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Jewish Margins and Centre: a historical and literary comparative study of Jewishness

This special issue presents a series of essays that probe the borders and meanings of Jewishness in the context of the broader non-Jewish world. The issue started its life, as do so many special issues, as a conference—or rather, a series of conferences which were meant to happen and were delayed such that the original participants changed over time, over zoom, through the pandemic, until finally a group of us convened in person, at the University of Birmingham in the summer of 2022. Several people who participated in the zoom versions of the conference and then the non-virtual one were not able to participate in this special issue, but the issues and topics they addressed remain germane to the larger project of teasing out the interactions among margins and centres in Jewishness and Jewish studies, and impact all that follows below.

Jewish people, Cynthia Baker reminds us, ‘have not...owned the word Jew or controlled the discourse about it...for most of the past two thousand years’.ⁱ In a racialised world, Jewish identity has been both a matter of how people may have seen themselves, and how they have been seen by others. ‘A man may forget he is a Jew’, British Jewish novelist Maisie Mosco told her readers in 1983, ‘but the gentiles acquainted with him never would’.ⁱⁱ On this basis, conversations about the boundaries of Jewish community transcend discussions of Jewish thinking, instead reflecting an ever-changing interplay between Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. Who and what is seen as Jewish is historically and geographically contingent, a matter of who is asking, where and when. Recognising that this is the case, this volume seeks an understanding of contemporary Jewishness alongside other racialised identities, foregrounding dialogues about Jewish/Muslim and Black/Jewish relations, and exploring Jewish spaces in majority non-Jewish societies.

Placing emphasis on the boundaries between Jewish and non-Jewish lives is important because of the sprawling meanings of Jewishness across and beyond Jewish community. As histories and mythologies intertwine, ‘the Jew’ has come to represent far more than a distinct faith or community, serving as a shorthand for various life experiences and emotions. Constructions of ‘the Jew’, as Bryan Cheyette famously pointed out, are not stable, but instead evolve to suit different needs and periods.ⁱⁱⁱ Jews, for some, have come to represent the quintessential diasporans. Diaspora has often been defined first and foremost as the historical condition of all Jewish communities since the Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70AD, an idea confused and complicated by the Christian notion of the fallen, wandering Jew.^{iv} On these terms, Jews remain, to many, diaspora’s ‘defining paradigm’, serving as a shorthand for many other exiles in many other places.^v Here, Jewishness can serve as a proxy for being an outsider in society, or at least of feeling that way. To Devorah Baum, Jews have become models for all lost souls in the age of globalisation. She explains, ‘None of us fit in. None of us belong. The world feels unnatural for everyone, now’.^{vi}

It is in the ‘now’ that this collection seeks to operate. The volume places its focus on the contemporary period, delving back into the twentieth century but not further. This period, as Cynthia Baker hinted, is an unusual one for many Jewish communities in terms of the control that many Jewish people have finally gained in articulating their own place and values. Witnessing a genocide which in many ways continues to define much of Jewish identity, the twentieth century saw more of global Jewry secure security and affluence in many countries, and, also live through the establishment of Israel in 1948. These changes have yielded strange fruit when it comes to how Jews feel and think. As Caryn Aviv and David Shneer have put it, ‘That Jews are privileged may feel ironic precisely because many global Jews feel embattled, vulnerable, and under siege’.^{vii} Jewish grieving about the Holocaust, and anxiety about its repetition, shape all that has come after in much of the

Jewish world, in a climate fundamentally characterised by some Jewish people securing better qualities of life. Although, as David Cesarani put it, ‘funny things’ happened on the way to the suburbs, Jewish people in Europe, North America and beyond became disproportionately middle class and suburban in the twentieth century on a scale without historical precedent.^{viii}

With its gaze on the present, some specific questions come into view, most obviously relating to the evolving character of Jewish identities in societies where a growing number of Jewish and non-Jewish people see themselves as irreligious, and against the context of the rapidly escalating rise in Jewish identifications as Black Jews, Latinx Jews, Asian Jews, Jews of Color, and other transformations in and disruptions of the presumed alliance between Jewishness and Whiteness. Some questions that various iterations of these conferences asked include: without religious devotion and the cohesion it brings, what are Jewish people, and what makes someone Jewish? How have queer identities transformed Jewish life? How has the transformation of Jewishness vis-à-vis whiteness shifted the landscape? How can we grapple with Jewish masculinities and femininities as gender changes in so many realms?

Understanding Jewry in a secular climate raises questions that cut to the core about the meanings of Jewishness, especially in a post-Holocaust climate wherein many Jewish people are reluctant to articulate their difference in terms of race or ethnicity. Here, the complexities and ambiguities of Jewish identity come to the fore, unanswerable questions that have vexed generations of Jewish thinkers and activists. Indeed, thinking about Jews and Jewishness begins from a failure to firmly pin down what exactly the conversation is about. As Moshe Rosman put it, ‘The interplay of genealogy, religion, common history, and other factors makes classifying the Jews in some conventional category virtually impossible’.^{ix} Again, these are complexities of classification which are equally pronounced with many other communities and people, so that the broader value of wading into Jewish studies rests at least partly in how much it pertains to wider academic questions around ethnicity, religiosity, gender and sexuality. To answer broader questions, studies of Jews and Jewishness need to be outward facing, to recognise and explore the relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish pasts and lived experiences. Too often, the historian of British Jewry, Bill Williams, complained, scholars of Jews had undermined the broader reach of their work because of the ‘disease’ of ‘introversion’, the failure to see that Jewish history was about (and needed to be about) non-Jews too.^x

The work in this special issue touches on how Jewishness moves between and among centres and margins. Jessie Clarke’s analysis of four British synagogues highlights the ways in which some of the buildings recently constructed and occupied by Jewish communities speak to feelings about the Jewish place in society and how they want to be seen and to engage with non-Jewish worlds. Clarke’s article explores how synagogue construction, in different places, reflects broader trends in the building of religious spaces in modern societies, as well as changing thinking within the walls of Jewish community, especially about the value of interfaith activity.

Karen Skinazi’s article offers reflections about Nisa Nashim, a Jewish-Muslim women’s network in Britain, specifically focused on the activity of a book club. Through the study of Lynne Voyce’s short story, ‘The Allotment’, Skinazi teases out the relationship between literary and interfaith activism. Through the broader discussion of Nisa Nashim in action, she more broadly highlights the ways in which Jewish and Muslim women in Britain are navigating both the potentials and pitfalls of building interfaith community (notably in the context of the conflict in Israel/Palestine). Here, the ways in which non-Jewish and Jewish lives interact and shape each other is laid bare through the intersections of race, faith and gender, and through the engagement with literature as a site of identity creation and exploration.

Where Skinazi's and Clarke's research highlights the relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish communities in the present, Abby Gondek's article puts its focus on the immediate postwar period, highlighting the work of a refugee psychiatrist, Ernst Papanek, in the postwar United States. Exploring Papanek's leadership of the Wiltwyck School for delinquent Black youth, Gondek uncovers the ways in which Papanek's earlier work with Holocaust refugees informed his (and others) engagement with Black communities in the climate of Civil Rights, noting the extent to which approaches to racialised people informed and engaged each other.

Amy Barenboim's essay explores affinities forged through the archive across diasporic identifications—in this case, Blackness and Jewishness. In a new reading of Danzy Senna's 1998 novel *Caucasia*, Barenboim delves into how once can consider a shared archive between these two groups and how the novel stages that possibility. She examines how this novel is part of the larger context of passing narratives that often engage Jewishness. For *Caucasia*, though, Barenboim argues that the marginal becomes central.

Rachel Garfield, one of the participants in the online and in-person conferences, has been consistently interested in margins and centres, race, Blackness and Jewishness through decades of rich and fascinating artist practice. In Birmingham she offered an overview of this work and showed us videos which pushed us to think about how we make assumptions and how those assumptions may lead us astray. Brett had interviewed Rachel a few years ago and the special issue concludes with that wide-ranging discussion of Rachel's work, of the meaning of identity, of the notions of centre and periphery and how they can never hold.

The range of scholars and scholarship we brought together at the online and in person conferences spoke volumes about the breadth of Jewish Studies and how, increasingly, and in a welcome shift out of the silo, Jewish Studies embraces a whole panoply of ideas and texts that challenge and engage established and emerging thinkers.

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- ⁱ Cynthia Baker, *Jew* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), p.3.
- ⁱⁱ Maisie Mosco, *Between Two Worlds* (Sevenoaks: New English Library, 1983), p.16.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of "the Jew" in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations 1875-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- ^{iv} Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: an Introduction* (London: UCL Press, 1997), pp. 6, 7, 21 and Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (eds), *Theorizing Diaspora* (Blackwell: Malden, MA, 2003), p.1.
- ^v Tina Campt, 'The Crowded Space of Diaspora: Intercultural Address and the Tensions of Diasporic Relation', *Radical History Review* (2002), 83, pp.94-113, p.96. Also see Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, p.21.
- ^{vi} Devorah Baum, *Feeling Jewish (a book for just about anyone)*, Yale: New Haven and London, 2017, p.55. See also Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton University Press, 2006).
- ^{vii} Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, *New Jews: the End of the Jewish Diaspora* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), p.24.
- ^{viii} David Cesarani. 'A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Suburbs: Social Change in Anglo-Jewry Between the Wars, 1914–1945'. *Jewish Culture and History*, 1(1), 1998, pp. 5–26.
- ^{ix} Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish is Jewish History?* (Oxford and Portland: Litmann Library of Jewish Civilisation, 2007), p.33.
- ^x Board of Deputies MSS, London Metropolitan Archive, London, ACC/3121/C18/1/8, Conference on Jewish Life in Modern Britain held by the Institute of Jewish Affairs, 13/3/77. Williams's paper was titled 'Local History: Where do we go from here?'