

## INTRODUCTION

*Toward a New Jewish American Literary Studies*

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When I entered the field of Jewish American literary studies some thirty years ago, the discipline – its inheritance, evolution, and trajectory – looked very different from its current disposition. In many ways, Jewish American literary studies is not the same field it once was. Even as late as the last quarter of the twentieth century, the study (and the teaching) of Jewish American literature fundamentally responded to a continuous and ostensibly seamless narrative marked and shaped by distinct historical stages and events. The standard narrative, in broad strokes, looked something like this: the “great wave” of Jewish immigration in the two decades bookending the turn of the twentieth century (the late 1880s–c.1924), and the significant influence of the primarily European, Ashkenazic, Yiddish-speaking culture and the ways in which *Yiddishkeit* was grafted onto the literary and cultural landscape; the first-generation American-born writers and their move from the “margin to mainstream”;<sup>1</sup> the post-war writers and the emergence and ascendance of a definable Jewish American voice and literary presence, one that contained still the traces of its Yiddish antecedents, if only in its break from that cultural-linguistic inheritance; the rising recognition of Jewish American women writers in response to the feminist movement of the late 1960s–early 1970s and the corresponding awareness of a gendered “reading” of the experience of being Jewish in America; the widening in the 1980s to reflect the diversity of Jewish American experiences and identities; and the introduction in the 1990s of second-generation Holocaust writers, the children of survivors who came of literary age and staged their Jewish American identity against the backdrop of the Shoah. At the center of this largely chronological, sequentially unfolding generational narrative – albeit often contentious – was a shared sense, for lack of a more precise term, of Jewishness, a condition largely defined by the status of the “outsider,” but one “on the rise,” whose literature was in dialogue with the current enthusiasms and entanglements of American life and whose central

narrative was, in many ways, the making of the American Jew, but also the making and re-envisioning of America.

The point here is that there was a perceived set trajectory to the developing body of literature, a path that roughly corresponded to the shifting cultural place and disposition of Jews in America. Looking back on the literary momentum of the past century from the vantage point of our present age, it seems clear that the narrative of Jewish American literary studies clung to this useful but limiting idea of an evolving, continuous progression, tracing a point-to-point movement of distinct periodicity in the literature of American Jews. This well-established narrative began with the positing of an embryonic immigrant condition as central to the building of Jewish American literature and traced a trajectory through identifiable stages in the progression from a state of the dispossessed to that of ownership and belonging. In doing so, the critical focus of this controlling narrative constituted, by necessity, the attempts to isolate features of a definable Jewish American body of literature. Although, as Dan Miron argues, there has never been a “single Jewish Literature,” the past century might be said to have been characterized by a body of literature written by American Jews and imagined by scholars to have reflected the patterns and evolving self-portraiture of Jews in America.<sup>2</sup> The term Jewish American, in this context, broadly covered a wide range and blurring of definitional markers: religious affiliation, ethnicity, cultural inheritance and practice, and self-identification.

To be sure, such a prevailing and convenient narrative of Jewish American literary trends and patterns omits some of the more interesting and unconventional literature produced during the twentieth century. And in retrospect, the inevitable oversimplification of such chronological neatness was not only reductive, but understandably provincial and to a certain extent defensive. After all, America, that is, the United States, was at the center of literary activity and the making of a Jewish American literary presence through much of the twentieth century. Such defensiveness might understandably be an unsurprising response to the parochialism and anti-Semitism prevalent in both the political and literary marginalization and suspicion of Jews. As a result of the pressures exerted on this growing literary presence, the overriding narrative, as it morphed and adapted to cultural and critical change, continued to engage in issues of identity and identity-formation, which resulted in the fluctuating and disputed hyphenated categorical marker of American-Jewish/Jewish-American. Philip Roth and others of his generation had to fight against the hyphenated condition; they were opposed to the marginalizing

hyphen, but they had to entertain it, to engage it, in order to shed it.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century, the arrangement of the twinned terms was often readjusted in response to mutating cultural-political and ontological discursive modes and fashions. The changing emphasis – the primary ordering of American or Jewish – reflected an uneasy attempt to establish the preeminence of one controlling, defining identity over its subordinated other, reflecting the complicated relation of Jews to America and, not always correspondingly, America to Jews. Nonetheless, in whatever convenient equation, American and Jewish together informed and responded to an intersecting and, for the most part, mutually dependent literary and cultural evolution. Curiously enough, contentious debates about this somersault of hyphenated acrobatics has stubbornly hung on, extending into the twenty-first century, as we will see in Chapter 1 of this volume.

That being said, the guiding generational narrative of Jewish American identity and the incorporation of emancipatory critical discourses into it began to show its limitations at the beginning of the new millennium. Indeed, just as the field and its theoretical positions mutated to respond to changing cultural, social, and theoretical preoccupations – including psychoanalysis, Marxism, the rise of a reinvented New Left, feminism, race relations, civil rights, political activism, sexual and gendered identity, global awareness – the overriding narrative of continuity was being dismantled. The limitations in the edifice of the incremental generational narrative were exposed, not only as reductive in the way that such attempts to periodize and to track an unswerving path are by their very nature reductive, but also because of the failure of the generational narrative to represent the rich and vibrant diversity of writers and literatures produced over the course of the past century. Despite gestures toward theoretical and cultural currencies, the generational narrative not only abridged the richly diverse body of literature primarily to key male figures of American modernism – tokened by Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth – but also exhausted the incremental, explanatory discourse with the new wave of immigrant Jewish writers in the early twenty-first century.

Just as the field of Jewish American literary studies in the last quarter of the twentieth century posited the evolution of Jewish American literature as part of a developing movement in concert with the trends, fashions, and expansion of modernity and post-modernity, the emergence of Jewish writers with increasingly more complex, global contexts of migration and immigration has begun to form a new, vibrant platform for Jewish American literary studies in the twenty-first century. It is thus the

appropriate time for a newly framed and re-generated outlook of Jewish American literary studies. The changes accompanying the new millennium have opened the field up to new perspectives, new approaches, and a widening of interpretive possibilities that this volume hopes to introduce to its readers. Now that we are over a decade into a new century, the field of Jewish American literary studies has begun to reshape itself in response to a “new diaspora,” a newly defined sense not only of Jewish American literature, but of America, an expansion of new genres, new voices, and new platforms of expression. Such a shift in direction and definition calls for a critical revaluation of the field and of our approach to the literatures it encompasses.

As Josh Lambert has succinctly put it, “Everything changed in the field of American Jewish literature around the turn of the millennium.”<sup>4</sup> The shape of the field of Jewish American studies in the early decades of the twenty-first century has radically refashioned itself, once again in response to the socio/cultural and geopolitical character of our times. No longer indebted to a sequentially unfolding narrative, now, instead of clearly defined moments and stages in the developing corpus of Jewish American literature, the contemporary period, as Miron argues, is marked by “a freely floating, imprecisely defined, and widely inclusive Jewish literary complex . . . literary hybrids” that reflect the moveable, shifting features of contemporary life.<sup>5</sup> While the central preoccupation of the post-war period in Jewish American letters saw itself consumed with identifying itself within an American ethos, especially America in relation to Jews, the contemporary period takes a different turn. As Philip Roth has put it, the post-war experience was one in which “one’s American connection overrode everything, one’s American claim was beyond question . . . The American adventure was one’s engulfing fate.”<sup>6</sup>

Rather than an expression primarily of the various stages of Jews navigating America *qua* America, that is, a literature centered exclusively in and about America, the emerging body of literature that might be said to constitute a “field” is one more elastically characterized by its diverse interplay of geographical and cultural contexts. Such hybridity is reflected in its blending and blurring of conventional genres and also in its linguistic and geographical intersections and collisions. While Jewish writing has generally been considered a diasporic literature, as Hana Wirth-Nesher rightly argues, “never contained within national borders,”<sup>7</sup> Jewish American literature in the twenty-first century captures Jews writing in North America who extend the hybridization of their cultural and literary identities: “Russian/Jewish/American,” “Guatemalan/Jewish/American,” “Iranian/Jewish/American,”

“Latvian/Jewish/Canadian,” “South African/Jewish/Canadian,” and so forth. As the editors of the recent anthology *The New Diaspora* suggest, “Significantly, since the turn of the twenty-first century, an increasing number of Jewish writers who reside in North America are not Americans by birth. The United States and Canada are the ports at which they have dropped anchor and established their careers, though they come from elsewhere, and sometimes from other languages . . . a uniquely contemporary demographic.”<sup>8</sup> No longer throwing off the vestiges of the past, as might be said to have characterized the literature produced by Jewish immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, the disposition of the twenty-first-century body of literature written by those coming to America from elsewhere shows itself to be an insistent interplay of cultures and customs – one that “looks ahead to new forms of Jewish self-awareness as much as it looks back for history, sustenance, and collective memory.”<sup>9</sup> North America finds itself, in significant ways, at the center of this burgeoning literary activity, and provides the stage upon which these intersections and chiasmic crossings are reckoned and arbitrated. Thus, American-born Jewish writers are joined by Jewish writers from an array of other locales and languages, who graft their cultural milieu onto a palpably mutating American landscape. As a result, just as the literary production of this new wave of writers looks different from its generational predecessors, so does the very landscape on which the literature is fashioned. The contemporary generation of Jewish writers in America are exploring new forms of Jewish expression and identities – what it means to be Jewish and writing about it. The question of what it means to be Jewish at this particular moment in history and given this distinctive demographic is characteristically at the heart of this literature, either explicitly or implicitly. Such self-awareness expresses itself often generationally, captured parodically and ironically in something of a preemptive strike against the kind of doubts lodged against the identifier or signifier of Jewishness in an American context. Such hesitations anxiously evoke, once again, Irving Howe’s iconic and far-too-often-summoned prognostication that the Jewish literary imagination, in the later decades of the twentieth century, had come to something of an end-game, had, in other words, met its match in secular, diluted America.<sup>10</sup> The conscious (and at times self-conscious) awareness of the question of “Jewish?” is taken up as a kind of happy quarrel in the literature. As one of Allegra Goodman’s characters querulously and not un-ironically contests, “What about the original context? As in the Jewish people?”<sup>11</sup>

The newly defined field of Jewish American literary studies (and thus the title of this volume) responds to this changing demographic and dynamic

and is perhaps best thought of as so named for the pragmatic purposes of bringing together a body of texts that might be called “Jewish.” Such a defining principle of Jewish American literature, as Miron proposes, should not be understood as fixed, limiting, or “essential.” Rather, such a definition might simply stipulate that given texts are produced by writers who are perceived as writing from or about a position of Jewishness; that is, “whose work evinces an interest in or is in whatever way to whatever extent conditioned by a sense of *Judesein*, 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.”<sup>12</sup> This literature, complexly figured, engages the reader and writer in a shared, moveable exchange in conversation with something that might be recognized or imagined to be, in a patterning of expectations, assumptions, voices, and structures, Jewish. Is “Jewish” in this context the position from which one articulates experience or a gauged response to that experience? Is it best thought of as a marker of felt authorial identity or as a generic category, based in evolving demographics, class-positioning, and global political discourses?

What is “Jewish” about Jewish American writing is a richly figured gesture toward refashioning and adjudicating Jewish identities as a measure of historical and personal self-reckoning. Identity and place are thus twin escorts to reimagining the possibilities for the dualities and hybridities in contemporary Jewish American literary expression. And while the newly arranged corpus of writing might be said to have lost the necessity for the simple duality of the hyphenated condition (or implied hyphen) suggested by the potentially restricting “Jewish-American/American-Jewish” moniker of identity, the qualifier of Jewish American literature remains, as Wirth-Nesher suggests, useful, an opening, “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.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, the dueling categorical terms open themselves up provocatively to their appositional other: “If not ‘Jewish,’ then what?” What is it we “hear” when we read the work of contemporary Jewish American writers that invites the qualifying terms? Despite the suspicions of one of Thane Rosenbaum’s characters in regard to her mutinous American son, “Nothing Jewish that I can see,”<sup>14</sup> Jewish American frames the communicative act in such a way as to invite not only a discursive invitation of recognition, of kinship, but also of its antithetical *other*, of what it is not, conditions that offset and challenge notions of both Jewish and American. In fact, Jewish American or American Jewish – the one an implied silhouette of the other – pose

increasingly expansive possibilities for a contemporary *midrashic* extension of the very terms – Jewish, American – that such defining principles promise to identify. And often such clarification becomes fruitful confusion. How is the shape of contemporary American literature complicated by – informed by – writing from or about a perspective that might be identified broadly as Jewish? What does Jewish writing in America look like at this particular moment in history? Put another way, as Bernard Malamud’s astonished protagonist in the short story “Angel Levine” – the world changing far too quickly for him – from a not entirely dissimilar condition of appreciation and in the Yiddish-inflected English of his immigrant generation, might have asked: “is this what a Jewish [writer] looks like? . . . This I am not convinced.”<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, and by no means surprisingly, the current state of Jewish American literary studies is fashioned by new forms of identification and new ethical positions as well as the range of perspectives from which such structures are expressed. “Jewishness” in contemporary Jewish American writing is in the process of expanding not only its reach but also its thematic range, extending its terrain well beyond the borders of the United States. Its reach reflects “a richly diverse body of pluralistic fiction,” one that is elastic, vast, and enormously fluid.<sup>16</sup> No longer expressed primarily in one language or reflecting a single hegemonic cultural or historical narrative, Jewish American literature of the new millennium is a performance in many different languages, genres, and imaginations of Jewish identities in the changing landscape of North America. The radical change in comportment and character of the body of Jewish American literature that is emerging in the early decades of the twenty-first century is happening all at once and from all over, reflecting the interdisciplinary fashion and multidirectional state of the academy, but also that of our globally expanding culture. This is a literature that evinces productive, imaginative alternatives for the future as it responds to our increasingly multidimensional, hybridized world – in dialogue with and influenced by other cultures, other histories, and other notions of what it means (and what it *might yet* mean) to be Jewish. Importantly for our purposes here, as Morris Dickstein observes, the contemporary generation of writers “arrived in tandem with the expanding academic field of Jewish Studies.”<sup>17</sup> Thus the “new” Jewish American literary studies engages with a plurality of multi-faceted voices and contexts as it adjudicates history – both distanced and proximate – for the legacy of the past inevitably reshapes itself as we enter the future. This is a literature that looks to the future, a matter of engaging with past histories as a means of moving into

a more open, unconstrained and un-self-diagnosed, un-symptomatic future.

Contemporary Jewish American writers might be thought of as writing toward a position of “futurity,” as Amir Eshel articulates in the wider context of the literature of our age. To this end, “futurity,” as Eshel proposes,

marks the potential of literature to widen the language and to expand the pool of idioms we employ in making sense of what has occurred while imagining whom we may become . . . Futurity is tied to questions of liability and responsibility, to attentiveness to one’s own lingering pains and to the sorrows and agonies of others. Futurity marks literature’s ability to raise, via engagement with the past, political and ethical dilemmas crucial for the human future . . . [b]y engaging such circumstances, they point to what may prevent our world from closing in on us.<sup>18</sup>

One of the central patterns that shapes the literature of contemporary Jewish American writers is the conceit of the past as it informs and joins in dialogue with the present, with the conditions, circumstances, and exigencies of our time. Here the trope of memory is a measure against which contemporary Jewish American writers construct possible futures, a matter of writing against those catastrophic ruptures of the past but also those more proximate disasters of the present age. The present is in cautious conversation with the past. All the while keeping in perspective the backward glance, in looking ahead, in “moving toward the future,” as Eshel puts it, contemporary writers refigure possibilities for an expansion of modes of expression beyond spatial, temporal, and definitional borders.<sup>19</sup> We find in this literature a mapping of new territory – an expansion of the definitional terrain of both Jewish and American. Contemporary Jewish American writers are engaged in the project of refiguring, re-describing, redesigning, and re-presenting possibilities not only for Jewish expression, in an attempt, as Eshel proposes, “to remake ourselves,”<sup>20</sup> but also and essentially for “being Jewish” at this particular moment in history, in an attempt to avoid, as Philip Roth once put it, “the tyranny of contingency,”<sup>21</sup> that is, the weight of history, both proximate and past, personal and collective. Writing becomes a measure of resistance to definitional and often generational pressures and expectations (often and ironically while imposing such demands on itself), an ongoing self-reflection and engagement in what might be thought of as an ethics of exchange.

The plurality of new genres and new voices onto the landscape of Jewish American literature has created a cultural and dialectical exchange, drawing

upon the multi-faceted backgrounds of those producing literature in North America in the twenty-first century. While both Jewish American literature and its corresponding scholarship have historically, as Wirth-Nesher suggests, “always addressed the ‘fissures and tensions’ between multiple cultures,” the contemporary period makes increasingly emphatic the ruptures and discordant notes, but also the openings for negotiation and adjudication among the mixing of cultures and histories that comprise the literature of the current age.<sup>22</sup> The contemporary fiction, in particular, produced by Jewish writers in North America dramatizes the intersections and frictions – the resistances and elasticities – in a layering and exchange of histories, identities, and dispositions. In clarifying this proposition, and in anticipation of the chapters that will follow, we might here briefly consider two very different writers whose work speaks to this complex of impulses and histories and whose “voice” – understood in terms of narrative posture and conceit – contributes to the varied international mixing from which the literature emerges: the Guatemalan-born Jewish writer Eduardo Halfon, who resides in the United States and writes in his native Spanish, and Ayelet Tsabari, a Canadian writer born in Israel of Yemeni descent. Both writers are suggestive of this trans-national and trans-generational amalgam of geographies and temporalities, manipulating the juxtapositions and tensions among imaginative and material places of memory. The persistent narrative voice in their fiction – characteristic of contemporary writers who were born in America as well as those with more global backgrounds – consistently reveals the ways in which our histories, set against the broader frame of Jewish history, define the contours of the varying modes of perception, forms of identification, and the ethical positions from which the past is adjudicated and the present navigated. As Michael Wood suggests, contemporary Jewish American writers are engaged in “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.”<sup>23</sup> To this end, “otherness” fruitfully might be considered broadly: “other” than American by point of origin, to be sure – with all the linguistic and cultural complexities that contribute to this condition – but also “other” in terms of an identifying marker of Jewishness, even in defiance of or dismissal of this definitional signifier of difference and distinction.

Recognized by the Hay Festival of Bogota, Colombia, in 2007 as one of the best young Latin American writers, Eduardo Halfon is the author of

eleven works of fiction, only three, to date, that have been published in English. (Several short stories have been translated into English.) Halfon's fiction reflects the exchanges and collisions, the hybridity of languages, cultures, backgrounds, and heritages from which he draws: Guatemalan, American, Lebanese (by way of his paternal grandfather), Polish (that of his maternal grandfather), Jewish. Responding to a 2012 interview question about the "dualities" his background requires him to negotiate, Halfon says, "It's a very fluid existence."<sup>24</sup> Such fluidity is reflected in his fiction, in the intersections and liminal spaces that result from such hybridity, and in the gracefully executed moves among settings – Guatemala, Israel, Poland, Italy – and temporalities, the immediacy of the present and the far less proximate distillation of the past. Halfon speaks to the duality of languages that jointly informs his perception of both identity and place: "I am straddling two languages. One foot in Spanish, my mother tongue; another foot in English, my step-mother tongue. It's not that I go back and forth, but that I'm inside both or that both are inside me at the same time, and everything I write, then, is really a product of both."<sup>25</sup> This metaphorical reference to "inside" is suggestive of his position as an immigrant writer in America. It also reflects the historical position of the Jewish writer, a figure ever since the late nineteenth–early twentieth-century Eastern European maskilic writers of the Enlightenment, most notably Mendele Mocher Sforim (Sholem Abramovich), Sholom Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovitz), and I.L. Peretz, whose linguistic flexibility (Hebrew, Yiddish, and the language of the country of origin) and choice of literary language allowed him to straddle different worlds and defined the writer as both inside and outside his identified community of readers as well as his position internal to the text, that is the writer's relation to his imagined settings and fictional characters. The choice of language suggests the choice of invented and imagined communities. The fluidity of languages draws the writer inside, allows the writer access to a variety of conditions and experiences. Halfon's chiasmic iteration of "inside both/both . . . inside me at the same time, and everything I write" reflects the diasporic fluidity of the language to be defining of self and place. Language, in this equation, is the space the writer both inhabits and that which is inherent to the writer. These dual languages, as Halfon describes them, are not only imposed deterministically as a structural condition of subjectification, but they become an inhabited place of invention. Language thus functions metonymically as the container for that which is contained, in this case, the condition of possibility, and also synecdochically, the public marker of the fusion of cultural affinity and identity. For Halfon, the interchange and exchange of languages