Mapping the ‘New Jewish Cultural Studies’

by Jonathan Judaken


Introducing Jews and Other Differences, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin argue for the need to establish a ‘Jewish place’ within the shifting field of cultural studies. (p. viii) Creating such a place, I want to show here, involves a perpetual back-and-forth between postmodern theories applied to Jewish culture and history on the one hand, and the rich resources of ‘tradition’ Jewish studies on the other. In my analysis of the new Jewish cultural studies, I assess how this emerging mid-field enriches cultural studies and our understanding of both European and Jewish cultures. I discuss some of the problems and insights of postmodern approaches,
especially with respect to our understanding of the vexed subject of individual and collective identity. I point to a tension between postmodernist efforts to critically analyze the historical constructions of Jews and the historical tendency to rally and romanticize the "Jew." My argument is that the problems of postmodernism are mitigated when scholars work within an open dialectic that entails a deep respect for Jewish history and an understanding of how its resources can contribute toward tikkun olam, and simultaneously engage in a critique of the injustices perpetuated in the name of Jewish culture.

Mapping this intersection, I will use as my guide the four subject themes of the second anthology reviewed here, Modernity, Culture and the "Jew." Gender, Psychoanalysis and History; Literature, Modernism, Antisemitism; Memory, Memorialization and the Holocaust; and Modernity, Postmodernity and the "Jew." These themes demonstrate that what is now common to new Jewish cultural studies is a critique of the system of genocide (national and ethnic, sexual and gendered, epistemological and disciplinary, subjective and unconscious) that has served to inscribe the "Jew" on the margins of Europe culture. Periodically, however, this marginalization has by no means implied irrelevance, since all the works discussed here show that Jews, Judaism and the "Jewish Question" have for centuries been central to European civilization's self-definition.

The essays appearing under the heading "Gender, Psychoanalysis and History in Modernity, Culture and the "Jew" explore psychoanalytic contributions to the study of prejudice, focusing on what Eric Santner calls the "private and collective fantasies about the "other." . . . in the psychosexual make-up of the human subject." (p. 40) The three contributions to this section, Richard Robson, Santner, and Daniel Boyarin, discuss the image of the "feminized Jew." Robson traces the genealogy of this figure from Oeffe and Schiller to the "Young German" writers of the 1830s, through the Viennese Rabbi Adolf Jellinek, to the work of Nietzsche, Ratzel, and Weininger, among others. Robson's argument is that in the mid-nineteenth century, the femininity of the Jewish woman comes to be inscribed to the male Jew, whose deficient masculinity is measured against more than one implied model of masculinity." (p. 26) Robson's perspective is problematic because it is based on a model of representing, of overcoming, Jewish homosexual effeminacy. Both of these phenomena, he suggests provocatively, represented a radical form of 'masculinization' because they were like all the nations, that is, like Aryan (Oedipus), but remain Jews in name." (p. 276) Boyarin contends that assimilation should therefore be seen as a threat implicit in the entire emancipation project, one characterized, by romanticizing values, heroic victory, and recovering Jews according to gentile norms and cultural patterns, however, for many European Jews, Jews were still not authentically like "us." The figure of the "other Jew" (in the sense of Jewish difference, abstraction and effeminacy) thus discloses what Santner posits was a crisis of "symbolic power and authority" (p. 43) in the fin-de-siècle. One aspect of this crisis, Boyarin suggests, was "the parallel shift of Jews from "traditional" to "modern" and "eastern" to "western," and the ways that are both intimately interconnected in questions of male gender." (p. 63)

Elaborating on this claim, Daniel Boyarin's 'On Jewish Conduct is paradigmatic of the new Jewish cultural studies because he deploys the gaze of postmodern theoretical concepts as a productive supplement to the traditional philological and historical approaches of Jewish studies in the exegesis of the Bible and Midrash, Talmud and Halakah, Kabbalah, Liturgy, Hebrew literature and Jewish thought. The first section of the book contains a close reading of Talmudic passages to show how the tradition of rabbinic Judaism and its Ashkenazic legacy cultivated Talmudic learning to produce (ideally) gentle, passive, emotional men (p. 156) whose "feminization" was intentionally subtle in its implications for the (frequently hegemonic European) ideals of masculinity, defined in terms of honour and chivalry. What I would here call Boyarin's redemptive hermeneutics therefore seeks to reveal those aspects of traditional Judaism that permitted to preserve a memory of Jewish resistance to dominant norms and values as the basis for a cultural and political stance. He accomplishes this through re-reading of the stories and motifs in the Jewish past that can serve as prototypes for a cultural praxis in the present." (p. 312-313) This praxis is characterized by a dual movement that "the delegitimization of Judeo-culture from without and the reconstruction of the "kinder, gentler" patriarchy because 'it's a difficult definition to make a chain, then the exclusion of women [from study] was the practice that constructed gender difference and hierarchy within that society." (p. 152)

The second part of "Unilinear Conduct explores the invention of the Jewish man" as concomitant with the sociopolitical transformation of the fin-de-siècle Viennese culture. Taking the careers of Sigmund Freud and Theodor Herzl as typical of the psychological and political contrasts facing Jews at the time, Boyarin argues that there was a "shift in the discourse of marriage, family and parenthood that marked the "rise of heterosexuality" as the exclusive norm for assimilating Jews. A "text of historical forces," Boyarin writes, led to the "pathologizing of the "homoamerican" . . . and the racialization of the Jew." (p. 268) The European fin-de-siècle that saw a vicious backlash to Jewish assimilation, one of whose costs was the loss of that Jewish element in modern Jewish culture that cultivated strong women, and elevating, "masculine" males.

Bojarin traces the effects of this loss in the work of Freud and Herzl, arguing that the Oedipus complex and Zionism were tasks in reasserting Jewish "masculine effeminacy." Both of these phenomena, he suggests provocatively, represented a radical form of 'masculinization' because they were like all the nations, that is, like Aryan (Oedipus), but remain Jews in name." (p. 276) Boyarin contends that assimilation should therefore be seen as a threat implicit in the entire emancipation project, one characterized, by romanticizing values, heroic victory, and recovering Jews according to gentile norms and cultural patterns, however, for many European Jews, Jews were still not authentically like "us." The figure of the "other Jew" (in the sense of Jewish difference, abstraction and effeminacy) thus discloses what Santner posits was a crisis of "symbolic power and authority" (p. 43) in the fin-de-siècle. One aspect of this crisis, Boyarin suggests, was "the parallel shift of Jews from "traditional" to "modern" and "eastern" to "western," and the ways that are both intimately interconnected in questions of male gender." (p. 63) For all of his brilliant insights, Boyarin's writing is unnecessarily verbose and mixed in theoretical jargon. This is a failure common to much of the new Jewish cultural studies and cultural studies generally and one factor why "traditional" practitioners of Jewish Studies have resisted the claim. Daniel Boyarin's own theoretical strategies sometimes subtly obscure the problems that he seeks to highlight: that is, he writes from a position of discursive mastery, and occasionally assimilates other
readings to his argument. This is true of the second part of the book, and leads to a disjuncture between his reading of Talmudic literature, which is sensitive to the polysemous possibilities of the texts, and his reading of modern literature, where he is often more teleological, erosioning the ambiguity of a work in order to deliver what he considers to be a definitive analysis. Finally, the voice of Boyarin's work is diminished by an 'identity politics' that seeks to valorize a particular Jewish identity rather than to multiply the possibilities of being Jewish: an ever-present risk within Jewish cultural studies, as argued within cultural studies as a whole.

"Literature, Modernism, Antimodernism" is the category to which the largest number of essays in this volume are assigned. This category is divided into four parts: literature, modernism, antimodernism, and cultural studies, as the table above indicates. While it is true that the topics range from modernist and postmodernist literature to Jewish and non-Jewish art, film, theatre, music, and popular culture, I would argue that the category is too broad and too heterogeneous to deliver a coherent discussion of the topics.

Daniel Pick's essay is a new reading of Gustave de Beaumont's "Le Désert". Pick argues that the novel is a critique of the modernist discourse of the late nineteenth century, specifically the "cultural" and "ethnic" identities that emerged during this period. He argues that the novel is a critique of the modernist discourse of the late nineteenth century, specifically the "cultural" and "ethnic" identities that emerged during this period.

"Literature, Modernism, Antimodernism" is the category to which the largest number of essays in this volume are assigned. This category is divided into four parts: literature, modernism, antimodernism, and cultural studies, as the table above indicates. While it is true that the topics range from modernist and postmodernist literature to Jewish and non-Jewish art, film, theatre, music, and popular culture, I would argue that the category is too broad and too heterogeneous to deliver a coherent discussion of the topics.

Daniel Pick's essay is a new reading of Gustave de Beaumont's "Le Désert". Pick argues that the novel is a critique of the modernist discourse of the late nineteenth century, specifically the "cultural" and "ethnic" identities that emerged during this period. He argues that the novel is a critique of the modernist discourse of the late nineteenth century, specifically the "cultural" and "ethnic" identities that emerged during this period.

In the end, Conner celebrates what Joyce names the "perverted jew" for the connection he (i.e. Joyce/Conner) establishes between the perversion and power to pervert associated with the Jew. (p. 236) Conner details the deviation of Joyce's "perverted jew" because this untenable identity subverts the normalization and homogenizing tendency of powerful discourses and institutions in modernity. Conner does not, however, adequately address the ambivalent overlap between his affirmation of this "jewish perversion" and the anticommaxic critique of the "perverted jew". While I appreciate his insistence upon the always heterogeneous and multiple identity of Jew and Judaism, unlike Boyarin's dual strategy, Conner does little to theorize the historical violence against the "perverted jew" and the ways in which this violence has been perpetuated by the exclusionary logic of the "unified identity".

Several of the contributions in "Jews and Other Differences" focus critical attention on the exclusions within Hebrew modernism. Conner allows us to see how the"perverted jew"'s""jewish perversion" overlaps with the "unified identity". But Conner does little to theorize the historical violence against the "perverted jew" and the ways in which this violence has been perpetuated by the exclusionary logic of the "unified identity".

"Jews and Other Differences" focuses critical attention on the exclusions within Hebrew modernism. Conner allows us to see how the"perverted jew"'s""jewish perversion" overlaps with the "unified identity". But Conner does little to theorize the historical violence against the "perverted jew" and the ways in which this violence has been perpetuated by the exclusionary logic of the "unified identity".
developing European modernist trends within this minor tradition, while questioning some of the constraints of European modernism.

Last someone suggest that Jewish modernism is inherently self-distrustful, Naomi Seidman's last article shows that the restriiction of Hebrew that made Hebrew modernism itself possible engendered certain exclusions. She argues that "the Hebrew revival, and the Hebrew-Yiddish language was thus enabled, was, on one level, the struggle for a "modern tongue" [ma'ase-ha-shale] and a "father tongue" [ishan-keydesh] (p. 286) that ultimately led to "the suppression of the Yiddish language, with all its fascinations and wood". (p. 287) Amnon Ayalon's contribution on Jewish literary history widens the gender implications of Seidman's critique into a discussion of ethnic exclusions by contending that "Zionist discourse . . . has perpetuated every aspect of modern Jewish literature". It has also been complemented by two postmodern readings of the text. Ayalon notes that this discourse has almost literally refrained people to talk about the present political, social, and cultural status of Sephardic, Ashkenazi, or oriental Jews in historical and non-ideological or apologetic terms as a focal point through which different interpretations of the past can be filtered". (p. 333) Ayalon thus broaches the preoccupation of Jewish modernism with dominant Ashkenazi Jewish culture and the deleterious effects of intellectual currents in the postwar period which has accompanied the Zionist construction of the "literary" past.

The filtering of the traumatic past is foregrounded in the essays that focus on "Memory, Memory and the Holocaust", which explore the relationship between memory and history, emphasizing how memory is represented or housed in a museum and museums. The former texts are divided into two sections: individual and collective. Writers examine the differences and similarities in representations of collective Self and Other in the memorial space of the cemetery at Père Lachaise, in a British museum display in 1992, and in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, in films from Spielberg's Schindler's List to Livni's Shoah; in memoirs from Pirano Levi to Jean Amely, and in the career of the term "Holocaust" itself. In light of the effort by self-effaced "extensionists" to deny the Holocaust in publications that simulate historical journals — a movement that Pierre Vidal-Naquet justifiably calls the work of "paper Eichmann" — and evident in the recent history of the David Irving libel trial, the Holocaust has become a key test-case for general historiographical approaches, especially postmodern efforts to rethink history purely in terms of the problems of memory.

James Young's essay "The Arts of Jewish Memory in a Postmodern Age", in Modernity, Culture and the Jews, edited by John Dower, suggests that modernity might be interpreted as a process of exclusion. Young argues that the paradoxes of memorials of events tend to multiply as the events recede into the past, and the more significant the event, the more the episode of communal forgetting. Thus, the "impute to memorialization events like the Holocaust might actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them". (p. 211) As Young, Dower, and de laCerda and others have shown, memory work is always an unfinished project: self-doubting, self-reflective and bound up with the identity that remembers. This uncertainty and deference of meaning also characterizes history as a whole, forcing us to confront the historian's inability to "provide eternal answers and stable answers".

The essays in the section on "Modernity, Postmodernity and the Jews", in Modernity, Culture and the Jews, survey the significance of the Holocaust and the "Jewish Quotid" to the debates that have shaped the modern/postmodern divide. In his opening essay Zygmunt Bauman, condemning postmodern critique of modernity, argues for the reassessment of the historiography of anti-Semitism and for the need to rethink the social, political and historical processes which have shaped the representations of Jewish difference. Unlike Sander Gilman's seminal efforts in this regard, Bauman's work, I want to suggest, is insufficiently historical, absolving an essence assigned to Jewishness in the Holocaust narrative. (p. 146) His work is teleological, viewing all modernity through the somewhat distorting lens of the Shoah, and fashioned a image of "the Jew" as the non-reified Other of modernity's modernization

David Feldman's essay "Was Modernity Good for the Jews" provides an important corrective to this holistic argument. In a much lesser extent, which Bellamy explores from a psychoanalytic perspective. Her opening chapter, "Mounting and Melancholia in the French Post-Holocaust", surveys the widespread invocation of the "Jew" and Judaism in the work of Maurice Blanchot, Alain Fladik-Velk and Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Stjepan Zizek and others; subsequent chapters explore this problematization in greater detail in the work of Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Philippe Labbante, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jean-Francois Lyotard.

Bellamy argues that the philosophical discourse of much of postmodernism paradoxically both represses and naturalizes the trauma of the Holocaust, and that "new" psychoanalytic French theorists have appropriated psychoanalysis as a specifically French "science", eliminating its properly "Jewish" origins. In. Delucchi, Sinclair, perhaps surprisingly, syncretizes psychoanalysis as French post war culture in the role of the. Vichy government in the Holocaust.

The stress on psychoanalysis in Bellamy's analysis seems motivated by a desire less to restore Florence's Jewish origins than to counteract postmodern theory for getting Freud wrong. In a directly parallel way to what the author argues postmodernism, is repressed in her fixation on the Holocaust as psychoanalysis is not only the history of the "Jewish Quotid", but the Shoah itself, which, often disappears in a highly abstract (and difficult to follow) discussion about getting Freud right on the question of repression, the uncanny and traumatic, psychoanalytic notions and designating Freud's French readers for their creative uses of his concepts. While she is extremely rigorous in reading Freud, some of her criticism of postmodern thinkers equivocates on the meaning of modernist targets of her critique, for all of her sharp insights, Bellamy herself ultimately deploys the "Jewish Quotid" as a trope for a critical reading of postmodernism, mobilizing postmodern exegetical strategies to perform this trick, without in turn acknowledging her debt to the theories she is eager to criticize. The result is that her own text acts out, rather than works through the dichotomies of remembering and forgetting, memory and history, modernity and postmodernity.
The books reviewed here thus highlight the risks and benefits of postmodern approaches to Jewish culture. On the one hand, as Max Silverman warns in his contribution to *Modernity, Culture and the Jew*, Jews and Judaism are sometimes simply employed as 'an ethnic allegiance to characterize the tension between order and disorder, reason and resistance to reason, the self-constituted self and the heterogeneous self, Europe and its other(s)*. (p. 199) On the other hand, in the best of these writings Jewishness serves as a critical prism, not only illuminating the systems of domination in modernity, but offering examples from the Jewish past and from Jewish culture that may serve as tactics of resistance in the present. A focus on 'the Jew' therefore not only self-reflectively enables us to examine how postmodern theories have helped to shape the innovative efforts of the new Jewish cultural studies, but also some of the limits of these critical strategies in a postmodern age.

**NOTES AND REFERENCES**

1. Zabumbu was a Yoruban concept which arose to justify the institution of slavery in the American South. For more on this concept, see Adebayo Adeniyi Jnr., *The Yorubas of Nigeria*.


3. For examples of how post-Holocaust narratives are influencing these areas of Jewish identity, see Susan Kapferer's edited volume, *Interpreting Judaism in the Postmodern Age*, NYU Press, New York, 1994; and Laurence Silberman and Robert Cohen (eds), *The Other in Jewish Thought and History*, NYU Press, New York, 1994.

4. Boyarin develops the concept of 'iritrimentation' to resistance to a notion of 'essential femininity' in women and in order to mark these ideal Jewish performances as 'translations' within the context of a cultural performance, and particularly as it intersects with other cultural formations'. See p. 4, 8, 10.

5. Boyarin's approach to modern culture is characterized by what I would call a "transcultural" perspective. This phrase was suggested by Vincent Desprès's *L'Etoile de l'Amour*, translated as *Modern French Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1988. Deceuninck argues that the primary influences on postmodernism were Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, where he calls 'the three masters of suspicion'. I would suggest these are central influences because of their focus on contradictions within systems of oppression, their insights for outlining how power works, and their critical questioning of normative values. Boyarin is characteristic of much of the new Jewish cultural studies in foregrounding these concerns.


7. Conroy defines the 'Jewish Question' as 'the demand made of the Jew' that he name and acknowledge himself as such, along with the question that 'the Jew' poses in reply to this demand with regard to the processes of national naming and sublimating'. (p. 235)

8. Alchemy comes of the transformation of Jewish literary history is related to the historiographical critique of post-Zionist historians, known as the 'new historians'. For more on these developments within historicography, see Lawrence Silberman, *Postmodern Hebrew Studies: Knowledge and Power in Israeli Culture*, Routledge, New York, 1999; and History and Memory in the Holocaus...