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ANTHROPOLOGY

Misha Klein

Roots

Like other fields defined by a geographical area or cultural group, Jewish Studies has developed primarily through the disciplines of history and literature, with contributions from sociology and demography. With a few notable exceptions, anthropological perspectives have been largely absent from the discussion. This lacuna is in part an effect of the way that area studies emerged within the academy, and partly it is a reflection of the interests and materials available within the field of Jewish Studies in particular. It is also an index of the way in which anthropology has developed. The history of anthropology, especially as it has developed in the United States, has long been entangled with Jews and the study of Jewishness and Jewish cultures. However, it is only at the turn of the twenty-first century that anthropology has directly embraced the study of Jews and with full recognition of the contributions that the study of Jewishness can make to a variety of subfields within anthropology. The resulting theoretical developments also have insights to offer the interdisciplinary field of Jewish Studies.

The foundations for this mutually beneficial relationship between anthropology and Jewish Studies were laid as anthropology emerged in the United States, and in the singular persona of Franz Boas. There is little doubt that Boas became attuned to the social consequences of cultural difference through his experiences as a Jew in his native Germany. Trained in physics, Boas came to anthropology by way of questions that eventually came to be known as “cultural relativism,” which in its broadest sense means that cultures need to be understood on their own terms, and not through the lens of another culture. The significance of this often misunderstood concept for the understanding of Jews really only came to full fruition in the later part of the twentieth century, as anthropologists undertook research on Jewish cultures around the world; prior to this time, Jews were not considered a fully legitimate object of study, partly because the historical legacy of anthropology meant that scholars tended to study primarily foraging and tribal peoples and those who had come to the attention of core nations through colonial and expansionist initiatives. While often accused of conducting “salvage anthropology” in order to create a record of rapidly disappearing cultures, Boas’ research agenda was far more complex than a frantic attempt to catalogue cultural variation. As a methodological stance, cultural relativism insists that there are worldviews that are not fully knowable from the outside, and that they consist of more than a set of distinctive practices and knowledge of local flora and fauna. Boas’

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approach encompassed broader questions about the human mind and the nature of humanity. As such, the anthropological study of Jews and Jewishness must be understood as an endeavor to comprehend the full range of human experience within which individual research projects do not simply represent one more chapter in the catalogue of human variation, but shed light on larger questions about humanity as a whole.

As anthropology expanded in the post-war period, scholars took it upon themselves increasingly to research industrialized and familiar people. With the political upheavals in the U.S. and worldwide during the 1960s and 1970s, anthropologists began to study urban peoples, ethnic groups, and those who could read and respond to what they had written. This forced greater accountability on the part of anthropologists, both in terms of the substance of what they wrote, and also in terms of the significance of their research questions and the outcomes for the study population. Changes in anthropology also required that anthropologists justify their research vis-à-vis the contributions to be made to our collective knowledge about humanity as a whole, a fundamentally comparative project. As such, the increasing emphasis on the study of Jews in anthropology is rooted in the recognition that these scattered populations who consider themselves to be related genetically, historically, culturally, and religiously, offer us a rich example of the tremendous adaptability of humans, as well as the power of ideology.

Who is a Jew?

Franz Boas conducted research and trained students in all four of the major subfields of anthropology – physical, archaeological, linguistic, and cultural – an approach that distinguished the development of anthropology in the US, in contrast to other national scholarly traditions. Boas and his students made use of these varied approaches in considering “the Jewish question.”

Physical anthropology, or the study of humans as a species through the framework of evolution and adaptation, gave Boas and several of his best-known students a platform from which to rebut the prevailing eugenicist ideas that enjoyed popularity in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere, and which also drew on physical anthropology. A significant goal of the anthropological project over the last 100 years has been to debunk the notion that the human species can be divided into “races,” or biologically distinct groupings. This project began with Boas and several of his students, who used the example of Jews to build a case against the existence of biological races. The perennial question of “who is a Jew?” led several of these scholars to begin to dismantle the concept of race, first by considering the interaction of culture and biology. Boas (1912) began with a consideration of immigrants in the U.S., using anthropometric analyses to demonstrate that the children of immigrants were demonstrably different from their parents – making clear that the environment (nutritional, hygienic, and cultural) has immediate and significant effects on how humans respond to their genetic potential. While the eugenicists argued that biology determined culture, and that cultural differences were therefore biologically encoded, Boas dismissed biological determinism, instead emphasizing that cultural differences “depend upon outer conditions that sway the fate of the people, upon its history, upon powerful individuals that arise from time to time, upon foreign influences” (Boas 1939: 13). For Boas, culture was something dynamic and responsive, not something rigid and predetermined. In the lead article in the inaugural issue of the journal *Jewish Social Studies*, Boas considered the relationship between “heredity and environment,” and cautioned that “the existence of a cultural personality embracing a whole ‘race’ is at best a poetic and dangerous fiction” (Boas 1939: 14). By “cultural personality” he meant a set of behavioral and attitudinal characteristics attached to a particular group, and called the idea “poetic” because of the tenacious desire to embrace so-called positive stereotypes as if they were inherent rather than learned, and to fail to see that they are

merely the flip side of bigotry and violence. It is also worth noting Boas' prophetic use of quotation marks around the word "race" because of how that concept was employed in his native Germany to distinguish Jews and other groups, laying the groundwork for the holocaust to come.

Some of Boas' best-known students, including Alfred Kroeber (1917) and Melville Herskovits (1927, 1960 [1949]), used the example of Jews to think about the concept of "race." For Herskovits the question of "race" in regards to Jews was compelling precisely because attempts to define Jews have included such varied and slippery concepts as "race, people, nation, religion, cultural entity, historic group, [and] linguistic unit" (Herskovits 1960 [1949]: 1491).

Recent developments in genetics have reinvigorated the "poetic and dangerous fiction" of race because of fundamental misunderstandings of genetic science on the part of the lay public (including some scholars and rabbis). The fantasy that Jews exist as a distinctive and biologically identifiable entity, in spite of what has been clearly documented historically and culturally, allows people to easily latch onto ideas such as the "Kohen" gene (Kahn 2010), and imagine that it is possible to trace ancestry back to a specific priestly population in Ancient Israel – in spite of the fact that non-Jews also carry this gene, and that the gene is only transmitted along the male line, while Jewish ancestry is matrilineal. The desire to identify a biological source for perceived Jewish exceptionalism entirely ignores a century of scholarship that unequivocally points to environment – cultural practices and access to resources – as accounting for the accomplishments of groups of people.

Given these many considerations, when anthropologists undertake to study a Jewish group, they are not arbiters of identity. Their role is not to evaluate the truth-value of claims to Jewishness, whether by descent, desire, or feeling. Rather than determine the objective validity of Jewish identity by descent, anthropologists look at meaning, belief, and practice. There is no firm answer to the question "who is a Jew?" beyond the eminently social and flexible definition offered by Melville Herskovits nearly a century ago: "*A Jew is a person who calls himself a Jew, or is called Jewish by others*" (Herskovits 1927: 117, original emphasis).

Communities

Franz Boas and a good many of his students were themselves Jewish, including Herskovits and the linguist Edward Sapir (Goldberg 2005). In his obituary for Sapir, David Mandelbaum suggested that Sapir's work emanated from his Jewishness: "Jews are, in a sense, born ethnologists. By virtue of their dual participation in two cultural spheres, that of Judaism and that of their environing society, they are often made sensitive to differences in the forms of culture" (Mandelbaum 1941: 740). Similarly, drawing on W. E. B. DuBois, Gelya Frank explains that like other marginalized minorities, Jews developed a "double consciousness" (Frank 1997: 738), which Jonathan Boyarin explains as "an elaborately inscribed identity constructed in the awareness of difference" (Frank 1992: 66). While some among this early generation of anthropologists in the U.S. came from religious families, they positioned themselves primarily as secular humanists and avoided drawing attention to their own heritage. Nevertheless, it takes little imagination to see how their Jewish backgrounds, experiences of prejudice, and views from the social margins influenced their research interests (Frank 1997; Boyarin 1992). In the few instances in which these scholars directly mentioned Jews, it was in the service of answering larger questions. Indeed, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has suggested that this may have been an unintended consequence of Boas' approach to combating anti-Semitism through dismantling the concept of race: "[i]f Jews did not exist as such, how could ethnographers describe their culture?" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: x).

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, many of the studies undertaken by cultural anthropologists were defined by the communities where scholars conducted their research,

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usually villages or bands, that is, groups that were geographically or socially bounded (or at least were treated as such for the purposes of study). The resulting ethnographic accounts described social structures, ways of life, and worldviews of particular communities of people. Significant Jewish migration to the U.S. from Eastern Europe in the first half of the twentieth century meant that the view of Jewish culture that took hold in the North American imagination was in fact one of Ashkenazi culture, for which the *shtetl* was the basis for an “authentically” Jewish life – a life that was impoverished and marginalized, and brought to an end by the pogroms and world wars. Under the guidance of two of Boas’ students, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog (Zborowski and Herzog 1995 [1952]) wrote a postmortem ethnography of the *shtetl*, an idealized account based on the memories of pre-Holocaust immigrants and Holocaust survivors, a document that can be studied as much for what it reveals about that “moment in American Jewish life” and anthropology, as it does about Eastern European Jewish culture (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995). Selective and idealized, it portrays pre-war Jewish village life as spatially bounded and socially isolated. This notion gave the book textual coherence but ignored the well-documented mobility of Jews between socially diverse *shtetls* and even more socially diverse urban centers (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995). As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains, *Life Is With People* stands as an example of a particular kind of literature in dialogue with a grand tradition of Yiddish stories, and as a post-Holocaust memorial document, but not as ethnography.

A groundbreaking but less well-known study of Jewish life and culture had been completed earlier by a second-generation Boasian. A student of Herskovits, David Mandelbaum studied caste in India. In the course of his research in the late 1930s, he came across a Jewish community, and wrote “The Jewish Way of Life in Cochin” (Mandelbaum 1939), which was “probably the first ethnographic account to appear in print about a Jewish community by an American anthropologist” (Frank 1997: 736). He found that Jews in India reproduced the ideology of the caste system in their own community, which was bifurcated into “white” and “black” (or “Malabar”) historical caste-like divisions. After most Indian Jews had relocated to Israel, Mandelbaum found that new ideologies and factionalisms had taken over (Mandelbaum 1975). In both national situations, he found that Indian Jewish culture reflected the “legitimizing ideology” (Mandelbaum 1975: 201) of the surrounding society, whether India or Israel, and he argued for the importance of studying Jews in relation to their larger cultural context. In other words, rather than considering the variety of Jewish cultures around the globe as manifestations of a singular Jewish culture, Mandelbaum insisted that these cultural groups could not be understood only as Jews. Instead, the particulars of their cultural practices had to be seen in the light of the societies in which they lived, since much of what was “Jewish” about them could also be found in beliefs and practices that they shared with their neighbors, most of whom were non-Jews.

Another pioneer in Jewish ethnography was Barbara Myerhoff, who (along with Peter Furst) became the first non-Huichol to participate in the peyote rituals in Northern Mexico; her book, *Peyote Hunt* (1974), was nominated for the National Book Award. Having established herself as both a risk-taker and a gifted writer, Myerhoff undertook a study of the elderly Jews of Venice Beach, California. In the resulting book (1978), she charted new territory in the anthropology of North America, cities, aging, and ethnicity, and paved the way for a contemporary anthropology of Jews. In the accompanying film, *Number Our Days*, as well as in her subsequent film *In Her Own Time*, about the Hasidic community in Los Angeles, Myerhoff also innovated in visual anthropology (Frank 1995). The first film garnered an Academy Award in 1976 for the Best Short Documentary, to date the only such award ever earned by an anthropologist. Following Myerhoff’s forays into visual anthropology, other contemporary anthropologists have

also paired their ethnographic work with films, including Jack Kugelmass, whose ethnography of elderly Jews in a South Bronx congregation resulted in the book *The Miracle of Intervale Avenue* (Kugelmass 1996 [1986]) and a film of the same name, and Ruth Behar, whose film *Adio Kerida* gave further impetus to her ethnographic work on Cuba's Jewish community (Behar 2007, 2005), and represents one of the few ethnographic treatments of contemporary Latin American Jewish life.

Myerhoff began her study of elderly Jews after being redirected by Latinos in Los Angeles, who suggested that rather than studying them she should study her "own kind." In the early 1970s, U.S. minorities were gaining political and cultural ground in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, and Ethnic Studies programs were emerging in the U.S. academy. Anthropologists who studied their own cultures began to gain recognition as doing legitimate anthropology (this, even though Boas had trained native anthropologists because he well understood that they would enjoy access and acceptance in studying their own communities). However, even as Myerhoff stepped into this "new" idea of studying one's own (knowing that she would be a "little old Jewish lady one day" [Myerhoff 1978: 19]), she also exposed the fallacy of the contrast between insider and outsider anthropology: though she was Jewish by heritage, she was not a "little old Jewish lady" (and, sadly, never became one due to her early death), had not lived the *shtetl* life for which the elders were nostalgic nor suffered the privations and horrors of the Second World War as they had, nor was she impoverished and socially marginalized. When she turned her attention to the Hasidic community in *In Her Own Time*, it was not as an insider, but quite explicitly as an outsider to the beliefs and practices of this community. Myerhoff was both attracted to and alienated from them, across what she referred to as "vast and affectionate distances" – but she was also Jewish *enough* to be able to do the research, and Jewish *enough* for them to try to rekindle the Jewish spark within her as she fought for her life against lung cancer. In short, it is only possible to see her work as "insider" research if one ignores culture and presumes that Jewishness is in the blood, genes, or soul, these being more properly mystical ideas than scholarly ones.

Even though they did not study Jews who were like themselves, it is no accident that these two innovators of Jewish ethnography were themselves Jewish. Nor is it insignificant that these accomplished scholars disseminated their work about Jews through non-anthropological and even non-academic venues. Indeed, in spite of their successes and contributions to the field, Mandelbaum's and Myerhoff's works on Jews were exceptions rather than ice breakers. Other anthropologists who attempted to engage the discipline through the study of Jews (without first positioning themselves through research on more familiarly "exotic" topics) encountered impediments to publication and employment as late as the 1990s – an indication that the discipline did not yet consider Jews a legitimate object of study. Noting this pattern, Virginia Dominguez asked whether "assertively Jewish ... " books were "too Jewish for anthropology" (Dominguez 1993: 618). Not surprisingly, this critique came from a non-Jew, one who had herself done ethnographic research on Jews. Indeed, Dominguez's 1989 ethnography set the stage theoretically and thematically for the critical ethnographies of ethnicity and national identity that followed.

Contemporary anthropologies of Jews and Jewishness

Although there are continuities with earlier work on Jews and Jewishness, recent ethnographies on Jewish topics have also innovated in ways that are consistent with theoretical and methodological developments in the field. Contemporary anthropology is more theoretically driven and ethnographic fieldwork is less spatially constrained, following not only people, but ideas and

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commodities as well. While a given project might have a local focus, ethnographers also pursue regional and global interconnections, and make use of all forms of broadcast and communicative media. The new generation of anthropologists of Jews and Jewishness addresses broad questions of human experience, such as language, gender, race, and identity, through the lens of Jewish actors, and may be just as interested in the idea of Jewishness as in Jews, per se. Most of these anthropologists come to the study of Jews by way of anthropological questions that are interesting to consider through the example of Jews. The field of Jewish Studies has much to gain from engaging with the ethnographic perspective and the analyses offered by anthropologists. Ethnography reminds us not to take for granted, not to presume to know, and most importantly that humans continue to invent and reconfigure their lives in response to the changing world around them. Not only does this new ethnography consider the changing circumstances of Jews throughout the world, but it examines the meaning of being Jewish in the full range of contexts in which Jews live, how people make sense of their world, as well as the meaning of Jewishness, that is, what the idea of Jews and things Jewish have come to have for other people, including non-Jews – those who wish to become Jewish, those who wish to connect with their Jewish ancestry, and those who feel a meaningful connection to the former presence of Jews.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, those anthropologists who did address Jewish topics did so either in historical communities (Deshen 1989; Goldberg 1990) or in the U.S., Europe, and Israel where there are relatively larger Jewish populations. Landmark ethnographic volumes on Jews in the United States and elsewhere described great cultural diversity and asserted the relevance of anthropology to the analysis of Jews and Judaism (Boyarin 1991; Goldberg 1987; Kugelmass 1988; Zenner 1988). The interest in U.S. Jews has continued to develop along the lines of contemporary anthropology, critically exploring the socially and racially intersecting worlds in which Jews live (Goldschmidt 2006), and deconstructing racialized assumptions about Jewish identity (Azoulay 1997).

The new Jewish ethnography has gained momentum by looking at lesser-known Jewish communities, especially those in countries that are not world powers, such as Denmark (Buckser 2003), Turkey (Brink-Danan 2012), or Brazil (Klein 2012). In doing so, these ethnographers seek to understand the full gamut of Jewish experience. Further, these scholars seek to interpret the larger meanings operating within these contexts, where Jews provide an illuminating view from the margins.

Fieldwork and participant observation

Cultural anthropologists draw on philosophy, history, demography, sociology, and even literature to make sense of social worlds, but one of the unique contributions of anthropology has been the methodology of participant observation, in which the anthropologist engages in the activities of the community he is studying in order to gain an understanding of the everyday. As Matti Bunzl (2003) explains, “the anthropological commitment to fieldwork and the here and now can serve as a potent corrective” to the tendency within Jewish Studies to leave Jews in the past. Through participant observation anthropologists tease apart the layers of practice and meaning to get at the underlying logics of culture. Myerhoff’s work anticipated the new wave of “reflexive Jewish ethnography” (Frank 1997: 737) (and reflexive ethnography in general), in which the ethnographer is an active participant and fully present in the work. This is a form of embodied knowledge, a phenomenology that integrates what we know in our heads with what we experience in our bodies and in our social interactions, what Fran Markowitz calls “full-bodied ethnography” (2006). In this view, “ethnographic research [is] embodied dialogical participation in the social process” (Markowitz 2006: 43), such that research comes out of social interactions.

This reflexive methodology draws on the presence of the ethnographer and her subject position; the anthropologist is her own research instrument, and it is her relationships and experiences that structure and mediate what she learns. As such, contemporary ethnography does not pretend to represent an entire social sphere, but each writing is a prism, a means by which to gain perspectival insight, but never a view of the whole, because culture is not homogenous and all knowledge is positional and partial.

In order to learn about the Hasidic world in Los Angeles, Myerhoff made use of her background, her presence, and her own ailing body. Similarly, Ruth Behar (2007) has drawn on her own background, her family ties to the Jewish community in Cuba, to turn her childhood memories of Havana into meditations on the relationship between the present and the past, the nature of memory and longing, the layers of exile, and to offer an oblique critique of religious and racial definitions of Jewishness that would exclude from Judaism many of those who remain and maintain a Jewish presence in that island nation. However, it is not only Jewish ethnographers who make use of their backgrounds when conducting ethnography among Jews. William Mitchell (1988) turned his ignorance, bodily awkwardness, and outsider status into a way to learn about Jewish social practice.

Among the social practices that anthropologists study are those associated with religion and religious ritual. Jewish religious rituals are interpreted through the anthropological literature on rites of passage, not as singular forms but as diverse cultural practices (Brink-Danan 2008; Goldberg 2003, 2001, 1998; Prell 1989). Fran Markowitz reminds us that “[r]ituals ... encapsulate, demonstrate, and play with central symbols of a social system ... ” (2001: 123), making them especially rich ways to access meaning. For example, when Markowitz (2001) examines the bat mitzvahs of Russian Jewish immigrants to the United States, she analyzes this lifecycle ritual as a process through which Jewish identity is transformed from the negative identity that it was in the Soviet Union into a positive identity, as the community members celebrate and learn about that which was formerly inaccessible to them. In Markowitz’s analysis, the religious ritual is appropriated and adapted so that these immigrants are able to powerfully validate their new social status as Jewish in distinctively Russian ways.

Another example of ritual providing key social insights is found in the work of Riv-Ellen Prell on the innovations of alternative Jewish worship groups, which reveals the ways in which the group reasserted social inequality along the lines of gender, expertise, and other forms of knowledge/power (1989). The use of humor in these contexts expressed the tensions and contradictions that were inherent in the entire enterprise (Prell 1988). The use of humor elsewhere among Jews, such as in the “dialect joke” (Brandes 1983), depends upon specialized knowledge in order to reinforce ethnic unity.

Other cultural practices may have historical continuities but are appropriated for different purposes in new contexts. Elly Teman (2008) traces the transformation of the use of the red string from biblical through contemporary times, from a metaphor of continuity to one of flowing blood, from fertility and protection of children in a liminal state to protection in situations of violence in which the meaning has been generalized to apply to the nation as a whole. Foodways also reflect and reproduce Jewish historical trajectories, as Jews have adopted and adapted the culinary practices of other cultures each time they have traveled and relocated and fled. What people eat, how it is prepared, and the meanings attached to certain foods at specific times of the year allow food to symbolically express values and ideas. It is not only observance of the dietary laws that make food “Jewish,” but there are also ethnic foods (including “non-kosher Jewish foods”) that are “emblematic of Jewish tradition,” such as the deli foods so tied to New York Jewish life (Merwin 2008: 196; Kugelmass 1997). In considering the experiences of Danish Jews trying to reconcile the laws of *kashrut* with Danish culinary

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practices, Andrew Buckser explains that “the ways that people eat signify not only that they are Jewish, but precisely what sort of Jews they are” (Buckser 1999: 198). For Danish Jews, the tension between their national identity and their religious identity is expressed along a sliding scale of *kashrut* observance in relation to the national cuisine and in a variety of social circumstances. Similarly, Brazilian Jews express what Buckser calls the “conflicting claims of national and ethnic affiliations” through a range of responses to the national dish of *feijoada* (a stew of black beans and salted meats, traditionally including pork) that include kosher versions of this symbolically powerful dish (Klein 2012).

Another aspect of identity that has received attention from anthropologists is sexuality. In this work, Jewishness is productively contrasted with other forms of difference, resulting in analytic studies exposing modern processes of identity formation, for example by looking at the intersection of Jews and queers in late twentieth-century Vienna (Bunzl 2004) or the tensions between tradition and invention in a gay synagogue in New York (Shokeid 1995).

Jewish orthodoxy has also provided fertile ground for anthropologists, primarily in the U.S., but also in Brazil (Topel 2008). Hasidic Jews in particular present a puzzle, a deliberately anachronistic group bearing all the signs of modernity, and integrated into racially complex urban communities (Belcove-Shalin 1995; Goldschmidt 2006). The world of ultra-Orthodox Jews, including *ba’alei teshuva* who have “returned” to deeper Jewish practice (Benor 2012), appear contradictory for scholars concerned with the relationship between tradition and modernity, and especially with the ways in which these old and new forms of orthodox Judaism shape the lives of women (Fader 2009, Jacobson 2006). Scholars interested in gender have also looked at the role of Jewish women in non-orthodox ritual life (Sered 1992, 1996).

Intersecting with this body of research on American Jews and Judaism are some key explorations of the strategic use of language to communicate identity and affiliation with others. Leonard Plotnicov and Myrna Silverman explain the use of “ethnic signals” to deliberately “advertise” ethnic identity to others (Plotnicov and Silverman 1978: 409). They found that Jews in multiethnic urban settings whose own Jewishness might not be evident to others, or who are unsure of the Jewishness of their interlocutors, make use of code switching, such as the use of Yiddish words or inflection to connect with others for social or instrumental purposes. No longer the language of the everyday, the use of Yiddish or other Jewish vernacular languages (such as Ladino or Djudezmo) may be used as signals precisely because they do not give clear signs to non-Jews, making them effectively linguistic winks to assert and affirm a minority ethnic identity. This is part of what Jeffrey Shandler (2008) means when he refers to Yiddish as a “post-vernacular language,” one that is no longer the language of the everyday. Rather than being used for mundane communication, Yiddish may be deployed as an index of a whole freight of ethnic and cultural referents, both within and outside of Jewish social contexts, including in popular culture.

However, Yiddish has also enjoyed a re-vernacularization, as it were: redeployed as a language of the everyday through Hasidic adoption as the *mamaloshen* of a new generation of observant Jews (Benor 2012; Fader 2009). Ayala Fader’s account of socialization through language among U.S.-born Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn, New York, describes social worlds differentiated by gender, where the use of Yiddish allows for the recreation of an ethnic enclave experience. In this densely multicultural urban setting, so different from the historical Jewish worlds of Eastern Europe from which Hasidism emerged, Fader describes the emergence of distinct forms of Yiddish, what she calls “Hasidic Yiddish” and “Hasidic English,” in which Hebrew and Yiddish words are Anglicized, and English is inflected with Yiddish words and accent, transforming English into a “Jewish” language. These linguistic innovations delineate a social world where Hasidic Jews are not concerned with linguistic purity but deliberately use language to create and

reinforce their distinctive identity. For the Hasidic women and girls who are the main focus of Fader's ethnography, language use supports their experience within a modern world that is not secular, one in which they have agency. In this sense, Fader does not take their Jewishness for granted, nor do these women, who seek to become more observant than their forebears. Even among these most Jewish of Jews, their Jewishness is something that must be continually constructed and reinforced.

Deconstructing Jewishness

Perhaps this is the most significant difference between earlier anthropological work on Jews and the new Jewish ethnography: Jewishness is not presumed or entirely knowable, but something to be interrogated and examined for the symbolic meaning with which it is imbued. Similarly, in this new work, Jewish identity is not understood as determined by Jewish law or genealogy, but as something experienced and practiced, contingent, syncretic, dynamic, and constructed – over time and across space. Most importantly, in this view there is no singular Jewish culture, nothing that can be taken for granted as inherently or obviously “Jewish.”

Rather than having a presumptive, a priori meaning, then, “Jewishness is a cultural process whose very terms are in flux” (Feldman 2004: 115). More than a postmodern sleight of hand, the multiple and intersecting histories of global Jewish migrations and exiles offer both metaphor and method for understanding the plurality of Jewish cultural expression, and insist that we cannot talk about the Jewish experience or Jewish culture in singular terms. The modern condition means that heretofore (apparently) coherent communities have fragmented such that the substance and very existence of Jewishness is called into question.

The roots for this thinking are found in Boasian anthropology, such as in the work of Ruth Landes, whose work on “Black Jews” in Harlem (Landes 1967 [1933]) can be seen as an early example of critical race theory. The “Black Hebrews” (as they are known today) claim no biological descent from the biblical Hebrews, but instead claim spiritual descent by virtue of their historical experience of slavery and suffering, and assert themselves as the rightful heirs as God's chosen people. In the context of contemporary Israel, Markowitz et al. (2003) describe the “soul citizenship” of Black Hebrews (formally the African Hebrew Israelite Community) who immigrated there following the Civil Rights movement in the United States, and today identify with the Jewish state using an African American idiom of “soul” to refer to both blackness and spiritual affinity (ibid.: 303), simultaneously desiring distinction and inclusion.

The emergence of multiple black or African groups either claiming Jewish descent, such as the Ethiopian Beta Israel (Anteby-Yemini 2005; Salamon 1999; Seeman 2010) or the Lemba in South Africa (see Buijs 1998; Tamarkin 2011), or practicing as Jews and wishing to become incorporated into the Jewish world, such as the Abayudaya in Uganda, has forced uncomfortable discussions among mainstream Jews about the relationship between race, color, and Jewishness. These discussions about Jewish legitimacy stem from both a failure to account for the tremendous diversity of Jewish populations and a lack of historical perspective on the fluidity of racial categorization. Karen Brodtkin (1998) offers a corrective, tracing the transformation of ethnic/racial categories in the U.S. in the twentieth century, and how social class has facilitated a process that has moved Jews and other “white” ethnics from immigrants into the professional classes and (nearly) full social membership.

In the South African context, Lemba claims to Jewish descent intensified in the context of extreme ethnic tensions and land struggles during colonial occupation of South Africa and racial segregation legally codified under the Apartheid regime (Buijs 1998). In the aftermath of international attention to the case of the Lemba whose claims of Jewish descent have been

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substantiated by DNA evidence, Noah Tamarkin argues that casting the Lemba primarily as Jews ignores the South African context in which the idiom of race has been used to limit the rights of full citizenship on the basis of many forms of difference, and within which the Lemba have unsuccessfully sought recognition as a distinctive South African ethnic group (Tamarkin 2011). The twentieth-century categorization of Jews as “white” in multiple national contexts has resulted in what Tamarkin calls the “racialization of religion” and means that the Lemba are recast as “not exactly African and as only Jewish with qualification” (2011: 160), that is as *black* Jews, a categorization that has impeded their longstanding attempts to be recognized within the South African context.

In spite of historical events and research advances in the biological and social sciences, folk biological notions of race persist, including in relation to Jews, regardless of the enormous physiological and cultural diversity to be found among people(s) who identify or are identified as Jewish. This ideology makes use of folkloric concepts of race, for example, in Susan Kahn’s study of assisted reproduction in Israel, when Israeli mothers select sperm for social and behavioral characteristics that are presumed to be genetic (Kahn 2000: 34). The state also perpetuates these folk beliefs. As a modern nation state Israel is interested in reproducing itself through the creation of new citizens, such that, in a socio-religious context in which identity is conferred through matrilineal descent, the state has a vested interest in motherhood. State structures make use of family structures and support systems to encourage unwed mothers to reproduce, while the state assumes the paternal role by sponsoring the uses of new reproductive technologies. Kahn asserts that state-sponsored assisted reproduction is subversive because it challenges notions of the family (ibid.: 71), and exposes marriage as a social construct and not a divine or natural institution (ibid.: 86). In interweaving the contradictions of secular and religious law, Kahn exposes the underlying logics (and fallacies) of bodily bases for Jewish identity. These logics are also revealed when we look at attempts by groups claiming primordial Jewishness through broken or obscured lines of descent, such as the “crypto-Jews” in New Mexico (Freedman 2010; Jacobs 2002), the Lemba in South Africa (Buijs 1998; Tamarkin 2011), and the “urban Marranos” in Portugal (Leite 2011). As if tracing Jewish identity along genetic lines were not problematic enough, Jewish law allows solutions to reproductive difficulties that turn the entire notion of genetic descent on its head. While Jewish law has always had provisions for how to graft those who have been adopted or converted onto the Jewish family tree, in response to developments in reproductive medicine rabbinical scholars have searched scripture to help them interpret what part of the mother is actually the source of Jewishness: her egg or her womb (Kahn 2000: 157).

New reproductive technologies in Israel are given additional treatment in Elly Teman’s analysis of surrogate motherhood, in which not only Jewishness but motherhood is dissociated from gestation (Teman 2011). Unlike Kahn, Teman is more concerned with the kinship and feminist implications of new reproductive technologies in general, rather than their implications for Jewish identity in particular, and this may be an indication of the most interesting development in the new Jewish ethnography: even if the research is among Jews, the focus is not necessarily on Jewishness. In this moment in anthropology, Jews *qua* Jews may be less compelling than Jews as people engaged in complex subject formation. Studying Jews in the contexts of their cultural and national locations takes the Israeli context as one nation among many, the product of situated and historically constituted ideologies, and therefore not an exceptional case that must be set apart from all others. This is clearly an important contribution that anthropology can make to Jewish Studies: to find in global Jewish experience common humanity, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Another example of the importance of cultural context conferring meaning can be seen among the Portuguese “urban Marranos” (Leite 2011). In contrast to the better-known

Marranos (*anusim*), the descendants of forced converts who maintained secretive Jewish practices over generations in Portuguese mountain villages, these Marranos are often the only ones in their families to embrace their Jewish heritage, something that is more often revealed through feeling or affinity than by documentation or sustained practice. This construction of Jewishness draws on what Naomi Leite calls “the logic of genealogical causality,” a particularly Portuguese understanding of genealogically embedded cultural characteristics. These traits do not necessarily pass from one generation to the next, but operate as potentialities to be ignited within individuals, oftentimes skipping generations. Within this logic, urban Marranos do not wish to be “converted” to a Judaism to which they believe they already belong, but rather to “return” to a Jewishness that is already in them, to be recognized for what they already are (2011: 94). Leite argues that in encounters with global Jewish tourists, these two groups talk past each other, each using different idioms of kinship, but nevertheless managing to forge meaningful kin-like connections. These claims to Jewish identity depend on a calculus that involves both social and folk biological notions, and they have been tremendously compelling for mainstream Judaism as well, especially in relation to the idea of a persistent Jewish “spark” that can remain lit across generations (Leite 2011).

While the normative international Jewish community celebrates cases of Jewish persistence against all odds, it is the murkier instances of attempted “return” that expose their underlying assumptions. Mainstream Judaism has powerful sympathies for those who were forced to convert, but is suspicious of those who seem to have opportunistically done so, as in the case of the Feres Mura, those descendants of Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jews) who now wish to rejoin the Jewish family and the Israeli nation (Seeman 2010).

Immigration, exile, diaspora, and transnationalism

In part, these new contexts have emerged because of a very old idea, that of diaspora. The trajectories of diasporic peoples are marked by multiple border crossings, layers of movement thickened through time, such that group identity incorporates and reflects this sense of displacement. Rather than a temporary status, this common condition of homelessness is what unites the members of diasporic groups as permanently displaced people. As the prototypical diasporic people, Jewish identity incorporates a deep sense of history and longing. However, not all subsequent dispersals represent further instances of diaspora, especially those in the modern era (Stratton 2000). Not only do more recent migrations lack historic depth, but more importantly the regulatory effects of the modern state and technological developments in transportation and communication that today undergird globalization mean that the contemporary experience of displacement is qualitatively different. Overlying a core identity as a diasporic people, today Jews are also citizens of nation states around the globe who are intimately connected with Jews who are citizens of other nation states. Their social relations cross multiple borders to create a transnational identity and set of social practices that are not bound to a single nation. In this conceptualization, modern Israel is not the nation of origin for most of the world’s Jews, but one of many nations in which Jews reside. These Jews may see *Eretz Israel*, the Land of Israel, as the starting point of their trajectory, but they also conceive of their nations of birth and residence as “symbolic center[s]” (Levy 2001; see also Stratton 2000; Boyarin and Boyarin 1993), and as spaces for resisting Israeli cultural hegemony (Levy 2001).

Whereas an earlier generation of anthropologists was engaged with Israel as a new social experiment, especially in the form of the kibbutz (Spiro 1970 [1956]), recently some anthropologists have critiqued Israeli state power. For example, Stein examines the use of Jewish Israeli tourism to Arab cultural sites as a way that the state has redrawn “the dominant map of the

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nation-state, historically predicated on forced Palestinian absence” such that “rural Palestinian communities ... [are] reincorporate[ed] into a state-authorized national geography” (Stein 1998: 91–92). In making use of ethnic difference within its borders the state of Israel contests claims of Palestinian erasure, while reinforcing claims to cultural authenticity by ignoring the very unequal access to power of the various actors (Stein 1998). Bodies figure prominently in these analyses, problematized as eminently inscribable sites of cultural meaning (see Weiss 2002a and b). Even where research in Israel focuses on non-Jewish populations, such as Latino migrants, it still fits under the rubric of an anthropology of Jewishness because of the nation’s symbolic and formal framing as a Jewish state (Kalir 2010: 32).

Within an anthropological perspective, Jewishness is a lens through which national ideologies are refracted. Because anthropologists are often attracted to views from the margins, the study of Jews becomes a means to think about how race, ethnicity, and nationality are understood in those countries that are home to small populations of Jews around the world. Each national context shifts the focus, as the historical and cultural particulars of each nation and Jewish community bring different concerns to the fore. In South Africa, Frankenthal (1999) notes the ethnic distinctions made within the formal Jewish community between South African Jews who are mostly “white” (in a majority black society) and Israeli Jews who are immigrants (from a majority Jewish society); Frankenthal calls this the “proximal host model” in which immigrants blend in with the ethnic group to which they are assigned in the host nation (*ibid.*: 159), which depends largely on the national ideologies of race and ethnicity. In contemporary Denmark, drawing on a long history of positive relations and a powerful story of rescue from Nazi capture, Buckser explores the experience and meaning of Jewish identity where the social exclusion that has characterized Jewish experience in so much of the world is absent (Buckser 2003). In this context, Jewish culture and Danish culture are mutually constitutive in ways that illuminate the persistence of ethnic difference without the forces of discrimination and assimilation. In Buckser’s view, Jewishness is a “body of symbols,” a “toolbox” with which people continually construct and reconstruct their identity in the face of massive global cultural change.

However, Jewishness is meaningful not only where Jews live today, but also where they used to reside, both for the citizens of that nation and for the tourists who visit in search of ancestral ties (Kosansky 2002; Lehrer 2013; Leite 2007 and 2011). In post-Holocaust and post-communist Poland, where little remains of what had been the world’s largest Jewish population, Jewishness continues to be powerfully symbolized through memorials, museums, heritage tourism, and tourist art (Kugelmass 1992; Kugelmass and Orla-Bukowska 1998; Lehrer 2013); one form of the latter that has garnered attention is carved wooden figurines depicting stylized and stereotyped pre-war Hasidic Jews, which one shop owner called “an example of ‘post-Jewish’ culture” (Lehrer 2003: 347). Though such commercial representations of Jewishness can easily be read by some as examples of anti-semitism, Erica Lehrer suggests that they also serve as “a site of potentially positive memory-building,” and “as a way of engaging with the Polish Jewish past and present” for both Jews and Poles (*ibid.*: 354). In Portugal, Naomi Leite considers the problem of touring what is no longer there, where objects and spaces, as well as tourists, become “surrogates” for a “Jewish Portugal” that “no longer physically exists” (Leite 2007). Spain has similarly engaged in the promotion of tourism, romanticizing its Jewish heritage and the “Golden Age” of religious harmony, a move that is both redemptive and lucrative. In all of these examples, tourism, specifically heritage tourism, offers tourists more than recreational travel and gives toured sites the opportunity to “animate a phantom landscape” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 167). This is an anthropology of absence.

In most of these examples, Europe is constituted as the ancestral homeland to be visited, the site of key dispersals and disappearances. However, Israel is a much more popular site for

heritage tourism. Youth tours are promoted by the Israeli state throughout the mainstream Jewish world as a form of “embodied engagement with place,” which can “temporarily collapse a geographic divide by establishing a physical copresence of diasporic bodies and homeland spaces” (Kelner 2010: 133; see also Feldman 2008 for an analysis of Israeli youth tours to Poland). Here, the interests of the state are entangled with embodied symbolic practices. These are uneasy equilibria, suspended between the rage of catastrophic loss and the delicate hope for redemption. Just as the nation can be revealed as “Jewish” through the recuperation of a shattered (and scattered) Jewish past, or expanded through celebration of its internal Jews, so too can these examples show “how symbolic, how iconographic (and thus – according to some – how ‘un-Jewish’) a lot of Jewishness is today” (Lehrer 2003). Perhaps what these messy, uncomfortable examples show us is that by holding too tightly to an essential notion of Jewishness we may squeeze the life out of it; on the other hand by gently embracing Jewishness around the edges we may yet be surprised by how vibrant it is in the contemporary world.

Contrasting with these examples of the reincorporation of historical Jewishness (if not actual Jews) into the body and idea of the nation, in other national contexts Jews may be set apart, or may provoke reconsiderations of national belonging. In contemporary Turkey, Marcy Brink-Danan describes how native-born Jews are reinscribed as foreigners, which they understand to be a reflection of contemporary cultural developments (Brink-Danan 2010). In Argentina, the 1994 bombing of the Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Society not only killed nearly 100 people and destroyed over a century of communal archives, but also created a “crisis of belonging” for the Buenos Aires Jewish community (Zaretsky 2008). Natasha Zaretsky traces the responses of the community, especially those organizations that sought to transform the crisis into an opportunity for positive social change, casting the bombing as an attack not on Jews but on the Argentine plurality. In particular, she explores how in performing for non-Jewish publics a Yiddish chorus recasts Jewish suffering in light of Argentine suffering during the Dirty War to “allow a point of mutual identification – a moment of imagining a common ‘we’ – that is critical to the quest for memory and justice” (2008: 256). In the Brazilian context, with its utopic ideology of “racial democracy” and without a history of organized anti-semitism, Jews embrace their place within the nation as well as their own multicultural community by crediting “the Brazil effect” (Klein 2012). Jews make use of national projects to celebrate their place in the nation, and assert a Brazilian basis for the organization of their community, which forges common ground among Jews of culturally distinct backgrounds from over 60 countries of origin. For Jews in Brazil, it is their status as transnationals that places limits on the national belonging, making them vulnerable to transnational violence in spite of their acceptance in the Brazilian context.

In this generation of ethnography, we see anthropologists focusing on productive tensions between cosmopolitanism and patriotic citizenship (Brink-Danan 2012), between transnational practices and national belonging (Klein 2012), and between diasporic distinctiveness and ethnic connectedness (Cooper 2012). These ethnographies are all the product of a historical moment in which it is professionally possible for scholars to pursue anthropological questions through research on Jewish populations and Jewishness in the broadest sense. Anthropology’s current theoretical concerns and privileging of the global periphery are what have given momentum to the cascade of new Jewish ethnography. In each of the contexts where ethnographers have examined Jewish identity they have found that Jews make use of the surrounding cultural idioms and reigning ideologies to make sense of their experience. As a result, who or what is considered Jewish in one context may not be recognized by other Jews elsewhere as such (Goldberg 2012). It is hardly surprising that anthropologists have found that Jewishness is a far more malleable and fluid construct than Jewish law allows, since law is rigid relative to lived

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experience. The contributions of anthropology to Jewish Studies extend beyond colorful reporting on the rich variety of Jewish experience globally and a few culturally and politically dominant national and cultural groups. It is through the contextualized comparison of Jewish experience and the analysis of culturally constructed notions of Jewishness that the study of Jews has greatly enriched the anthropological record. This is also where anthropology can make its greatest contributions to Jewish Studies.

Essential reading

- Behar, Ruth. 2007. *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. Part memoir, part ethnography, part photographic essay (by Humberto Mayol), Behar's melancholic exploration of the remnants of a once-vibrant Cuban Jewish population is an important contribution to the literature on Jewish Latin America, and an example of deeply reflexive anthropological writing.
- Brink-Danan, Marcy. 2012. *Jewish Life in 21st-Century Turkey: The Other Side of Tolerance*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press. Brink-Danan offers an analysis of a smaller Jewish community in a Muslim-majority society on the European periphery that amply demonstrates the theoretical contributions that can be made by ethnographically exploring the contradictions between the discourses that structure the lives of Jews with deep historical ties.
- Cooper, Alanna E. 2012. *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. At the intersection of history and ethnography, Cooper's analysis of a Mizrahi community calls into question the way Jewish history is told, and the cultural implications of global interconnectedness.
- Fader, Ayala. 2009. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Fader's detailed linguistic analysis describes the social processes by which Hasidic girls become Hasidic women, and the values that are instilled both explicitly and implicitly.
- Goldberg, Harvey E. 2012. "Dynamic Jewish Identities: Insights from a Comparative View," in *Dynamic Belonging: Contemporary Jewish Collective Identities*, Harvey E. Goldberg, Steven M. Cohen, and Ezra Kopelowitz, eds. New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 1–27. Goldberg has traced the relationship between anthropology and the study of Jews and Judaism since the 1980s, and continues to offer fresh insight into the productive relationship between the two scholarly fields, and the contributions that anthropology's comparative perspective can make to Jewish Studies.
- Kelner, Shaul. 2010. *Tours That Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism*. New York: New York University Press. An example of critical ethnography of heritage tourism, Kelner analyzes Birthright Israel and what it tells us about how tourism with a purpose can be an important part of forging transnational ties.
- Klein, Misha. 2012. *Kosher Feijoada and Other Paradoxes of Jewish Life in São Paulo*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. One of the first ethnographies of Jewish life in Latin America, Klein describes how Jews in the metropolis of São Paulo live comfortably with the contradictions of being Jewish in the world's largest Catholic country, while forging a multicultural community that reflects national ideologies of inclusion and tolerance.
- Lehrer, Erica. 2013. *Jewish Poland Revisited: Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. In contrast to the heritage tourism to Israel, Jewish tourists to Poland revisit places of loss, destruction, and absence, but also encounter non-Jewish attempts to redeem Jewishness for Poland. Lehrer offers an analysis of a historically refracted present.
- Seeman, Don. 2010. *One People, One Blood: Ethiopian-Israelis and the Return to Judaism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. A critical part of the new ethnography of Israel's complex ethnic composition, Seeman examines the meaning of blood and identity for the Feres Mura, one of the more problematic Jewish minority groups because of the way that they point out contradictions in ideologies of race and religious belonging.

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