partially distinguished themselves.

At the novel's end, Portnoy remains on the border of the generation gap, unable to conform to his parents' conception of respectability and bourgeois

success, but equally incapable of making a home for himself either in a countercultural pursuit of liberation that would erase his Jewishness or, when he travels to Israel, in a utopian Zionism that would negate his Americanness. It is therefore not just linguistically convenient that his final erotic pursuit involves Naomi, the Israeli child of American *olim*, a woman who speaks idiomatic English yet despises Portnoy as an embodiment of Diaspora capitalism, hedonism, and impotence. By saying of her *This might have been my sister* and associating her red hair with his mother's,³⁰ Portnoy, whose incestuous anxiety toward Naomi (mother or sister?) reiterates the generational confusion in which he is caught, renders "The Jewish Pumpkin," whom he also refers to as "The Heroine," into his female double, and hence his inversion and his negation. To her dismissal that Portnoy is "nothing but a self-hating Jew," his response – "Ah, but Naomi, maybe that's the best kind"³¹ – offers the only available rejoinder to her naïvely ideological embrace of Zionist militarism, itself a pitfall waiting to consume Israeli society. Israel may have its heroism, but the Diaspora at least has the jokes, and with this self-deprecation perhaps the verbal and cultural resources not only to cope with the contradictions of Jewish modernity, but also to critique them.

En route to Israel, Portnoy claims to long most of all for the object of his scorn throughout the preceding 240 pages of his monologue, the home he had abandoned in a thoroughly Jewish neighborhood in Newark: "A future, see! A simple and satisfying future! Exhausting, exhilarating softball in which to spend my body's force – that for the morning – then in the afternoon, the brimming, hearty stew of family life, and at night three solid hours of the best line-up of radio entertainment in the world."³² Portnoy's vision of the future, in common with Zionism's, is rooted in an irretrievable past; not only would radio have been replaced by 1966 with television, but the year of the Six-Day War also saw six days of devastating riots in Newark, one consequence of which was the drastic flight of Newark's Jews. For all of Roth's rhetorical investment in depicting a departure from the Jewish literature that preceded him, bidding farewell to the identification of Jews with immigrant outsiders (*Goodbye, Columbus*), *Portnoy's Complaint* signifies not just the proximity of its protagonist's experience with his parent's generation, but also a summation of their anxieties. On the last page of the novel Portnoy lacks the linguistic means to differentiate himself from his parents' world, and so the narrative ends with two alternatives to figure the predicament of Jews seeking to move beyond Jewish American hyphenation – Portnoy's final inchoate scream, stretched out to six lines on the printed page, and the psychiatrist's Jewface response, "Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?"³³

If *Portnoy's Complaint* provides a model for Jewish American comic narrative in the last third of the twentieth century, whether for male comedians such as Woody Allen and Larry David or female ones such as Fran Drescher, the first really great Jewish American comic performance of the twenty-first century is Sarah Silverman's concert film *Jesus Is Magic* (2005). Like Roth in *Portnoy* and Lenny Bruce, Sarah Silverman distinguishes herself with an inexhaustible ability to shock, all the more astonishing that she succeeds in this objective four decades after the disappearance of the strictures against which Bruce had struggled. At the outset of her routine, Silverman provides a context that places her material in familiarly *Portnoyesque* territory:

I wear this St. Christopher medal sometimes, 'cause I'm Jewish but my boyfriend is Catholic. It was so cute the way he gave it to me. He said if it doesn't burn through my skin it will protect me!... Who cares? Different religions? The only time it's an issue, I suppose, would be, like, if you're having a baby and you have to figure out, like, how you want to raise your baby – which wouldn't even ... be an issue for us because we'd be honest and say, like, Mommy is one of the Chosen People and Daddy believes that Jesus is magic!³⁴

Despite her protestations that religious difference is irrelevant, the ability to provoke laughter by mocking the theological claims of Jewishness and Christianity underscores the commonality of supernatural thinking to both, as well as the enduring centrality of religious identification, particularly in American culture.

Like *Portnoy* and Lenny Bruce, Silverman performs her comedy at a border between an "uninflected" American culture and multiple marginalities of religion, race, gender, and sexuality. The danger that Silverman cultivates in her performance derives from the blurring of distinction between the persona she inhabits and the readily available details of her personal life; "Sarah Silverman," the stage persona, is far more closely aligned with Sarah Silverman the performer than Alexander Portnoy is with Philip Roth. Without this ambiguity, there would be no risk – and therefore no humor – in her claim "I was raped by a doctor, which is so bittersweet for a Jewish girl," yet the ability for the audience to laugh at such a statement is predicated on the assumption that the confession is fictitious. This tension animates the entire performance, which focuses primarily on ethnic stereotypes, mocking both the thoughtlessness that generates such stereotypes and the no less complacent conviction that merely avoiding stereotypical labels is sufficient to avoid racist thinking: "I believe that if Black people had been in Germany during World War II that the Holocaust would never have happened. I do. Or, not to Jews."

When responding to accusations that her comedy is racist, she states, “It hurt, as a . . . member of the Jewish community, you know, I was really concerned that we were losing control of the media.” The effect of using an anti-Semitic stereotype as a defense for equally derogatory stereotypes of other groups calls attention to the absurdity of stereotypical thinking, yet the humor depends on a “good faith” between the performer and her audience that Silverman only leaves implicit. The question of whether the audience should be laughing at such material remains unanswered.

Instead of breaking the façade of her narcissistic and thoughtless persona to make explicit that her use of stereotypes is intended to be ironic – “I don’t care if you think I’m racist, I just want you to think I’m thin” – Silverman breaks the flow of her stand-up routine with interpolated music videos that compound the complexity of her work further. The most characteristic of these is a disarmingly catchy and well-crafted song titled “I Love You More than” and performed with Silverman dressed as a 1960s pop icon:

I love you more than bears love honey
 I love you more than Jews love money
 I love you more than Asians are good at math
 I love you even if it’s not hip
 I love you more than Black people don’t tip
 I love you more than Puerto Ricans need a bath.

This litany of racist clichés is interrupted with a bridge that reiterates a theme from the on-stage routine, the supposed hypocrisy of Jews after the Holocaust who drive German cars: “Jewish people driving German cars / Jewish people driving German cars / Jewy people buying German cars / What the cock is that shit?” The interlude seems to be non sequitur, as many of the punch lines to Silverman’s jokes are, and yet given the opening premise of her routine – that she is Jewish and her boyfriend is Catholic – the connection is essential to the song as a whole. The love for her boyfriend is as incongruous as a Jewish person driving a German car and constitutes perhaps to the same extent a betrayal of her heritage and her history.

The rationalizations she offers to excuse her desire only compound the questions she raises: “But maybe it’s like Patty Hearst siding with her kid-nappers / Maybe it’s South-African-miner-killing-diamond-wearing gangsta rappers / Maybe it’s like when Black guys call each other niggers?” At this moment in the video, Silverman finds herself facing two African American men, neither of them laughing at the joke; a moment of purposefully uncomfortable silence follows, broken when one of the two men begins to laugh.

Silverman, still apparently embarrassed, joins in the laughter as if the racial slur had not been at the two men's expense. Another uncomfortable silence among the three follows, then the song itself concludes, abruptly and ebulliently, with "cha-cha-cha." The discomfort itself has been "part of the act," which underscores a comparable discomfort over whether intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews is itself a source of unease, or merely a target for further irony. Silverman's refusal to defuse the apposition of discomfort with irony is – analogous to the routines of Lenny Bruce or Alexander Portnoy – like a joke without a punch line. The musical logic of the song provides the closure for the performance, while the satire that motivates it remains open-ended.

In the absence of linguistic, religious, or even sexual distinctions separating Jews from non-Jews in Silverman's comedy, it is nevertheless significant that a tension between the two categories receives relatively conspicuous attention in her film; perhaps the title itself, *Jesus Is Magic*, finds in Jesus a figure for the ambivalence of what simultaneously connects and divides Jews from Christians. The minority status of Jews from which Silverman's humor derives, along with all of her predecessors in this account, is in fact another sign of its Americanness, since ethnic humor as such depends on the recognition of difference between the minority, however constituted, and the majority. The question that remains for Jewish humor in the future is not whether this sense of difference will persist – it surely will for as long as Jews continue to define themselves as an ethnic group – but how this difference will be articulated, linguistically, culturally, or physically. In the twentieth century, the imprint of Yiddish on Jewish American English supplied a natural resource for marking differences otherwise unapparent between Jews and non-Jews. In the twenty-first, the question will not be whether a hyphen will continue to link and separate "Jewish" and "American," but where the boundary will be found, and how it will be designated.

Notes

- 1 The two best sources for the transformative role of technology and mass entertainment affecting Jewish American immigrants are Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) and Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).
- 2 Gus Goldstein, *Der Mesader kedushin, Jakie Jazz 'em Up: Old Time Klezmer Music, 1912–1926* (Global Village, 1995), track 5.

- 3 In his recording "Ye Ch'hob Nit Kein Panenis," a Yiddish version of the ubiquitous novelty hit of the 1920s "Yes! We Have No Bananas," Goldstein similarly tailors the words of the original English-language song to offer imitations of Lithuanian and Romanian Yiddish, as well as, less persuasively, an Italian American accent. Cf. *Cantors, Klezmerim, and Crooners: Classic Yiddish 78s from the Mayrent Collection, 1905–53* (JSP Records, 2009), disc 1, track 18.
- 4 For more on the history and ambivalent social function of the wedding jester in traditional Jewish society – between lachrymose moralizer and insult comic – see E. Lifschutz, "Merrymakers and Jesters among Jews (Materials for a Lexicon)." *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 7 (1952): 43–83.
- 5 Cf. Various Artists, *Jewface* (Idelson Society), 2006. The cover image for this album bears the heading "Perhaps the Most Offensive Album Ever Made."
- 6 The *Jewface* compilation, for example, includes a 1907 song sung by Ada Jones, written by Alexander Carr and Fred Fischer, called "Under the Matzos Tree" (track 7). I was unable to find any documentation as to whether any of these figures was Jewish, but given some of the other titles in Fischer's oeuvre, such as "If the Man on the Moon Were a Coon" or "Ireland Must Be Heaven Because My Mother Came from There," I will venture to guess not. Cf. Levy Sheet Music Collection, the Sheridan Library of the Johns Hopkins University, box 150, item 094, <http://jhirlibrary.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/15270>
- 7 Silver employs the same structure in his other selection from the *Jewface* compilation, "No Hot Water Way up in the Bronx" (track 9), recorded in 1924.
- 8 The popularity of the minstrel comedy *Amos 'n Andy* from the 1920s until the 1960s – first on radio with white performers impersonating African Americans, then on television with a predominately black cast – is a notable exception to this trend.
- 9 The first documentable uses of the term "Yinglish" are William Schack and Sarah Schack, "And Now – Yinglish on Broadway," *Commentary* 12 (December 1951): 586–589, and Herbert J. Gans, "The 'Yinglish' Music of Mickey Katz," *American Quarterly* 5.3 (Autumn 1953): 213–218.
- 10 Cf. Mickey Katz, *Papa, Play for Me* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977), 131.
- 11 Mickey Katz, "Duvid Crockett," *Greatest Shticks* (Koch, 2000), track 1.
- 12 See, for example, Slobin's discussion of the early-twentieth century broadside "My Fiancée's Appetite" in *Tenement Songs*, 104–106.
- 13 Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact: Findings and Problems* (New York: Linguistic Circle of New York, 1953), 95. It is important to bear in mind that Weinreich uses the concept of linguistic obsolescence to describe not only Yiddish, but the inherited vernacular of any ethnic group immigrating to America and adopting English.
- 14 *Greatest Shticks*, track 6 (1951).
- 15 Slobin, *Tenement Songs*, 183.
- 16 Cab Calloway & His Orchestra, "Utt-da-zay (That's the Way)," *From Avenue A to the Great White Way: Yiddish and American Popular Songs, 1914–1950* (Sony, 2002), disc 2, track 22.
- 17 By way of comparison, Woody Allen (b. 1935), who abandoned regular stand-up performance when his career as a film director began in the late 1960s, nevertheless remains one of the great masters of the form; Allen in his early-1960s heyday combined the meticulous craftsmanship of a professional joke writer – with which he began his

- career in show business – with the free form and countercultural sensibility of the stand-up routine. The results, the best of which have been collected on the CD *Stand Up Comic* (Rhino, 1999), are a series of brief performances that continue to provoke laughter more than fifty years after they were written and (more surprisingly) after repeated listenings.
- 18 Like that of most speakers of an obsolescent language, Bruce's word usage in this instance appears to be imprecise; if its derivation is Yiddish, it seems to be a mash up of *knaker* [big shot] and *nafke* [whore], illustrating that the imprecision of memory is what enables an obsolescent vocabulary to serve as portmanteaus.
 - 19 Lenny Bruce, *Carnegie Hall Concert* (Blue Note, 1995), disc 1.
 - 20 Quoted at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lenny_Bruce, accessed online, July 17, 2014.
 - 21 Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Vintage International, 1994), 235–236.
 - 22 This is of course true for nearly all of Woody Allen's film comedies – as well as, in reconfigured form, *Match Point* (2005), his ludicrous melodrama of an Irish arriviste's insinuation into the British upper classes. The premise in turn becomes predominant for Jewish-themed television comedies such as *Bridget Loves Bernie*, *Northern Exposure*, and (with most explicit debts to Allen's films and Roth's novel) *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Two noteworthy variants of this theme from the 1990s are *The Nanny*, in which the gender relations of a Jewish man's pursuit of a non-Jewish woman are, uniquely, reversed, and *Will & Grace*, in which the sexual component is completely sublimated into the friendship of a Jewish woman with a non-Jewish gay man.
 - 23 *Portnoy's Complaint*, 205–206.
 - 24 Ibid., 195. The reference is to the final couplet of the poem, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?"
 - 25 Ibid., 224.
 - 26 Ibid., 209.
 - 27 Ibid., 149.
 - 28 Cf., Ibid., epigraph page and back cover.
 - 29 Ibid., 209.
 - 30 Cf. Ibid., 259, 260.
 - 31 Ibid., 265.
 - 32 Ibid., 246.
 - 33 Ibid., 274.
 - 34 Liam Lynch (director), *Jesus Is Magic* (Los Angeles: Roadside Attractions, 2005). All subsequent Silverman quotes will be taken from this film.

Since 2000

JOSH LAMBERT

Turn of the Millennium

Everything changed in the field of American Jewish literature around the turn of the millennium. Surveying the literary landscape in 1997, Mark Shechner observed that the postwar writers who last constituted a major Jewish movement in American literature continued to publish; he noted that new books by Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, and Cynthia Ozick had made 1997 a “banner year.” He suggested, though, that while younger writers interested in Jews and Jewishness had emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, they published less splashily and without producing a sense of a cohesive, influential literary movement. Shechner did not mention poetry, drama, or graphic novels, but glancing at a couple of contemporary American fiction anthologies, he asserted that “despite a rich, varied, and voluminous [output of] fiction, Jewish writers in America, as anything like a ‘camp’ or a ‘movement,’ are virtually invisible.”¹

What a difference half a decade would make. When Michael Chabon won the Pulitzer Prize in spring 2001 for *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), his exuberant historical epic dramatizing links between Jews’ experiences and the development of the popular American medium of the comic book, it was the first time that prize or the National Book Award, the two most prestigious national literary prizes, went to a work of fiction about Jews by a writer born after 1933. (Chabon, born in 1963, is three decades younger than Philip Roth.) Then in December 2002, Paul Zakrzewski introduced an anthology of “Jewish fiction from the edge” by emphasizing “how many talented Jewish writers have recently emerged to share the literary spotlight,” naming Nathan Englander, Myla Goldberg, Jonathan Safran Foer, Tova Mirvis, and Gary Shteyngart among those who had “debuted in the past five years”: precisely in the time elapsed since Shechner’s survey.² Here, then, was the camp, the movement that Shechner had been missing: a group of fiction writers,

each regularly if not exclusively telling stories about Jews, who had rocketed to prominence in such quick succession as to produce an unmistakable echo of the postwar breakthrough.

Why was there a more concentrated emergence of such writers in the 2000s than in any previous decade since the 1960s? A few observers have ascribed this phenomenon to the political and social landmarks of the period, including the 9/11 attacks, the Second Intifada in Israel, and the high rates of American Jews' intermarriage reported in 1990 and 2001 surveys, which drew Jews and Jewishness into several national conversations.³ Those events surely mattered, but from the 1970s to the 1990s writers had had plenty of social and political inspiration, too, from the transformations wrought by second-wave feminism to the end of cold war, and those had not caused them to coalesce into an influential group. This chapter argues that the key developments for understanding the wave of writing about Jews that crested after the millennium were institutional ones. The flourishing of this literature after 2000 resulted, for better and for worse, from its intensifying institutionalization – that is, from the marked increase in support for such work within a range of relevant educational, social, media, and community organizations.

New School

Mark McGurl has deftly argued that postwar American literature was increasingly the product of a complex and widespread educational system.⁴ As that aspect of American literary production ramified in the final decades of the twentieth century, the educational system became ever more capable of supporting writers interested in Jews and Jewishness. This was the result both of changes within the system that allowed for greater influence by scholars knowledgeable about Jewish culture, and of the growing influence of programs of private and informal Jewish education dovetailing with the academy.

One way to track such transformations is to examine the educational careers of two of the notable young writers who emerged in the new millennium, Jonathan Safran Foer and Dara Horn (both 1977–). Foer and Horn grew up in Washington, D.C., and Short Hills, New Jersey, respectively, and attended excellent nonsectarian high schools. In the summer of 1994, both of them participated in the Bronfman Youth Fellowship, a program founded by the philanthropist Edgar M. Bronfman in 1987 that selects an academically elite group of twenty-six Jewish teenagers each year and sends them to Israel together for five weeks. Foer and Horn's group met with politicians and major literary figures including Yehuda Amichai and A. B. Yehoshua.⁵ The Bronfman

program trumpets its role as a feeder for Ivy League schools, and Foer matriculated at Princeton and Horn at Harvard.⁶ Both of their first novels developed directly out of opportunities they encountered at these universities. Foer started to write fiction in Princeton writing workshops with Joyce Carol Oates and Jeffrey Eugenides, and the trip to Ukraine that inspired his first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), was reportedly paid for by a Princeton alumnus.⁷ Horn meanwhile wrote her first novel, *In the Image* (2002), while on a year-long Harvard-Cambridge Scholarship that she earned for her undergraduate studies of modern Hebrew and Yiddish language and literature.⁸

These cases reflect just how much encouragement a young writer during this period could receive to build a creative relationship with modern Jewish culture, both inside and outside the American academy. Theirs were opportunities that had simply not been available in previous decades. The Bronfman Youth Fellowship is a small, elite program, but its establishment in the late 1980s reflects a broader flourishing of experiential/educational programs of which Foer and Horn's generation were the first participants, and of which Birthright Israel, founded in 1999, is the best-known example.⁹ Before Bronfman, Horn had also participated in the March of the Living, another large program that takes Jewish teenagers to visit Holocaust sites in Europe and then to Israel, and her first published essay was a response to that trip.¹⁰ The schools at which Horn and Foer matriculated were, when they arrived, not only fully open to Jewish applicants – as had been the case since the mid-1960s – but also, for the first time, equipped to offer classes in modern Jewish history and literature. By then, the generation of Jewish Studies scholars who had expanded the field from a tiny oddity to a vigorous and regular feature of the American humanities curriculum had been installed in powerful positions in top departments, and they were readying for publication such field-defining texts as *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (2000) and Ruth Wisse's *The Modern Jewish Canon* (2000). Wisse had fought to introduce the study of modern Jewish literature at McGill University in Montreal in the 1960s and 1970s and had been recruited in 1993 to a professorship at Harvard, where she served as Horn's undergraduate adviser.¹¹ At Princeton, a small Committee in Jewish Studies had been upgraded to program status near the beginning of Foer's undergraduate career, in 1996, at which time the university began to offer courses in modern Jewish history and culture, most of them for the first time. The English Department reportedly had never offered a course on Jewish literature until fall 1998, but by fall 2001, a few months after Foer graduated, Princeton was hosting one of the most impressive gatherings of American Jewish writers ever assembled, with speakers including Susan

Sontag, E. L. Doctorow, Art Spiegelman, Marge Piercy, Will Eisner, Grace Paley, and Tony Kushner.¹²

Horn and Foer cut distinct paths through these institutions, but the openness of their schools to the study of Jewish texts and history and the availability of generous and rigorous informal Jewish education aimed at the non-Orthodox offer one explanation for the increased prominence of writing by and about American Jews in the new millennium. These details also contextualize one of the thematic foci of Foer's and Horn's work, and of the literature of this period more generally: questions of ignorance and knowledge, the raw matter and product of the educational system of which this generation was the subject. To appreciate Foer's and Horn's most celebrated fictions, in other words, one has to consider them in relation to education.

When the nineteen-year-old Foer traveled to Ukraine in 1996 in search of the town where his grandfather was born, he found "nothing" and then retreated to an apartment in Prague, where he drafted the imaginative novel.¹³ Foer deliberately produced that "nothing" through the active cultivation of his ignorance: He later recalled, "Because I didn't tell my grandmother about the trip . . . I didn't know what questions to ask, or who to ask, or the necessary names of people, places and things. [Finding nothing] was as much a result of me as of what I encountered." He understood this ignorance as necessary for the novel he would go on to write: "My trip to Trachimbrod would have been better served by some smart plans. But I wouldn't have written a novel. Writing hates such intelligent preparation."¹⁴ The novel's project, as these comments make clear, is to imagine rather than to research; in Foer's words, it is "an experiential, rather than historical, record" of a place, which before and after his novel has been the subject of both memorialization and research.¹⁵ Given his educational background, if Foer had wanted to document the history of his family, or to learn about the experiences of people like his grandfather, he had better opportunities to do so than almost anyone in the world: access to Eastern European historians at Princeton and to Jewish studies scholars and communal leaders through his school and the Bronfman alumni network, who could have helped him. But that was not what he wanted. As he described it, "My mind wanted to wander, to invent, to use what I had seen as a canvas, rather than the paints."¹⁶ Foer acknowledges this in the novel when the Ukrainian narrator, Alex, notes a historical inaccuracy in the fanciful shtetl narrative that the character Jonathan Safran Foer has written but then goes on to declare, "I trust you have a good purpose for your ignorance."¹⁷ Foer's was a deliberate, purposeful, perhaps factitious ignorance – one reaction to unbounded educational opportunity.

Horn could not differ more from Foer in her attitude about the place of “intelligent preparation” for writing fiction. Whereas he cultivated ignorance, Horn studied Yiddish and Hebrew literature at the doctoral level and discovered the stories that Eastern European Jews, including her ancestors, told. Like all of her fiction (but slightly more so), her second novel, *The World to Come* (2006), is densely packed with material that would be appropriate in a scholarly anthology, including short samples of Yiddish fiction in translation and biographical information about major writers, artists, and the contexts in which they lived. As one Amazon.com reviewer wrote, “A lot of research obviously went into this work, and readers learn interesting, little-known facts about Marc Chagall’s art, Yiddish literature, and Russian and American history by osmosis.”¹⁸ This seems to reflect a typical reader’s experience, even if scholars in the fields Horn treats can point out occasional moments where her research slips.¹⁹ Horn aims to teach because she is aware of the threat ignorance poses in her time: Like Foer – and perhaps like any alumnus of the Bronfman Youth Fellowship – she understands how little Jews of her generation typically know about the lives of their great-grandparents, but whereas Foer sees this as cause to fabulate, she takes it as impetus to educate, to preserve and revivify history. In a 2013 essay for the *New York Times Book Review*, Horn declares that “every writer’s secret faith [is] that somewhere, whether in our notebooks, our basements or our spirits, everything is perfectly preserved and recorded, ready to return to life.”²⁰ If not every writer’s, such faith is certainly reflected in her fiction.

Like Foer, Horn reflects on her relationship to education in her novels. *The World to Come* begins and ends with references to a midrash that describes how prior to their births, fetuses know the entire Torah, just about everything worth knowing, but “Then, just before each baby is born, an angel puts its finger right below the baby’s nose . . . and whispers to the child: *Shh – don’t tell*. And then the baby forgets.”²¹ One character wants to know, “Why does [the baby] have to forget?” His mother answers, “So that for the rest of his life . . . he will always have to pay attention to the world, and to everything that happens in it, to try to remember all the things he’s forgotten.”²² The ignorance of children, Horn proposes here, serves the necessary function of transforming every person into an eager student. Different as this response to ignorance is from Foer’s, Horn’s didacticism seems equally natural in the subject of an astonishing, unprecedented array of educational opportunities. Horn wants others to study, just as she has.

Many other writers who have emerged since 2000 manifest related attitudes toward historical and cultural knowledge and its connection with

the fiction they produce. Indeed, Jewish historical fiction exploded in this period, not just as the mass market genre it mostly was in the second half of the twentieth century in the hands of Joel Gross, Belva Plain, and other best-selling commercial novelists, but, as the judges of the Edward Lewis Wallant Award have noted, as by far the dominant mode of contemporary literary fiction about Jews and Jewishness.²³ This tendency can also be understood as a reaction to the expansion of opportunities for the study of Jewish history and culture, and the support of such literary projects throughout the academy.

In comparison to their peers, Foer and Horn both conspicuously lack one degree, the M.F.A. in creative writing, and the field of creative writing has in many cases supported interests in Jewish literature even more ardently than other corners of the university.²⁴ A remarkable number of the faculty at leading M.F.A. programs since the late 1990s themselves write about Jews and Jewishness, including Ethan Canin at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Eileen Pollack at the University of Michigan, Leslie Epstein at Boston University, Ehud Havazelet at the University of Oregon, E. L. Doctorow at New York University, and Binnie Kirshenbaum at Columbia. Few if any of these teachers would say they show preference in admissions to applicants who write about Jews and Jewishness, but the number of graduates of these programs who have gone on to publish books in this area suggests, at least, that there are no prejudices against this subject matter on "Planet MFA."²⁵

Unlike Horn and Foer, most of the young writers who have won major prizes for Jewish literature since the turn of the millennium worked toward the M.F.A., and many of them, perhaps not coincidentally, have engaged in scholarly research. Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* set a standard with its bibliography of more than three dozen sources as well as a list of five academic libraries where "the research for this novel was undertaken."²⁶ Younger writers with very different projects and aims from Chabon's followed suit: Austin Ratner's fictional biography, *The Jump Artist* (2009), relies on letters, newspaper accounts, and medical reports surrounding the 1928 trial of Phillippe Hallsman in Austria; Julie Orringer's *The Invisible Bridge* (2010) recreates the Munkaszolgálat newsletters produced by inmates of the Hungarian forced labor brigades in the 1940s; Sara Houghteling's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (2010) draws upon Rose Valland's *Le front de l'art* (1961) to relate details of the Nazis' looting of French art collections. In the 2000s, even Philip Roth's novels included substantial bibliographies, for the first time, and literary critics as a matter of course remarked on the accuracy of novelists' historical and linguistic research.²⁷

Other writers evince more irreverent attitudes toward education, as becomes clear from the title of Adam Levin's *The Instructions* (2010), whose precocious, messianic protagonist recalls feeling at Jewish Day School, before being kicked out, "like everyone was waiting for me to teach something."²⁸ Joshua Cohen's self-consciously Joycean *Witz* (2010), for another example, concludes with a long monologue containing many dozen punch lines to unprinted setups, which can be recognized by someone who has read through a handful of Jewish joke collections, or could be tracked down by an enterprising reader – in either case, a kind of pedagogic exercise. Joseph Skibell's *A Curable Romantic* (2010) could be understood as a novel equal parts Foer and Horn: densely packed with researched historical details and multilingual play like Horn's novels (and accompanied, online, by a hundred-item bibliography of sources in several languages), it relies on flights of folklore-inspired fantasy (*dybbuks*, angels) reminiscent of Foer's magical shtetl. Whether or not Skibell's novel will educate more people than academic studies of Sigmund Freud, Esperanto, and the Piasetzener Rebbe remains to be seen, but the novel's effort to provide a historical and cultural education – its implicit vision of fiction as both a corrective to gaps in Jewish education and the product of passionate study – reflects one signal tendency of its period.

The *New Yorker's* Immigrants

Just as the educational system conditioned the production of American literature in recent decades, a drastic reduction in the number of high profile, widely distributed periodicals regularly publishing literary fiction has figured in its circulation. Whereas into the 1980s a reader could discover literary short stories in more than a dozen widely circulating general interest magazines, the shuttering of some publications and cutbacks in the publishing of fiction by others meant that by the mid-2000s there were few venues left where a short story could catch the reading public's attention.²⁹ Among the hundred most widely circulated magazines in the country, the only one currently publishing literary fiction on a regular basis is the *New Yorker*. So while that magazine has long wielded major influence in establishing the careers of American novelists, its power only expanded in the early years of the new millennium.

The magazine has always included fiction by and about Jews – in the twentieth century it published Daniel Fuchs, Henry Roth, Bellow, Philip Roth, Ozick, and many others – and under the current editor in chief, David Remnick, who took over in 1998, and fiction editor, Deborah Treisman, who started as the deputy fiction editor in 1997, its support has only increased. The "20 under 40"

lists of fiction writers the magazine curated in 1999 and 2010, for example, featured a substantial proportion of writers who write primarily or occasionally about Jews: in 1999, Canin, Allegra Goodman, Chabon, and Englander, and, in 2010, David Bezmozgis, Foer, Rivka Galchen, Nicole Krauss, and Shteyngart. (Compare to only four on the lists who write about Africans or members of the African diaspora, and three who write about Asians or Asian Americans.) Might the personal backgrounds of Remnick and Treisman have contributed to this phenomenon?

Remnick has long evinced both a personal and a professional interest in Jews and Jewishness.³⁰ He also expresses a particular fondness for midcentury American Jewish literature: His classmate Richard Brody has described how, as college students in the late 1970s, he and Remnick shared an admiration for “a whole generation of Jewish American writers – when Saul Bellow won his Nobel Prize, I guess when we were all freshmen or about to enter school. There were people like Philip Roth and Norman Mailer and Bernard Malamud and Joseph Heller. We sort of had a canon of fathers.”³¹ Remnick has hardly been shy about the intensity of his admiration for Roth.³² Treisman describes herself as being “of mixed heritage – mother with Protestant roots, Jewish father, neither of them religious” and as having grown up close to her “paternal grandfather [who] was a Lithuanian émigré (to South Africa, and then England) who lost a lot of family in the Holocaust.”³³ (Her stepfather, the Nobel laureate and Princeton psychology professor Daniel Kahneman, has been thoughtful in print about the role of Jewishness in his life.)³⁴ Sympathetically, Treisman doubts that her personal relationship to Jewishness has much to do with her editorial decisions: “My aim,” she says, “is to be receptive to fiction that is powerful, eloquent, and original, regardless of its plot or its preoccupations. . . . What we look for in a story is, of course, evidence of talent and inspiration, rather than ethnic, cultural, or religious concerns.”³⁵

Treisman’s motivations notwithstanding, one might still understand her department as having helped to produce a sense of a flourishing of writing about Jews since 2000 simply by not instituting an informal quota on such writing, as some editors might have in her place. Take, for example, the case of Sana Krasikov: By the time she submitted her first stories to the *New Yorker* in 2005, the magazine had already published stories about Soviet or post-Soviet Jews by Bezmozgis, Lara Vapnyar, and Gina Oschner, and an essay by Shteyngart.³⁶ It is not hard to imagine an editor in Treisman’s or Remnick’s position objecting, at that point, that the magazine had already devoted enough space to short fiction about Jews from the former Soviet Union, but these editors – whether because of a specific fascination with this subject matter, as Remnick could reasonably

be conjectured to have;³⁷ or an insistence on judging a story according to its technical virtues and not by its subject matter, as Treisman avers; or, likely, some nebulous combination of the two – did not feel a limit had been reached. Asked whether she has felt that her work has had to compete with other fiction about post-Soviet Jews, at the *New Yorker* or elsewhere, Krasikov responds, “Absolutely not.”³⁸ The willingness of the *New Yorker* and other publishing institutions to support a large cohort of writers mining this particular vein created the sense of a movement, even while the writers themselves remained ambivalent about the idea of their collectively representing a demographic group, as, say, the cultural fruits of American efforts to liberate Soviet Jewry.

That tension is a useful context in which to read the tendency of these writers – the handful published by the *New Yorker* but also others, including Anya Ulinich and Nadia Kalman – to attend precisely and brutally to the humiliation that accompanies help from established Americans, and particularly from third- and fourth-generation American Jews. Frequently these compromises are figured through the metonym of awkward sexual encounters. Krasikov’s first *New Yorker* story, “Companion” (2005), for example, describes a posh Georgian immigrant and divorcée named Ilona Siegal who moves in with an unappealing seventy-year-old American, giving him the attention a spouse or caregiver might offer, so as not to have to move out of the pleasant suburb, Tarrytown, whose rents she can no longer afford. Embarrassed by the man, she still recognizes how much she gains from the relationship. In Bezmozgis’s “Roman Berman, Massage Therapist” (2003), the young narrator awkwardly discovers his Latvian Jewish father massaging the neck of a Toronto Jewish matron whose family has “been involved with trying to help the Russian Jews” and whose husband, a respected doctor, could save the narrator’s father’s fledgling business. The shame the narrator feels at his family’s need for charity becomes confused with uncertainty about his father’s physical encounter.³⁹ Most directly, Vapnyar’s *Memoirs of a Muse* (2006) details the affair between a Russian immigrant to New York and an American Jewish novelist who regards her as a source of novelistic interest (“Details! Details! Be evocative!” he tells her in bed, as if issuing creative writing instruction) and, finally, she realizes, simply as a “tool to get off.”⁴⁰ In all of these cases, and likewise in Shteyngart’s fiction and in the sections of Anya Ulinich’s satirical *Petropolis* (2007) and Nadia Kalman’s warmly comic *The Cosmopolitans* (2010) detailing the grotesque Tarakan family and the condescending Strauss family, respectively, these writers emphasize how much Soviet immigrants required the patronage of people and especially Jews who occupied institutionally influential positions in North America and how humiliating it is to trade on

one's status as an exotic victim of history so as to curry favor with spoiled, ignorant, and self-righteous Americans.

Most clearly in Vapnyar's novel, this trope reflects the institutional positioning of post-Soviet Jewish writers vis-à-vis American Jewish literature and American Jews, like Remnick, with power over their careers. Like their characters, these authors have had to choose how much to trade on their personal histories, how much to emphasize Russianness or Jewishness, like the narrator of Bezmozgis's story who arrives at his family's potential patrons' house wearing "a silver Star of David on a silver chain not under but over the shirt."⁴¹ In most cases, the biographies appended to these authors' first books briefly note the year of their birth and the year of their immigration, suggesting that their status as immigrants is a crucial detail for readers to know. As Adrian Wanner has pointed out, their book covers regularly include symbols of Russianness, onion domes and *Matryoshka* dolls, and almost never icons of Jewishness.⁴² But if Jewishness seems more fraught than Russianness in the promotion and positioning of these writers, that is itself highly traditional: If some of these writers evince discomfort with being categorized as "Jewish writers," and if critics disagree about how exactly to categorize them, the same can be said of the midcentury generation before them and of plenty of their nonimmigrant contemporaries.⁴³

Indeed, because every writer has to build first a network of professional support and then a constituency of readers who come to care about the writer's work for any numbers of reasons (some more sensible than others), just about all emerging writers find themselves in the positions of the immigrants in the stories told by these post-Soviet writers, wherein they must negotiate between seeking out strangers' approval and aid, on the one hand, and maintaining their artistic and political integrity and self-respect, on the other. As had been the case in the mid-twentieth century, the question of the strategic utility of an affiliation with Jewishness – the issue Bezmozgis captures so deftly with his reference to his character's "over the shirt" Star of David – has lately been a very complex one, for writers of different backgrounds and interests, especially because of the recent emergence in America of a specific market for so-called Jewish books.

Creating a Market

Shrinking space for literary fiction in periodicals in the new millennium had its analogue in a pattern of other contractions throughout the American publishing industry. Independent bookstores failed as chains and then online

booksellers prospered; publishers slashed their marketing budgets; and venues for demonstrably effective advertising of literary fiction dried up.⁴⁴ Given such circumstances, it makes perfect sense that any well-organized submarket for books – any group of like-minded book buyers arranged so that they can be targeted easily and cheaply – would be welcomed with open arms by the mainstream American publishing industry.

One such market coalesced in the late 1990s thanks to the efforts of an organization called the Jewish Book Council. Dating its origins to a Boston librarian's establishment of a Jewish Book Week in 1925, the organization attained new relevance after the arrival of Carolyn Starman Hessel, who took it over in 1994. Under Hessel, the council's programs have included, among other ventures, a quarterly book review magazine, *Jewish Book World*; the Jewish Book Network, which orchestrates book tours by connecting authors and host communities; and prizes including the annual National Jewish Book Awards and, starting in 2007, the \$100,000 Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature. These programs and their predictable annual cycles fomented the sense that authors interested in Jews were emerging sequentially, year after year, and indicated to publishers that even if the demand for books of Jewish interest was not massive, it was at least consistent.

Profiling the organization in 2007, a *New York Times* reporter noted that “though connecting with ‘communities of interest’ . . . has been a marketing strategy for some time, publishers are hard pressed to name another ethnic or interest group with a semi-centralized organization that coordinates book fairs.”⁴⁵ Hessel's key innovation was to leverage the existing infrastructure of Jewish organizations across the country to generate this market. The first major success of the council under Hessel's direction, in terms of building an author's reputation, was the book tour orchestrated with the help of the Knopf publicist Sophie Cottrell for Nathan Englander in support of his debut fiction collection, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, in 1999 and 2000. It is noteworthy that this tour included one reading in a rather unlikely venue: at the General Assembly, the annual conference of the Jewish Federations of North America, that most traditional of American Jewish communal organizations, in Atlanta, Georgia, on November 19, 1999. This was, Hessel says, “the first author program at the GA, ever.” She cites the event as a key inflection point for her organization, because it revealed what would be possible with the buy-in of the organized Jewish community – which had not, up to that point, acted in a concerted way to support authors.⁴⁶ The Jewish Book Network's famed “Meet the Author” nights, at which staff from hundreds of synagogues and community centers across the country gather to watch as many as ninety

authors audition with rapid-fire two-minute pitches, are precisely, and straightforwardly, a means of connecting authors with established Jewish institutions and organizations.

The sheer quantity of books and authors promoted and supported by the council is stunning: Between 2000 and the present, the Jewish Book Network has helped to send thousands of authors on tour, and, even just in the category of fiction, in that time *Jewish Book World* published reviews of more than seven hundred distinct titles. Meanwhile, in 2012 alone, the council honored fifty-one winners and finalists for National Jewish Book Awards in eighteen categories.⁴⁷ In supporting so many authors, the council's programs operate on the basis of an implicit, extremely broad definition of what constitutes a Jewish book. Some recent prizewinners demonstrate the definitional breadth: Peter Manseau's *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter* (2008) won the National Jewish Book Award for Fiction, though Manseau is Catholic, and Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011) received the \$25,000 second prize of the council's Sami Rohr Prize in Jewish Literature though none of its characters is identified as Jewish, and, as a blogger noted, the book "didn't show any of the usual signs of being part of Jewish literary discussion."⁴⁸ Non-Jewish authors whose books are deemed to be of interest to the council's audiences and Jews who have written books with no overt Jewish content regularly and without controversy take part in the Jewish Book Network. The council's vision of what counts as a Jewish book can be understood, then, as reflecting in equal measure Werner Sollors's maximalist definition of ethnic literature as "works written by, about, or for persons who perceived themselves, or were perceived by others, as members of ethnic groups";⁴⁹ the imperatives of a commercial market, in which consumers are offered any and all products that they might possibly want to purchase; and, importantly, an inclusive, widely pluralistic understanding of Jewish identity that has been typical of some other Jewish communal organizations in this period, and specifically Birthright.⁵⁰ The council is not unique in this regard among literary organizations, either, but representative of the general trend: Similarly broad standards have been employed by parallel awards programs including Hadassah's Harold U. Ribalow Prize, the Reform Judaism Prize for Jewish Fiction, the Koret Jewish Book Awards, the Goldberg Prize for Jewish Fiction by Emerging Writers, and the Edward Lewis Wallant Award, as well as in periodicals publishing reviews and fiction, for example, *Tablet*, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, *Zeek*, *Heeb*, *JBooks.com*, *Moment*, the *Jewish Review of Books*, and *Jewishfiction.net*.

This maximalist definition of Jewish books has allowed an increasing diversity of literary voices to be heard. The postmillennial period of

productivity witnessed the publication and discussion in the United States of more fiction, poetry, and memoir than ever before by and about Jews of color and Jews by choice (notable writers include Julius Lester, Daniel Olivas, and Mary Glickman); transgender Jews (Joy Ladin and T Cooper); Jews of Sephardic and Mizrahi descent and/or with family origins in Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia (Eduardo Halfon, Ruth Knafo Setton, Lucette Lagnado, André Aciman, Gina Nahai, Dalia Sofer, Danit Brown, Shani Boianjiu, Ariel Sabar, Jessica Soffer, Esther David, Carmit Delman, and Sadia Shepard); and people of mixed racial, religious, or ethnic heritage, of which Jewishness constitutes one part (both emerging writers, such as Rebecca Walker, David Treuer, and Saïd Sayrafiezadeh, and more established voices such as Tobias Wolff and Joyce Carol Oates, who discovered their heritage later in life and have written fiction inspired by those discoveries). These lists of names hardly do justice to the variety and quantity of work produced in each of these categories, and frequently authors inhabit several of these categories at once. To instance a concrete example: Achy Obejas's novel *Days of Awe* (2001) tells the story of a lesbian Cuban immigrant to America who discovers that her family has crypto-Jewish, Sephardic roots. Unsurprisingly, the novel has already been treated by leading scholars as a landmark text of American Jewish literature.⁵¹ Whereas in various contexts Jews from all of these backgrounds continued to encounter prejudice in the 2000s, the institutions of the literary marketplace were at least partially, and in many cases enthusiastically, open to them.

Similarly, while twentieth-century American Jewish literature was dominated by works by and about the secular (with important exceptions, such as the writing of Herman Wouk and Chaim Potok), the turn of the millennium saw a proliferation of literary works by and about Jews from every possible religious denomination and sect. Particularly noteworthy has been an outpouring of literature telling the stories of current or former Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox Jews, by such writers as Englander, Pearl Abraham, Shalom Auslander, and Anouk Markovitz, who tend to be harshly critical of religious practices, and others including Allegra Goodman, Tova Mirvis, Ruchama Feuerman King, and Risa Miller, whose fiction evinces more sympathy toward adherents of Orthodoxy and Ultra-Orthodoxy. That authors from such a range of religious perspectives have been honored by national prizes for Jewish literature, invited to speak at Jewish community centers and synagogues, and discussed regularly in the Jewish press suggests reason to hope that the religious-secular divide in contemporary Jewish life may not be quite as deeply entrenched as has been reported.

Not everyone agrees, though, that these developments have been salutary. Some critics suspect that the focus on new and unfamiliar Jewish stories has resulted from the boredom of American Jewish readers with the stories they know. Writing in the *Nation* in 2007, William Deresiewicz echoed notorious statements made by Irving Howe in the late 1970s, arguing that “over the past three decades, the dense particularity of American Jewish life has, outside the Orthodox community, largely disappeared,” and so “the most visible of the current generation of self-consciously Jewish novelists appear to be avoiding their own experience because their own experience just seems too boring.”⁵² Deresiewicz targeted Englander’s first novel, *The Ministry of Special Cases* (2007), and Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* (2007), but the critique implies that the contemporary market privileges religious and geographic exoticism because familiar stories have grown stale. A parallel argument, voiced clumsily by the polemicist Wendy Shalit in the *New York Times Book Review* in 2005, is that the representations of Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox Jews that have proliferated perniciously portray these people “in an unflattering or ridiculous light” for the sake of catering to the curiosity and confirming the biases of secular readers.⁵³ Though Deresiewicz is much better equipped as a literary critic than Shalit, the two arguments similarly suggest that people buying “self-consciously Jewish” books want stories of strange people in traumatic circumstances as an escape from their hollow contemporary experiences.

True as this may be of a few of the readers who attend Jewish Book Network–orchestrated events at Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) and synagogues in Houston and Cleveland and Tulsa and Albuquerque and Kansas City and Manhattan and everywhere else, every year, this vision of the reading public does not give readers the respect they deserve. Nor does either of these critic’s perspectives reflect the richness of contemporary Jewish life. People may be seeking out stories about Jewish immigrants and crypto-Jews from India and Mexico and Iran and Ukraine, tales of Yiddish-speaking defectors from Hasidic sects, and stories of transgender Jews and Jews by choice less because they have a lurid desire to encounter something outlandish and more because people with such backgrounds and experiences increasingly have been joining their own families and communities. While there is certainly a tension in recent American Jewish literature between playing to exoticism and attempting to make difference familiar, that is as venerable a dynamic as there could possibly be in this literary tradition: The late nineteenth-century writers, Jewish and non-Jewish (Sidney Luska, Bruno Lessing, Abraham Cahan, Emma Wolf, and others), who initiated the field walked exactly the same line.⁵⁴

Which is not to say that the market for Jewish books we have, thanks largely to the council, is perfect, or even the best market we could imagine. It has its blind spots, and it perpetuates or exacerbates some long-standing problems in the circulation of Jewish literature in the United States. Though it reviews poetry faithfully in *Jewish Book World* and awards prizes for it, the council has not regularly been able to connect emerging poets with public speaking opportunities through its Jewish Book Network and so has not done much to mitigate the commercial marginalization of poets at a time when a great deal of exciting Jewish poetry is being written, and four of the U.S. Poet Laureates (Robert Pinsky, Stanley Kunitz, Louise Glück, and Philip Levine) were Jews. Jewish literature written in languages other than English remains neglected even while the last decade has seen new American Yiddish writers emerging⁵⁵ – and despite great efforts, translations of works from earlier periods seem to be harder and harder to sell.⁵⁶ The availability of an increasing number of scholarly studies and anthologies by and about Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews in America has not prevented a number of observers from feeling that such stories remain marginalized within Ashkenazicentric American Jewish culture.⁵⁷ The good news is that even while the atmosphere in American publishing has lately been a gloomy one, thanks to the council and its peer organizations, it seems more likely than ever that a new literary voice, telling a story that has not yet been told by or about American Jews, will have the opportunity to be heard.

Being Institutional

The institutionalization of a literary tradition carries both benefits and dangers. As positive a development as it may be for a cultural practice to be embraced at organizations as varied as the Jewish Book Council and the *New Yorker*, Princeton University, and the Bronfman Youth Fellowship, the other side of institutionalization, as is easy to see in so many areas in which culture is commercialized and commoditized, is a loss of freedom, spontaneity, and resonance.

One specific place we might locate the danger of institutionalization for the field of American Jewish literature is in the reproduction of privilege across generations. In the previous century, for an American Jew to become a writer typically meant breaking away, whether concretely or symbolically, from his or her family, but writers such as Foer and Horn have family networks that feature several other writers.⁵⁸ There is nothing unusual, of course, about families of writers – one immediately thinks of the Brontës, the Jameses, and

in modern Jewish literature, Israel Joshua Singer, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Esther Kreitman – but those dynasties do suggest reserves of capital, whether financial or symbolic, that these families bestowed on the literary generation. Strikingly, a whole generation of Jewish novelists is emerging who are themselves children of a previous generation of writers, critics, and scholars. Jonathan Rosen, the son of the novelist Norma Rosen, is one important example, and the 2013 winner of both the National Jewish Book Award for Fiction and the Sami Rohr Prize, Francesca Segal, is the daughter of the best-selling novelist and classicist Erich Segal, while a runner-up for another 2012 fiction prize, Adam Wilson, is the son of Jonathan Wilson, a novelist and scholar. To point out this pattern is not to critique any of these writers', or their parents', work; their lineage neither adds to nor diminishes the appeal of their prose or plots. Still, the pattern of family dynasties typifies other highly institutionalized systems of cultural production, like Hollywood and academia, in both of which industries it is not at all unusual to discover a handful of siblings hitting the big time in quick succession, or children succeeding in fields noticeably close to their parents'. Any single example of this phenomenon may be a simple historical accident, but the phenomenon as a whole may more distressingly suggest that as this literary field continues to become more institutionally entrenched, its opportunities will become – like so many other opportunities in the United States – decreasingly meritocratic in their distribution, increasingly luxuries of the economically and educationally privileged.

More generally, the threat of institutionalization is the threat of banality. Many writers and scholars who serve as the judges of contemporary awards for Jewish literature report exasperation with the huge number of uninspired work they encounter. Staring at a towering pile of newly published books, one cannot help but doubt that more than one or two of the eighty new novels, sixty new memoirs, and hundreds of works of trade nonfiction now reviewed each year will be read or discussed with any frequency even five or ten years into the future.

The “problem of abundance” in contemporary U.S. literary scholarship⁵⁹ creeps into even as small a field as this, and both critics and readers become exhausted, overwhelmed by an unmanageable quantity of new titles. Indeed, in trying to survey the field responsibly, this chapter has simply not had the space to address some of the most fascinating developments of the period – even, for example, phenomena as significant as the rise of the graphic novel as serious literature (in which form some excellent work has been produced in the 2000s, even if nothing that yet quite rivals Art Spiegelman's *Maus* [1991] in its potential influence), or the extraordinary profusion of narratives about

Jews in the American theater, film, and television of the period. Still, the optimistic approach would be to remind ourselves that such a robust cultural market has room for marginal projects and even for some bizarre experiments that may turn out to be masterpieces. What seems truly unlikely now is that any excellent literary work about Jews or Jewishness could be written in America and *not* find its way to critical attention through one path or another. That alone makes ours a hopeful moment for both authors and readers who care about the vitality of this literary tradition.

Notes

This article is riddled with conflicts of interest. Having been active as an editor, reviewer, scholar, and prize judge in the years covered here, I have been privy to conversations and data otherwise not available, but this also means I cannot pretend to be an objective observer. My thanks for research assistance to Alessandra Pohle-Anderson and Camilla Pohle-Anderson, and to Hana Wirth-Nesher, Jonathan Freedman, Jennifer Glaser, Sasha Senderovich, and Sara Kippur for responding to earlier drafts.

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- 2 Paul Zakrzewski, "Introduction," in *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge*, ed. Paul Zakrzewski (New York: Perennial, 2003), xxv.
- 3 See, for example, David Sax, "Rise of the New Yiddishists," *Vanity Fair* (April 8, 2009), <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2009/04/yiddishists200904>.
- 4 Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
- 5 Interview with Dara Horn, April 23, 2013.
- 6 See "BYFI and College," *The Bronfman Youth Fellowships*, <http://www.bronfman.org/collegeadmissions>.
- 7 Jill Garbi, "Safran Foer Illuminates His Jewish Influences," *New Jersey Jewish News* (November 21, 2011), <http://www.njewishnews.com/article/7326/safran-foer-illuminates-his-jewish-influences#.Uh69NhvNm9U>.
- 8 Alvin Powell, "Harvard-Cambridge Scholarships Awarded to Four Students," *Harvard University Gazette* (February 25, 1999), <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/1999/02.25/hcscholarships.html>. Dara Horn, "Rewriting Redemption: The Messianic Experiment in Modern Jewish Literature," A.B. Thesis, Harvard University, 1999.
- 9 On the proliferation of such programs, see Jack Wertheimer, "Mapping the Scene: How Younger Jewish Adults Engage with Jewish Community," in *The New Jewish Leaders: Reshaping the American Jewish Landscape*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 1–44.
- 10 Dara Horn, "On Filling Shoes," *Hadassah Magazine* (November 1992): 16–22.
- 11 On Wisse's career, see Ruth Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey through Literature and Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2000), ix–x, and Janet Tassel, "Mame-loshn at Harvard," *Harvard Magazine* (July/August 1997), <http://harvardmagazine.com/1997/07/mame-loshn-at-harvard>.

- 12 Froma Zeitlin, e-mail to the author, August 26, 2013; Jennifer Greenstein Altmann, "Milberg Inspires Celebration of Jewish-American Writing," *Princeton Weekly Bulletin* 91:6 (October 15, 2001), <http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pwb/01/1015/3a.shtml>.
- 13 "Jonathan Safran Foer on *Everything Is Illuminated*," HarperCollins Publishers, <http://www.harpercollins.com/authors/25419>.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Jonathan Safran Foer, "Preface," in Avrom Bendavid-Val, *The Heavens Are Empty: Discovering the Lost Town of Trochenbrod* (New York: Pegasus, 2010), xiii–xv (quote on xiv). For historical and memorial writing about the town, see Bendavid-Val's book and the memorial book for the community, Y. Vainer, T. Drori, and G. Rosenblatt, eds., *Ha'llan v'Shoreshav* (Givatayim: Bet TAL, 1988). On Foer's novel as an "imaginative memorial book" see Heidi E. Bollinger, "'The Persnickety of Memory': Jonathan Safran Foer's Audaciously Imaginative Jewish Memorial Book," *Genre* 45:3 (2012): 443–469.
- 16 "Jonathan Safran Foer on *Everything Is Illuminated*."
- 17 Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 142.
- 18 I. Aldor, "Dara Horn has outdone herself!" *Amazon.com* Customer Review (February 22, 2006), http://www.amazon.com/review/R3H5L1X1tBAWAK/ref=cm_cr_pr_perm?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0393051072&linkCode=&nodelID=&tag=.
- 19 For example, Sasha Senderovich notes that in *The World to Come* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), a character mentions the USSR in 1920, two years before it existed (36). E-mail to the author, September 21, 2013.
- 20 Dara Horn, "Articles of Faith," *New York Times Book Review* (August 29, 2013), http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/books/review/articles-of-faith.html?page_wanted=all.
- 21 Horn, *The World to Come*, 26. The original myth is in *Midrash Tanhuma, Pekudei* 3.
- 22 Horn, *The World to Come*, 26.
- 23 Mark Shechner, Thane Rosenbaum, and Victoria Aarons, "The New Jewish Literature," *Zeek* (April 1, 2011), <http://zeek.forward.com/articles/117238>.
- 24 On the awkward place of Jewish literature in English Departments, see Lori Harrison-Kahan and Josh Lambert, "Finding Home: The Future of Jewish American Literary Studies," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 37:2 (Summer 2012): 5–18.
- 25 The phrase "Planet MFA" comes from Elif Batuman, "Get a Real Degree," *London Review of Books* (September 23, 2010), <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n18/elif-batuman/get-a-real-degree>.
- 26 Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (New York: Picador, 2000), 637.
- 27 Philip Roth, *The Plot against America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 364–365, and "Acknowledgments," *Nemesis* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), n.p.
- 28 Adam Levin, *The Instructions* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2010), 111.
- 29 On these developments, see Ted Genoways, "The Death of Fiction?" *Mother Jones* (January/February 2010), <http://www.motherjones.com/media/2010/01/death-of-literary-fiction-magazines-journals>. Of course, not only high circulation magazines have the power to build literary careers, and another effect of these reductions has been

- to increase the importance of more recently established journals such as *McSweeney's*, *Zoetrope: All-Story*, and *n+1*.
- 30 See, for example, stories he published in the magazine, in one year, on the *Forverts*, Saul Bellow, and a book called *The Jewish 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Jews of All Time*. David Remnick, "News in a Dying Language," *New Yorker* (January 10, 1994); Remnick, "Mr. Bellow's Planet," *New Yorker* (May 23, 1994); and Remnick, "Semite Literate," *New Yorker* (August 15, 1994).
- 31 Gaby Wood, "The Quiet American," *Observer* (September 9, 2006), <http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2006/sep/10/observermagazine>.
- 32 See, for example, David Remnick, "Philip Roth's Eightieth-Birthday Celebration," *New Yorker's Page-Turner* blog (March 20, 2013), <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/03/philip-roth-eightieth-birthday-celebration.html>.
- 33 Deborah Treisman, e-mail to the author, August 8, 2013.
- 34 "Daniel Kahneman – Biographical," *Nobelprize.org* (2002), http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economic-sciences/laureates/2002/kahneman-bio.html.
- 35 Treisman, e-mail, op. cit.
- 36 Krasikov's story, "Companion," appeared on October 3, 2005.
- 37 Remnick served as the *Washington Post's* Moscow correspondent from 1988 to 1992, and his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Vintage, 1994) did attend specifically to the experience of Soviet Jews (86–100).
- 38 Sana Krasikov, e-mail to the author, August 17, 2013.
- 39 David Bezmozgis, *Natasha and Other Stories* (Toronto: Harper Flamingo Canada, 2004), 32.
- 40 Lara Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), 164, 167.
- 41 Bezmozgis, *Natasha and Other Stories*, 31.
- 42 Adrian Wanner, "Russian Jews as American Writers: A New Paradigm for Multiculturalism?," *MELUS* 37:2 (Summer 2012): 165.
- 43 See Wanner, "Russian Jews as American Writers," 158–159; and Gregory Cowles, "Of Jewish Interest?" *ArtsBeat* blog, *New York Times* (April 2, 2009), <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/02/of-jewish-interest/>.
- 44 On these developments, see Laura J. Miller, *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), and Chris Artis, "With Marketing Budgets Slashed, Co-Op and Web Take Priority," *Publishing Perspectives*, September 8, 2009, <http://publishingperspectives.com/2009/09/with-marketing-budgets-slashed-co-op-and-web-take-priority>.
- 45 Rachel Donadio, "Star Search," *New York Times Book Review* (June 24, 2007), <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/24/books/review/Donadio-t.html?pagewanted=all>.
- 46 Interview with Carolyn Hessel, January 23, 2013.
- 47 To give a sense of scale, the most capacious anthology covering the entirety of this field from its beginnings, *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, attends to a total of 143 writers, which is less than a tenth of the number of writers whose work has been reviewed in *Jewish Book World* since 2000.
- 48 Erika Dreifus, "Reflections on the 2013 Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature Finalists," www.erikadreifus.com, February 28, 2013, <http://www.erikadreifus.com/2013/02/reflections-on-the-2013-sami-rohr-prize-for-jewish-literature-finalists>.

- 49 Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 243.
- 50 Birthright Israel requires only that applicants “self-identify as Jewish,” meaning that some people not considered Jewish by various religious authorities may participate. Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan, *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England/Brandeis University Press, 2008), 13.
- 51 See, for example, Jonathan Freedman, *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 239–250, and Hana Wirth-Nesher, “Who Put the Shma in Shmattas? Multilingual Jewish American Writing,” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 37:2 (2012): 47–58.
- 52 William Deresiewicz, “The Imaginary Jew,” *Nation* (May 28, 2007), <http://www.thenation.com/article/imaginary-jew>.
- 53 Wendy Shalit, “The Observant Reader,” *New York Times Book Review* (January 30, 2005), <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/30/books/review/30SHALITL.html>.
- 54 See Leslie Fiedler, “Genesis: The American-Jewish Novel through the Twenties,” *Midstream* 4:3 (Summer 1958): 21–33.
- 55 Gary Shapiro, “For the Modern Sholom Aleichem, Click on This Blog,” *The Jewish Daily Forward* (May 6, 2011), <http://forward.com/articles/137578/for-the-modern-sholom-aleichem-click-on-this-blog>; Zachary Sholem Berger, “Haredi Women’s Lit Explodes,” *Tablet* (August 8, 2012), <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/108710/haredi-womens-lit-explodes>.
- 56 See Rachel Rubinstein, “Is Yiddish Literature the Next Big Thing?” *Jewish Daily Forward* (December 6, 2010), <http://forward.com/articles/133698/is-yiddish-literature-the-next-big-thing>.
- 57 For example, Ilan Stavans, ed., *The Schocken Book of Modern Sephardic Literature* (New York: Schocken, 2005). The degree to which Mizrahi and Sephardi marginalization persisted into this period – in the United States as well as Israel – is emphasized in several of the essays in Loolwa Khazzoom, ed., *The Flying Camel: Essays on Identity by Women of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish Heritage* (New York: Seal Press, 2003).
- 58 On the Foer and Horn families, see Sheelah Kolhaktar, “The Foer Family,” *New York Observer* (December 18, 2006), <http://observer.com/2006/12/the-foer-family>, and Caren Lissner, “In Person: The Three Sisters,” *New York Times* (October 3, 2004), <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A05E0D91238F930A35753C1A9629C8B63>. The post-Soviet and other immigrant writers discussed previously are, in this respect, closer in experience to previous generations of American Jewish writers than to their American-born contemporaries.
- 59 See Matthew Wilkens, “Contemporary Fiction by the Numbers,” *Post45* (March 11, 2001), <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2011/03/contemporary-fiction-by-the-numbers>.

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