

Introduction

Jewish Difference, Jewish Reading

“They were throwing their tefillin overboard. Because tefillin were something for the Old World, and here in the New World they didn’t need them anymore. ‘And that is why I want you to be a deep-sea diver,’ Mr. Rosenthal told Jason. ‘I want you to dive down to the bottom of New York Harbor and bring those cast-off tefillin back up to the land’” (Horn 50). This scene from Dara Horn’s *In the Image* (2002) might usefully be viewed as a micronarrative of Jewish difference in the United States. For immigrants seeking economic opportunities and respite from a continuum of anti-Semitic persecution, the flight from Europe seemed to invite—even to demand—a casting off of the most distinguishing trappings of Judaism, that Old World religion. Tefillin, phylacteries incorporated into daily morning prayers, were a sign of Orthodoxy and thus of being “too Jewish.” According to a lachrymose version of Jewish American history, that process of casting off Judaic ritual and its accompanying Jewish cultural identity has proceeded from generation to generation in the United States so that now both religious and ethnic identity are merely symbolic, without authentic content.¹ However, emblematic of a contemporary Jewish renaissance in life and letters, Horn’s narrative suggests otherwise. Jason, whom Mr. Rosenthal mistakes for his grandson, metaphorically follows his faux grandfather’s injunction to become a deep-sea diver by becoming a *baal teshuva* (returnee to traditional Judaism) and embracing “the beauty of the world beneath the black hat . . . a world where every moment could be considered holy . . . a world where nothing was considered worse than playing recklessly with

someone else's heart . . . a world where large numbers of people built entire careers around the academic study of how to be a better person" (210). Given a well-established literary history of black hats and the Orthodox serving as foils for new world identities,² such a positive representation of this world by one of the most promising and gifted young contemporary Jewish writers suggests that American Jews are not vanishing as quickly as some commentators fear.

However, Jason, who takes on the name of Yehudah to mark his Jewish transformation, is not the only deep-sea diver in this novel. Jake, an academic specializing in modern Jewish history, is, one might say, a secular deep-sea diver by profession. More literally, he happens upon a water-logged tefillin set, a testament to the accuracy of Mr. Rosenthal's recollections, in a store called Random Accessories, and buys it as a courtship gift for Leora. Jake and Leora are not traditionally observant; indeed, keeping Leora's family custom of Friday night movies, they follow Shabbat dinner with a playfully interactive viewing of *The Planet of the Apes*. However, it is during such an untraditional Shabbat that Jake envisions having a daughter with Leora; thus the biological reproduction of Jews seems to be more likely from their union than from Yehudah and Rivka's, since Rivka is infertile.³ Jake initially perceives Yehudah as another "Mad Hatter" in keeping with his academic narrative that "the people who had changed Jewish life for the good hadn't been the ones who didn't question life as it was, but those who did and who therefore demanded better" (209); Yehudah assumes that Jake is "one of these Jews who could care less about Judaism" (208). Yet the text clearly doubles Yehudah and Jake as not only deep-sea divers, rescuers of tradition and guardians of memory, but also transformers and interpreters of Judaism and Jewishness. Both represent Jewish men by birth who have actively chosen Jewishness, although their respective masculine Jewish expressions are quite distinctive. At a historical juncture when Jewish identification is expressed in a myriad of ways and is voluntary, we need to understand Jewish difference differently, and literary texts such as Horn's *In the Image* encourage such a reconceptualization. Indeed, in the pages of the Jewish American literary renaissance, gendered, sexed, and raced debates about Jewish identity become opportunities rather than crises, signs of creative potential rather than symptoms

of assimilation and deracination. By focusing on narratives that image Jewish regeneration through feminist Orthodoxy, queerness, off-whiteness, and intermarriage, *Identity Papers* argues that contemporary Jewish American literature redefines Jewish difference and resists a lachrymose view of contemporary Jewish American life.

To be sure, my emphasis on Jewish regeneration is allied with an abiding faith in the possibilities of becoming Jewish by choice. The term “Jews by choice” has conventionally been used as a descriptor for converts to Judaism; however, many commentators have noted that, as a result of modernity and the virtual disappearance of the most pernicious and disabling forms of anti-Semitism, all Jews in the United States who identify as such are “Jews by choice.” For many who are concerned—as I am—with questions of Jewish continuity, this element of choice arouses ambivalence and even fear. First and foremost, if one can choose Jewish affiliation (and I use this term to indicate a broad range of self-identifications rather than to designate the act of belonging to a synagogue), then it becomes possible to unaffiliate Jewishly, either actively or through benign neglect. As Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen characterize the modern period, “One could now choose what sort of Jew to be, and could in some cases choose—by conversion or assimilation—not to be any sort of Jew at all” (31). Moreover, when Jewishness becomes a function of “the sovereign self,” an expression of liberal individualism, the reigning ideology of the United States, then the boundaries of Jewish identity become porous. Although Cohen and Eisen recognize that such Jewish self-fashioning might contribute to Jewish creativity and renewal, they worry that it is more likely to “contribute to the dissolution of communal institutions and intergenerational commitments, thereby weakening the very sources of its own Jewish fulfillment and making them far less available to succeeding generations” (12).

As Cohen and Eisen note, “before the modern period Jews took for granted a conviction of *essential Jewish difference* from non-Jews” (27, emphasis in original). Significantly, this notion of “essential difference” is predicated on difference being absolute and oppositional (and, implicitly, hierarchical, which has historically led to the anti-Semitic abjecting of Jews countered with narratives of Jewish chosenness/superiority).⁴ The demise of this “essential

difference” has too often been read as the demise of the Jews, as an erasure of substantive Jewish difference. In a discussion of Jewish American literary history that might begin with Judah Monis, a Jew who converted to Christianity in 1772, and extend to Philip Roth’s “The Conversion of the Jews,” Michael Kramer aptly summarizes the alarm bells that have sounded as Jewish Americans have been consorting and sharing more and more with their Gentile neighbors in the post-World War II period: “Had the Jews remained Jews in more than name only? Did they indeed observe the same laws and offer the same prayers? Or had they all but converted—not formally, perhaps, but virtually, through assimilation?” (183). The universalist/particularist paradigm seems to be another way of framing the question of Jewish difference as either nonexistent or absolute, thus keeping “Jew” and “Gentile” as the foundational terms of Jewish difference. And, of course, communal concern about intermarriage reifies the notion that Jewish difference is defined as that which separates Jews from non-Jews; the stakes of upholding that difference in and through marriage are often presented as the key to Jewish survival or extinction (the dubbing of intermarriage as the “silent Shoah” makes this abundantly and, to many, offensively clear).

Essential Jewish difference, as it has been traditionally understood, provides the security of a clear boundary, a seemingly stable identity, but at what cost? By defining Jews primarily in relation to non-Jews, what forms of intra-Jewish difference are glossed over or allowed to calcify into internal Jewish hierarchies? Consider anew the language of the questions that Kramer uses to summarize anxieties about Jewish American (literary) history. Jewishness here is measured by “laws” and “prayers,” not to mention the specter of conversion. Thus Jewish expression is defined as essentially religious—that is, Judaic. So Jews who self-identify as ethnic rather than religious subjects are beyond the pale? Only traditionally observant Jews are authentic? Even if we accept that—and I certainly do not, nor do the vast majority of writers represented here—have we considered the extent to which such a stance reifies Orthodox subject positions and denies the multiplicity, diversity, and dialogues going on within those communities?

Narratives of the demise of Jewish difference have been accompanied by the death knell for Jewish American literature.

Famously and erroneously, Irving Howe and Leslie Fiedler assumed that immigration and generational tensions related to acculturation were literary catalysts; once acculturation gave way to a process of assimilation well-nigh completed, they predicted that Jewish difference and its literary expression would be exhausted.⁵ However, as critics as diverse as Andrew Furman, Victoria Aarons, Janet Burstein, Morris Dickstein, and Ezra Cappel have demonstrated, as a special issue of *Shofar* has attested, and as the pages of the *New York Times Book Review* illustrate on an almost weekly basis, a Jewish literary renaissance is well under way and shows no sign of abating.⁶ As many commentators have noted, a revival of religious energy, especially among women, has spawned this literary revival. Thus it makes sense that the first chapter of this book is devoted to the interface of feminism and Orthodoxy. However, if this is the only story for which we look, then we miss such important texts as Tony Kushner's *Caroline, or Change* (2004) and Paul Hord's *The Baker* (1997), not to mention such recent texts by Philip Roth as *The Human Stain* (2000) and *The Plot against America* (2004). Taken together, the texts discussed here seem to be in accord with Cohen and Eisen's view that "it seems there can be no Judaism without a Jewish people—and vice versa" (101). Although individual texts might privilege ethnic identity over religion or vice versa, the emergent traditions I trace here tend to see both expressions of Jewish identity as vital, intertwined, and authentically substantive. Significantly, many of these texts seem to share Horn's conviction in *In the Image* that the likes of both Jake and Yehudah are the key to a vibrant Jewish future in the United States.

Indeed, *Identity Papers* argues that the contemporary Jewish literary renaissance understands Jewish difference not only or even primarily as that between Jews and non-Jews, but also as Jews in relation to other Jews and, concomitantly, as Jews in relation to the "mob of Jews" that, according to Philip Roth, resides "inside every Jew" (*Operation Shylock* 334). Thus I read the pages of contemporary Jewish literature as performing Jewish identity in terms akin to Susan Stanford Friedman's conception of relational positionality. Friedman deployed this concept in an effort to get beyond an impasse in feminism that was marked by scripts of denial, accusation, and confession, and to "open the door for dialogue, affiliation, alliances,

and coalitions across racial and ethnic boundaries” (48). According to this theoretical framework, identity is viewed as “situationally constructed and defined at the crossroads of different systems of alterity and stratification. . . . Within a relational framework, identities shift with a changing context, dependent always upon the point of reference. Not essences or absolutes, identities are fluid sites that can be understood differently depending on the vantage point of formation and function” (47). Such a model seems particularly useful for analyzing texts that thematically engage with and strive to move beyond Jewish culture wars, with particular emphasis on the battlegrounds delimited by the relationship between feminism and Orthodoxy, the status of queer Jews, the ethnoracial identifications of white Jews, and intermarriage. An Orthodox feminist is positioned differently in a traditionally observant Jewish community than in a religiously liberal Jewish community or in a secular feminist enclave. As a queer Jew, one negotiates one’s being and becoming not only in relation to heterocentric Jewish communities but also in relation to queer communities that sometimes remain ignorant of or evince hostility to ethnoreligious identifications. The motivations for and effects of US Jews claiming whiteness shift according to context. The possibilities for Jewish expression within intermarriage become enmeshed within a web of history, familial dynamics, and communal attitudes. Ultimately, thinking about Jewish identity and difference in terms of relational positionality is a critical strategy designed to honor the complexities of literary texts that both represent and perform the multiple possibilities of choosing Jewishness; in dialogue with visionary texts, I strive to move beyond the communal impasses that result from deeming some “too Jewish” and others “not Jewish enough.” In the pages of the contemporary Jewish literary renaissance, Jewishness cannot be reduced to either excess or lack.

My critical method strives to take into account institutionalized structures of power and normalized narratives of Jewish identity. Thus I seek to avoid a vapid pluralism predicated on an individualism that much of contemporary theory has exposed as an illusion and that, in any event, is antithetical to the communalism that characterizes Judaic practice and Jewish ethnic expression. Jewish self-fashionings, choices, and becomings do not occur within a vacuum but rather within representational systems that have and

will continue to have material effects on Jewish lives and cultures. Narratives that represent Orthodoxy as embodying static notions of Jewish authenticity or an Old World state of being “too Jewish” affect the (im)possibilities of the development of feminist Orthodoxy; scripts that position queerness as a threat to the Jewish family shape narratives of Jewish queer life; whether the majority of US Jews story themselves (and are storied) as white or off-white impacts their understanding of anti-Semitism and their affiliation with—or distance from—communities of color. The texts showcased here do not shy away from the conflicts or struggles between or within Jews; rather, they are animated by creative forms of identification “fueled by tensions and differences” (Friedman, “The Labor” 104). Indeed, *Identity Papers* argues that such tensions and differences are a source of the vitality and significance of these texts. In short, my argument is that contemporary Jewish fiction re-presents contentious issues of Jewish identity as opportunities for reconceiving Jewish difference; here Jewish identity trouble is not the path to deracinated selves but rather a potential creative source, a well that might nurture new ways of becoming Jewish. Lest I seem too optimistically and glibly American, it might be worth noting that wrestling with identity and its ethereal projections is an archetypal Jewish story, one that turned Jacob into Israel.

The idea that Jewish reading is part and parcel of identity formation and a key to Jewish continuity is also in keeping with tradition. As People of the Book, Jews have forged identity and community (historically, these two have been inextricably connected) through reading and study. George Steiner has polemically argued that the text is the ultimate Jewish homeland, and Rebecca Goldstein, one of this generation’s preeminent writers and thinkers, notes that Jewish identity is textually and ritually portable.⁷ Of course, the Book that traditionally has defined Jewish peoplehood is the Tanakh and its vast commentary tradition. Torah does nothing less than narrate the founding of a people and their often vexed relationship with God, one another, and other peoples. Questions of inclusions and exclusions in order to maintain authenticity and community are major thematics. Although I do not have the chutzpah or even the desire to compare Goldstein’s *Mazel*, Horn’s *In the Image*, Roth’s *The Human Stain*, or Katz’s *Running Fiercely toward a High Thin Sound*

to the Tanakh, I do think that the reading and discussion of such texts serve a similar function as the study of Torah: to reflect and shape a sense of Jewish selfhood and peoplehood. Contemporary US Jews may well be the people of the books and of the movies, of the book club and the film festival. Many critics have noted that book fairs and film festivals function as ritual events (Sarna 331–32). For religiously minded Jews, such rituals become an addition to an already rich Jewish calendar marked not only by Passover, Chanukah, and the High Holy days but also by Shabbat, Sukkot, Purim, Shavuot, and Simchat Torah. For ethnically or secularly identified Jews, such textual engagements may be the primary form of ritual expression and Jewish learning. In either case—and perhaps all along the continuum of Jewish identification—it makes sense to pay close attention to what is inscribed, offered, and prohibited by these identity papers. Historically, of course, the term “identity papers” has referred to governmental rules and regulations that often were a matter of literal life and death. I use the term here to argue that, while US Jews today are Jews by choice, there are dominant discourses of Jewishness that are culturally and religiously regulatory. The texts—“papers”—discussed in these pages not only cite but also shift those nongovernmental but nonetheless powerful imperatives. I view such shifts as transforming Jewish identity crises into communal opportunities.

Contemporary Jewish textual culture is widely acknowledged as an aesthetic means of transmitting Jewish values, knowledge, and being. Alan Berger posits that “many American Jews depend on novels, rightly or not, for their knowledge about fundamental Jewish issues” (*Crisis and Covenant* 37). In *Generation J*, Lisa Schiffman reports that fiction was, for her, a purveyor of Jewish literacy, most specifically about the *mikveh* (80). Paul Berman cites the role that reading literature played during a phase of intense Jewish identification: “My conscious recognition of myself as this Jewish type came from reading literature, which I began to do seriously in the early seventies. That was a Jewish event, maybe, to learn about your personality from books. I read all sorts of novels, and I saw myself in the old Jewish world of the Lower East Side of fifty years before, where a certain characteristic personality—at least in the novels—was someone whose life revolved around a

passion for ideas” (qtd. in Bershtel and Graubard 27). Berman’s experience illustrates that while in the first half of the twentieth century Jewishness in the United States was often purveyed through urban and suburban Jewish enclaves, by the 1970s patterns of acculturation—facilitated by the eradication of both quotas in higher education and restrictive housing covenants—meant that a vibrant Jewish subculture could no longer be readily accessed or taken for granted. As Barack Fishman notes, “During the second half of the twentieth century, informal Jewish experience in neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces faded. . . . American environments provided little in the way of Jewish reinforcement” (*Jewish Life and American Culture* 59–60). Thus textual experience, always an important part of Jewish enculturation, has the potential to play an even more pivotal role in a world where the informal education of the Jewish street has waned.

The content of the texts considered here is explicitly and extensively Jewish centered. Thick descriptions of the markings of Jewish time and the Jewish calendar abound and are put to literary use: thus the onset of Shabbat is a narrative event in such texts as Goodman’s *Kaaterskill Falls* and Mirvis’s *The Outside World*; the custom of gift-giving at Purim is used to depict the boundaries of community in Mirvis’s *The Ladies Auxiliary*; the ceremonial burning of *chametz* (leaven, forbidden during Passover) as a means of purification becomes linked to questions of queer sexual ethics in Lowenthal’s *The Same Embrace*. However, although many of the texts under discussion in *Identity Papers* represent the oft-noted trend of being more religiously centered than earlier waves of Jewish American writing, Jewishness is not limited to Judaic ritual practice. In Roth’s *The Plot against America*, the Jewish street is remembered alongside the particular forms of anti-Semitism that were to be found on this side of the Atlantic. Significantly, the legacy of the interfacing of Jewishness with social justice movements such as feminism, gay liberation, and the civil rights movement is writ large in these pages. In *The Same Embrace*, Holocaust remembrance and the AIDS quilt project are presented along a continuum of cultural memory; the ways in which Northern and Southern Jews differentially responded to the civil rights movement animate Uhry’s *Driving Miss Daisy* and Kushner’s *Caroline, or Change*; blacks and

Jews defining themselves and each other through boxing becomes narrative and metaphor in both Roth's *The Human Stain* and Hond's *The Baker*; female communities in the garment industry become a precursor for Jewish lesbian feminism in Newman's *In Every Laugh a Tear*. Debra Schultz has commented that the transmission of Jewish cultural history "is a particularly vexing problem for progressive, unaffiliated Jews. Unlike synagogue members, secular Jews do not have ongoing social contexts within which to tell and retell our collective history" (xiv). Contemporary Jewish literature, in dialogue with its lay readers and professional critics, does the cultural work of not only transmitting Judaic literacy but also progressive Jewish cultural memory.⁸

For some of even the most enthusiastic supporters and chroniclers of the Jewish literary renaissance, the thick Jewish description contained in these texts is almost too thick. Andrew Furman, whose lively scholarly work in *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma: Return of the Exiled* has helped establish contemporary Jewish literature as a field worthy of study, has recently wondered aloud in the pages of *MELUS* whether the proliferation of Orthodox representations in literature, while welcome, speaks to our common national life as readily as did the works of Bellow, Malamud, and Roth ("Jewishness" 7). In "The Complex Fate of the Jewish American Writer," Morris Dickstein describes Jewish newcomers on the literary scene as "a rapidly expanding group, which reflects a passionate new ethnicity. Some of their work smells of the library or reads like latecomers' writing, arduously researched" (72). For him, such expressions of Jewishness are symptoms of belatedness as well as a "bookishness" that suggests "a vicarious Judaism" and "a certain remoteness from life" (73). However, I would argue that "its bookishness," what I would categorize as its self-conscious calling upon diverse religious traditions and cultural histories, may, in fact, be the lifeblood of this emergent literature. At least to me, it seems no coincidence that Fraydel, the wonderfully creative storyteller in Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel* who can only position herself as the madwoman of the shtetl, commits suicide and thus removes herself from the Jewish community soon after she gives up her voracious reading habit. The Jewish tradition is one that advocates study and intense

textual engagement; indeed, textual life is no less than a technology of Jewishness. The so-called bookishness of contemporary Jewish literature becomes its claim to poststructural authenticity. Stuart Charmé has compellingly argued that rather than dispensing with the notion of authenticity, we need to understand it as an always and already contested narrative, one that has critical and social utility. As Charmé writes, “Not only can a rehabilitated ideal of authenticity offer a position from which to critique cultural essentialism, but a critical, self-reflexive authenticity can also focus awareness on our identities’ unstable process of becoming. This is not an oxymoronic idea. Rather, authenticity is not about finding one’s ‘true self’ or the ‘real tradition’ but about maintaining an honest view of the process by which we construct the identities and traditions we need to survive” (150). The texts under discussion here both represent and collectively perform this process of mining religious and cultural narratives for postmodern Jewish sustainability, a process that entails the reconceptualization of Jewish difference.

From a variety of disciplinary perspectives, those who study contemporary ethnicity often read it as waning, especially among those groups that purportedly became white during the course of the twentieth century. A dominant sociological and aesthetic narrative proffered, respectively, by Herbert Gans and Werner Sollors is that ethnicity has become a largely symbolic structure with little particularist content.⁹ Gans has expanded his argument about ethnicity to include religiosity as well.¹⁰ However, the thick Jewish and Judaic description embedded in and defining contemporary Jewish literature seems to me to resist such trends. Moreover, this body of literature also seems to counter the tendency of some strands of poststructuralist thought to unwittingly erase Jewish specificity even as it strives to insert Jewish ideation into the history of philosophy. Lyotard’s decapitalizing of the “jews” in *Heidegger and “the jews”* exemplifies this new postmodern Jewish question:

I write “the jews” this way . . . to indicate that I am not thinking of a nation. I make it plural to signify that it is neither a figure nor a political (Zionism), religious (Judaism), or philosophical (Jewish philosophy) subject that I put forward under this name. I use quotation

marks to avoid confusing these “jews” with real Jews. What is most real about real Jews is that Europe, in any case, does not know what to do with them: Christians demand their conversion; monarchs expel them; republics assimilate them; Nazis exterminate them. “The jews” are the object of a dismissal with which Jews, in particular, are afflicted in reality. (3)¹¹

The best of intentions notwithstanding, Lyotard’s formulation here unwittingly poses a significant threat to Jews—either we end up becoming a lowercase figure for difference itself, for all Others, for the nomadic, for the postmodern, or our reality is mostly reduced to becoming the objects of European history. Like Woman, the Jew seems always in theoretical danger of becoming a metaphor, a victim, or a metaphoric victim.

Putting the “jew” into discourse in this way seems to be a form of inclusion, seems to mark and remember the horrors of the Shoah, seems to expose the failures of the Enlightenment and modernity to do right by “the Jews.” However, this form of “jewish studies” also makes it unnecessary to learn much (anything?) about Zionisms, Judaisms, Jewish cultures. Thus this theoretically correct, rigorously anti-essentialist mode of taking “jews” into account unintentionally functions as another form of dismissal, another form of othering, another denial of Jewish subjectivity. The “jew” becomes fetish and metaphor, while the “Jew” becomes less real, more phantasmic than the demanding Christian or the exterminating Nazi.¹² Postmodern “jewish” studies threatens to erase Jewish materiality and history. In sharp contrast, contemporary Jewish literature, with its focus on reconceptualizing Jewish difference so that questions of authenticity and identity are still in play but are neither essentialized nor outside the realm of representation, becomes an important body of knowledge for the development of postmodern Jewish studies.

The narratives under discussion here certainly are indebted to the new life narratives that Jews are creating and, to some extent, institutionalizing. Indeed, the role of organizations such as the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) and of gay synagogues such as Beth Simchat Torah in New York should not be underestimated as a cultural catalyst for the strands of the Jewish literary renaissance

represented in *Identity Papers*. However, aesthetic narratives need to be understood not only as mimetic in nature but also as visionary or prophetic. I view these narratives as accessible and concrete forms of Jewish identity theorizing; as such, they “remove blockages so as to make possible new ways of . . . enacting Jewish identity” and “provide openings for contemporary Jews wishing to free themselves from the prevailing normalizing discourses and develop alternative modes of Jewish becoming” (Silberstein, “Mapping, Not Tracing” 19, 12). Thus, for example, although some commentators have disparaged recent texts on Orthodoxy by Jewish women writers for inaccurately representing details about religious practice, I think such mimetic critiques are misplaced because they overlook the extent to which even and especially Orthodoxy is being defined as a mode of Jewish becoming rather than a predetermined way of being Jewish.¹³

Significantly, some of the removal of blockages entails a rethinking of the oft-assumed oppositional relationship between assimilation and Jewish identification.¹⁴ Throughout these texts and my analysis of them, we see that some seemingly assimilative strategies are, in fact, transformative, and have the effect of affirming Jewish difference. Chapter 2, “Feminism and Orthodoxy: Not an Oxymoron,” argues that while earlier Jewish feminist texts critiqued—and even dismissed—Judaism as hopelessly patriarchal and misogynist, a new generation of women writers represented by Rebecca Goldstein, Allegra Goodman, and Tova Mirvis inscribes the possibilities of feminism to revivify rather than to reject traditional Jewish life. These texts suggest that the development of feminist Orthodoxy reveals that Orthodoxy has a history; perhaps paradoxically, this refusal to embody Orthodoxy as a timeless, Jewish essence becomes a promise of its future. Moreover, these texts mine tradition for new models of masculinity that not only serve the goals of *shalom bayit* (peaceful, harmonious homes) but also should be required reading for a truly multicultural feminist discourse bent on reconstructing masculinity. Notably, these texts that provide narrative room for feminist Orthodoxy simultaneously inscribe narratives of respect and coexistence for intra-Jewish difference; Boaz Yakin’s film *A Price above Rubies* builds upon this emergent tradition by defining a contemporary tzaddik as one who embraces rather than

exiles diverse forms of Jewish expressiveness. Thus seemingly secular and assimilationist feminist impulses not only foster Jewish life but also short-circuit rather than ignite Jewish culture wars.¹⁵

Chapter 3, "Queering the Jewish Family," argues that while upholding proscriptions against homosexuality seems to preserve *halakha* (Jewish law) and essential Jewish difference, it simultaneously must be understood as a response to anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews as sexually perverse and as gender benders. Hence Jewish homophobia and the concomitant valorizing of the heterosexual nuclear family become a strategy of assimilation for Jewish communities, even as queers take on the mantle of an ethnic group, leaving little or no room for the expression of Jewish ethnicity or Judaic practice. In such diverse texts as Raphael's *Dancing on Tisha B'Av*, Katz's *Running Fiercely toward a High Thin Sound*, Newman's *In Every Laugh a Tear*, Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*, and Lowenthal's *The Same Embrace*, homophobia is inscribed as the real abomination that threatens the Jewish family, while queer living becomes a means of revising and preserving Jewish difference from generation to generation. For the queer Jews at the center of these narratives, religious and cultural traditions are a resource for coming out, for formulating queer sexual ethics, for resisting oppression, and for memorializing the dead without forsaking the living. Representing the overlap of two communities that are too often simply opposed to or paralleled with one another, queer Jews become double agents and cultural innovators in their quest to refuse to be assimilated to normative narratives of Jewishness or queerness. Thus they critique and transform both identity categories as they narrate alternative ways of becoming Jewish and of healing fractures within nuclear and more extended Jewish families.

Chapter 4, "The Color of White Jewry," explores the relationship between racializing discourses and the expression of Jewish difference. Through the genre of memoir, McBride's *The Color of Water* and Walker's *Black, White, and Jewish* tell an increasingly conventionalized ethnoracial story: Jewishness becomes aligned with whiteness, the former is represented as hopelessly deracinated, and Jewishness is mobilized in opposition to blackness. However, such texts as Hond's *The Baker*, Kushner's *Caroline, or Change*, Uhry's *Driving Miss Daisy*, and Roth's *The Human Stain* strive to

complicate a black-Jewish binary by reading Jewishness as a form of off-whiteness. These texts historicize and position Jews in relation to non-Jewish African Americans and, often implicitly, to white Christians. Taken together, narratives of off-whiteness simultaneously chart the lingering effects of US forms of anti-Semitism on Jewish psyches as well as acknowledge the access Jews have had to white privilege throughout the twentieth century. Significantly, these texts demythologize black-Jewish relations, seeing them as neither a story of essential antagonism nor a script of naturalized alliances. Moreover, in a work such as Uhry's *The Last Night of Ballyhoo*, the relative whiteness of Jews becomes an expression of intra-Jewish difference linked to US and European geography. Too often the whitening of most US Jews is cast as a simple story of assimilation, and resistance to reading Jews as white is read as a (neo)conservative strategy to make Jews strangers to mainstream US culture. Taken together, the narratives of relational positionality under discussion here refuse to use race as a means of obliterating Jewish difference or establishing it as absolute.

In chapter 5, a purposefully polemical epilogue, I look at the identity crisis that arguably most vexes the institutional Jewish world: intermarriage. The narratives focused on here, Rebecca Goldstein's "Rabbinical Eyes" and Allan Appel's *Club Revelation*, resist the normative reading of intermarriage as both cause and effect of the most virulent forms of assimilation. Instead, these texts assess both the risks and the possibilities of loving coalitions between Jews and non-Jews, an ambiguity continuous with some biblical precedents, most notably Moses and Zipporah, and Esther. While the terms *shiksa* (non-Jewish woman) and *shaygetz* (non-Jewish man) derive from the Hebrew word for abomination, these narratives suggest we read Jewish lovers and lovers of Jews (and their progeny) with considerably more *rachmones* (compassion) and creativity.

My initial plan for this book included a chapter devoted to post-Holocaust consciousness; however, I deviated from that plan for both practical and theoretical reasons that merit exposition here. First and foremost, it seems to me that contemporary Jewish American literature is, almost by definition, an expression of post-Holocaust consciousness. I confess little patience with the argument that Jewish Americans are victim-mongering when the

Shoah looms large in psyche and memory. Although Peter Novick has asserted that Jewish Americans have no claim to the trauma of the Holocaust since most are two or three generations removed from that historical event, I would argue that to be so historically close to attempted genocide is indeed traumatic and that Jewish American writers are, as Janet Burstein has recently demonstrated, doing the cultural work of mourning and moving beyond mourning. As Morris Dickstein puts it, post-World War II, Jewish American writers are “as much the children of the Holocaust as of the ghetto” (61). Thus it makes sense that both the lost and the saving remnants of the Shoah frequent the pages of such texts as *Kaaterskill Falls*, *In the Image*, *Mazel*, *Running Fiercely toward a High Thin Sound*, and *The Same Embrace*. Throughout *Identity Papers*, I strive to remain sensitive to the explicit presence as well as to the absent presence of the Shoah in these fictional meditations on Jewish difference. However, it also seems to me that contemporary narratives of Jewish identity cannot be founded on attempted genocide. As Rebecca Goldstein eloquently points out, the Shoah is “what they did to us, but that’s not what we’re about. We’re not about being martyred, and we’re not about suffering, and we’re not about victimhood: we’re about celebration” (interview with Cappell 182). If we allow such historic atrocity to define us, then we risk losing the richness of a living tradition. I think that all those committed to Jewish studies should be concerned about how much of Judaica on the shelves of Barnes and Noble is devoted to the destruction of European Jewry; without in any way trivializing or marginalizing the Shoah, I seek to privilege Jewish agency, Jewish creativity, and Jewish life as a means of refusing to grant Hitler a posthumous victory.¹⁶ Hence post-Holocaust consciousness is both omnipresent throughout this study but also quite purposefully not the center of any one chapter. While Thane Rosenbaum, one of the most gifted and responsible of our second-generation writers, has his Nazi hunter Duncan Katz note that “the people of the Book had become the people of the Holocaust books,” *Second Hand Smoke* develops into a narrative in which “all of a sudden, just being Jewish, independent of his Holocaust credentials, mattered to Duncan, as well” (75–76, 283). In some ways, *Identity Papers* picks up where Duncan leaves off. Ultimately, I consciously write in the shadow of the catastrophic losses of the twentieth century but also emboldened by what I

perceive as the vitality and promise of contemporary Jewish American life and letters.¹⁷

Like the Shoah, Israel is normatively assumed to be a pillar of contemporary Jewish identity. However, while journeys to and from the Jewish state mark narratives as diverse as Anne Roiphe's *Lovingkindness* and Michael Lowenthal's *The Same Embrace*, Israel does not become a center for *Identity Papers*.¹⁸ In Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel*, Sasha, a star of the Yiddish stage, escapes from Nazi-occupied Europe via what was then known as Palestine; however, she ends up settling in New York and refuses to regard herself as in exile. The idea that Jewish life in the United States can only be lived vicariously through Israel is anathema to me; thus *Identity Papers* focuses on the diverse forms of Jewish home-making that have been effected in the States and in the pages of a specific national Jewish literature. Indeed, my analysis here presumes that the contemporary Jewish American literary renaissance both reflects and shapes a distinctive national ethos marked by tensions between discourses of difference and the ideology of the melting pot. Such tensions contribute much to the productive unsettling of the opposition between assimilation and identification that I argue can be found throughout these contemporary narratives of Jewish becoming.

Ultimately I would argue that the emergent body of Jewish American texts represented here has much to offer not only Jewish studies but also feminist, queer, and whiteness studies. Although feminist studies has, in the past two decades, increasingly engaged questions of race, class, sexuality, and national origin, it has yet to fully develop a subtle and sophisticated understanding of religion as a category of difference and to unpack some of its anti-Judaic baggage; my hope is that my discussion of feminist Orthodoxy does its part to further not only the discussion of feminism in Jewish studies but also a wrestling with Jewishness in feminist studies. Similarly, queer studies is at a stage in its (inter)disciplinary development in which it needs to take into account more heterogeneous queer subject positions. Moreover, since questions of kinship, assimilation, and normalization have taken center stage in queer studies in recent years, I remain convinced that related questions of Jewishness can make a productive difference in that field as well. Although a significant body of material on how Jews became white exists, the assumption that that process has been completed is at odds with how many

Jews view themselves within a country that is becoming increasingly multiracial rather than biracial. Put another way, the narrative of the whitening of Jews too often reinstates the very white-black binary it strives to disrupt. Additionally, the view that Jews have “achieved” (or fallen into) whiteness leaves us analytically ill equipped to take into account diverse and subtle formations of racism, including anti-Semitism. Thus it seems to me that the evolving Jewish literary renaissance is anything but provincial; rather, it is engaged with the central categories of analysis—gender, sexuality, and race—of contemporary academic discourses and our national life.

Nessa Rapoport, whose coedited anthology *Writing Our Way Home* and 1981 novel *Preparing for Sabbath* might serve as early markers of the contemporary Jewish literary renaissance, has recently commented that she can no longer keep up with the current outpouring of Jewish texts.¹⁹ The danger of such a proliferation of texts is that critics will become overwhelmed and settle on a canon prematurely, thus excluding voices that merit a fuller hearing. Indeed, it is my acute awareness of the stakes of canon formation that has caused me to focus on an eclectic group of texts, including a few paradigmatic feature-length films. Some of the usual suspects are well represented here: Who writing on contemporary Jewish literature today would not discuss one or another novel by Philip Roth and Allegra Goodman? However, I have also striven to include less well-known texts by well-known writers; for example, while Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* is already critically overexposed, his *Caroline, or Change* is worthy of much more serious attention than it has hitherto received, particularly since some initially dismissed it as a performance of Jewish self-hatred. Significantly, many of the other gay and lesbian writers represented here—for example, Judith Katz and Michael Lowenthal—are neither Jewish nor queer household names, and that seems to me to be a literary *shanda* (shame). The reconceptualization of Jewish difference is not only a literary but also a critical project. Especially for a people of the books, how we envision Jewishness is inextricably connected to what we read, and the Jewish choices we think possible are, at least in part, a product of narrative. By choosing to focus on such a diverse but by no means comprehensive body of texts, I hope to encourage my readers to expand their literary horizons and thus their Jewish imaginations.