Modern Jewish Literatures
Intersections and Boundaries

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INTRODUCTION

Intersections and Boundaries
in Modern Jewish Literary Study

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A Wall-Less Ghetto

The act of defining, circumscribing, and demarcating has long been a principal activity of modern Jewish literary scholarship, yet the boundaries have proved elusive. While many definitions of Jewish literature have been offered, none has been universally accepted, and questions about who is and who is not a Jewish writer, what is and what is not a Jewish book, remain unsettled.¹ So vexed has the enterprise been, that Hana Wirth-Nesher has wondered whether the only thing that unifies the field is the question itself: What is Jewish literature?² Modern Jewish literature lacks the basic markers of national literatures: it has neither a shared language nor a common geography, though some have tried to limit it in these ways.³ Indeed, the field is so diverse—written in so many languages and so many places, embodying so many intersecting literary traditions and cultural influences—that Dan Miron has suggested that it cannot be contained within the bounds of one literary category but that we must refer to multiple Jewish literatures, a suggestion that we have adopted for this volume.⁴

Instead of seeking to define modern Jewish literature in lockstep with fixed categories or rigid binary oppositions, Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries examines sets of relations, adopting the perspective, broadly conceived, of modern Jewish writing moving back and forth between and through categories, of intersections and boundaries as
mutually inclusive by way of continual movement across borders, of separations and syntheses.  

This perspective is emblematic for us—in a figurative sense—by a unique institution in modern Jewish history: the ghetto. We have in mind not the isolated Jewish world as described by Heinrich Graetz that long pervaded the Jewish imaginary: squalid, backward, impervious to outside influence. Nor are we thinking of the idea of the ghetto as conceived by its founders in Venice as an “urban condom,” in the image made familiar by Richard Sennett.  

The figure we wish to evoke is something more like the culturally complex, vibrant, and fluid Italian ghettos described by historians Robert Bonfil and David Ruderman: closed off from the surrounding Gentile society yet an integral part of it, traditional yet in flux, deeply Jewish yet receptive to external ways. Indeed, a particular example we have in mind is the ghetto of Rome in the period immediately before the unification of the city in 1870 with the rest of the fledgling Italian nation.

For more than three centuries, the Roman ghetto constituted both a physical space and a legal institution, separating Jews from Gentiles and Gentiles from Jews. Contiguous residential buildings bereft of external doors and windows, along with a single, freestanding wall, divided the ghetto from the rest of the city, while five iron gates controlled entries and exits. On the eve of the Revolution of 1848, Pius IX ordered the gates and wall torn down but stopped short of ending the institution of the ghetto, such that movements in and out, while freer, continued to be regulated by law if not by iron. With the revolution, the pope went into exile, a republic was proclaimed, and the situation was reversed: although no law obligated them to do so, most Jews, either too poor to move or reluctant to leave their community, continued to inhabit the ghetto space, whose physical boundaries, rendered permeable by the elimination of the gates and wall, nonetheless remained largely intact, thanks to the buildings along its perimeter. A short time later, the pope returned to power, reinstated the ghetto, and ordered all Jews back inside, though he did not rebuild the gates and wall. For the next twenty years, the last of Europe’s historic ghettos continued to operate, circumscribed by a combination of real and imaginary boundaries, with century-old structures still intended to separate and invisible gates promoting movement in and out.

We have in mind, too, a modern wall-less ghetto of a different kind: the Lower East Side of New York, which, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, became, in Abraham Cahan’s words, “the Ghetto of the American metropolis, and, indeed, the metropolis of the Ghettos of the world.” What kept the Jews in this wall-less ghetto was neither physical nor legal but the immigrants’ inner need—with the familiar boundaries of their lives breached—for stability and mutual support. But little remained unchanged. In the “social cauldron” of the Lower East Side, Cahan explained, Jews from all over Eastern and Central Europe interacted—among themselves and with the culture at large—and even every tenement “harbor[ed] in its bosom specimens of all the whimsical metamorphoses wrought upon the children of Israel... by the vicissitudes of life in this their new Promised Land of today.” In the wall-less ghetto of New York, Cahan’s friend and colleague Hutchins Hapgood explained, “the Jews were at once tenacious of their character and susceptible to their Gentile environment”; they underwent “rapid transformation though retaining much that [was] distinctive.”

These wall-less, gateless ghettos serve as a trope for the project of delimiting modern Jewish literature—not because of any external imposition to stand apart but because modernity (let alone postmodernity) is incompatible with the manning of the gates. The figure provides an alternative perspective to the impulse, for example, to define a distinctly Jewish sense of humor, aesthetic, voice, or book—an impulse that, according to Anita Norich, belies a “profound anxiety about gatekeeping and permeability.” As in a “wall-less ghetto,” the boundaries still exist, but the intersections forged between those boundaries—the cultural osmosis, as it were—foster something new that exemplifies modern Jewish literary experience.

Each writer treated in this volume understood that he or she was located at a time and place of transformation, from a premodern time constituted by a relatively constant and relatively insulated Jewish past—of the ghetto or the shtetl, conceived in real or symbolic terms—and the commencement of Jewish life, or the life of Jews, in the modern world. The period in which, collectively, they wrote, is demarcated by the Enlightenment, the Haskalah, the French Revolution, and Emancipation, on one end, and the early decades of the State of Israel on the other. The particular terms of the encounter between a Jewish past and a present and future for modern Jews varied greatly, by continent, country, and village, by language, and by social standing, among other things. What unites the subjects of these studies is not a common history in any other than a very general sense, but rather a shared
response: to use literary production and writing in general as the laboratory in which to explore and represent Jewish experience in the modern world.

The contributors to this volume were among a group of scholars invited to the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania to discuss modern Jewish literature. We had come across many different geographic boundaries—from Europe and Israel, as well as from all across North America—and represented diverse academic fields: clusters of scholars of Hebrew and Yiddish writing were joined by specialists in Arabic, English (Anglo and American), French, German, Italian, Ladino, and Russian literatures. Our research interests were markedly disparate as well, ranging from Israel’s nationalist poet Natan Alterman to Russian apostate poet Osip Mandelstam; from turn-of-the-century Ottoman Jewish journalism to wire-recorded Holocaust testimonies, from the intellectual salons of eighteenth-century Berlin to the shelves of a Jewish bookstore in twentieth-century Los Angeles. The net had been deliberately cast wide, and we could not always discern where our distinct interests intersected or where our disparate fields overlapped.

In part, the openness and the eclectic nature of our interests are signs of our scholarly times, echoing the progressive impulses that lay behind the contributions to David Biale’s landmark Cultures of the Jews (2002): to set aside the restrictive definitions and distinctions that had characterized the field and to expand the scope of Jewish cultural studies “to include what has been neglected.” But we also consider Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries to be a reflection of the multifarious field at large and a response to the complex character of the literature being studied and the historiography that accompanied it over the last two centuries.

In the early nineteenth century, when Leopold Zunz founded the Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden and first set out to limn the contours of Jewish literary history, he conceived his academic endeavor explicitly as a response to the cultural crisis that we now conceptualize as modernity. Zunz observed that the boundaries separating Jews from (in his case) German—culture were crumbling and that Jews were embracing the new opportunities. As “the [richer and more congenial] intellectual products of their own country began to capture their minds and stimulate their emotions,” he wrote, Hebrew literacy declined. Zunz feared that Jewish literature—namely, the postbiblical (he called it “neo-Hebraic”) literary tradition that had embodied the volksgeist of the Jews for two millennia—would be abandoned and soon become extinct. So he set out to rebuild the walls around Jewish culture, to preserve from oblivion neo-Hebraic literature and the spirit of Judaism that informed it, creating the new academic ghetto of Jewish studies.

The Jewish studies that flourish today owe their origins, in large part, to the academic enterprise that Zunz initiated. But something unexpected also happened: Jewish literary activity experienced an extraordinary renaissance. Numerous talented Jews were indeed attracted to the national literary scenes of their respective countries, including Zunz’s friend and onetime member of the Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden, Heinrich Heine, and the salon hostess in eighteenth-century Berlin, such as Henriette Herz and Dorothea Mendelssohn Veit Schlegel, whom Liliane Weissberg discusses in this volume. But Jews also began to produce as well a self-consciously Jewish-oriented literature in non-Jewish languages. Over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, Jewish newspapers and periodicals in European languages were established, wall-less literary ghettos addressing the intellectual and social needs of the acculturated, modernized Jewish public with essays, stories, and poems: the Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums (1837) in Germany, Les Archives Israélites (1840) in France, The Jewish Chronicle (1841) in England, and The Israelite (1854) in America, among many others. By the mid-nineteenth century, Jewish-themed novels and romances clearly utilizing European genres, such as Berthold Auerbach’s Spinoza: Ein Denkerleben (1837), had appeared in Germany; Eugénie Foa’s Le Kidouschim (1830) and La Juive (1835) in France; Grace Aguilar’s The Vale of Cedars (1850) in England; and Isaac Mayer Wise’s The First of the Maccabees (1860) in America—each dealing in its own way with the crisis of Jewish modernity that Zunz had acknowledged. Not all these works were of equal quality, to be sure, but the groundwork for modern Jewish literature in European languages had been laid.

Even more startling to Zunz would have been the fascinating renaissance experienced by Yiddish and Hebrew. Yiddish, the language of the Eastern European masses, had been a demotic language of sorts since premodern times, a venue for popular religious translations, digests, and ethical treatises. During the Jewish Enlightenment, it was used against itself, as a tool to satirize the Hasidic community and to galvanize social change. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, a sophisticated modern literature began to develop in Yiddish that paralleled and borrowed from developments in European literatures: Isaac Meir Dick inaugurated his popular series of novellas in 1864, the same year that Mendele Moykher-
Sforim (S. Y. Abramovitch) published *Dos kheyne menshele*, considered by most to be the first modern Yiddish novel. At the same time, Hebrew asserted itself and, after serving for several millennia as the formal language of Jewish religio-literary production, emerged as a secular, European-influenced literary language. The language that Zunz believed would die came back to life: the first modern Hebrew novel, Abraham Mapu’s *Alhavat Tsiyon*, was published in 1853, and the first three daily Hebrew-language newspapers in Eastern Europe were published in 1886.

No matter what the language, the self-consciously Jewish literature produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries bore the marks of the walled ghetto. While Zunz wanted to define the boundaries between Jewish and Gentile cultures, the boundaries had already been traversed, and the ghetto wall could not be rebuilt. The circumstances of modernity complicated the relation of modern Jews to their literary heritage, and the complexity—indeed, the irony—is even inscribed in the pages that Zunz wrote: although the literature he sought to reclaim—medieval and Renaissance liturgical writing—was composed in Hebrew, Zunz himself wrote in German, and his German prose envelops the Hebrew passages he quotes. For all the attraction of Zunz and his cohort to the Jewish past, theirs was not the Judaism of their ancestors. Their subject was foreign to them, but it was the very foreignness that at once generated the desire to reclaim and repossess and to reinvent. Their relation to the Jewish literature they studied and their impulse to maintain its linguistic integrity were defined by their modernity and their Germanness.

By the early twentieth century, there were not only burgeoning bodies of modern Jewish writing in various Jewish and non-Jewish languages—along with a growing body of writing by Jewish writers who chose to participate in other literary communities—but also competing schools of literary thought and scholarly and polemical writing that chronicled and promoted Jewish literary activity. Broadly speaking, two distinct schools emerged. On the one hand, a particularist school, based in Eastern Europe and then in Israel, insisted upon setting specific linguistic boundaries for Jewish literature (restricting it primarily to Hebrew or Yiddish). On the other hand, an inclusivist school, with its center first in Germany and then in America, promoted the view that Jewish literature was a literature without geographic or linguistic boundaries. Together, these two schools embody the countertendencies of modern Jewish literary study.

The circumstances of modernity complicated the relation of modern Jews to the artifacts of their collective past, and they also problematized their connection to other Jews around the world. Jews have always borrowed culturally from their neighbors, conquerors, and hosts, but the onset of modernity, with its refrigured relation to the past and the increasing openness of host cultures, accelerated and augmented the process. So it seemed, at least, to Ahad Ha’am at the end of the nineteenth century. While the Hebraist critic believed that a certain type of strong cultural borrowing—what he called *hikui shel hitharut*, or competitive imitation—constituted a source of vitality for Jewish culture wherever and whenever it occurred, continually reinvigorating and reconfiguring it, he also feared that this borrowing might lead to the eventual fragmentation and disintegration of the Jewish nation (as if the nation were not already significantly fragmented). The boundaries that had once separated Jews from their host cultures would now divide Jews from one another. Jews in Germany would become German Jews; Jews in France, French Jews; Jews in England, English Jews. Each would constitute a separate and unique island of Jewish culture that had more in common with its surrounding culture than with other Jewish cultures around the world. What was needed, Ahad Ha’am argued, was something to ensure that the boundaries of Jewish culture, the wall-less ghetto, as it were, be maintained even as foreign influences were being absorbed—a modern cultural force to counter the centrifuge of modernity. He thus advocated the creation of a spiritual homeland in Palestine, along with the cultivation of Hebrew as the language of the Jews. Following Ahad Ha’am, drawing upon the scholarly initiative of Zunz, and fueled by the nationalist ideologies that would lead to the founding of the State of Israel, a school of Jewish literary historiography developed that sought to define Jewish literature in terms of language and land. For Joseph Klausner, dean of Zionist literary historians, it was Hebrew literature, and Hebrew literature alone, that embodied the Jewish national spirit. He acknowledged that the “People of the Book” had “created literature in the languages of the Gentiles among whom it lives” but argued that only “in its national language” does the Jewish people “continue . . . the creative work that covers thousands of years from Bible times to the present day.” Simon Halkin, who succeeded Joseph Klausner as professor of modern Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, continued in this vein, articulating the literary-historical equivalent of Ahad Ha’am’s argument, maintaining that “every linguistic unit in the polyglot Jewish literature of this modern era . . . shows an almost complete
and parochial absorption in the life of the Jew in a given country alone, with relatively little interest in Jewry as a whole.” He insisted, counterintuitively, that modern Hebrew literature, even as it saw its center in the State of Israel, nevertheless “persistence refused to become parochial, territorially exclusive in its Jewish interest.”

But even as they looked narrowly at Hebrew literature as the authentic Jewish literature, drawing direct lines of filiation from the Bible to the Talmud and medieval literature to the modern Hebrew renaissance, these Hebraists could not dismiss the significant intersections between foreign literatures and the Hebrew. “It is impossible for a people living among other people not to be influenced by them,” Klauser wrote, “especially during the Haskalah period, when the desire to leave the ghetto and to be more or less like all peoples prevailed.” It was thus incumbent upon the literary historian “to pay close attention to the general literary movements among the nations within which the Jews created their own modern literature.” Moreover, Hebrew literary expression itself was, dramatically, bursting onto the scene of European modernism in its profusion of apostasy narratives, modern sexual angst, and hyper meta-textuality. Even as it cultivated the new national language, it seemed unfazed by the literary criticism that attempted to channel it into the proper nationalist directions. Nationalist ideologies, in other words, came to be expected from a literature that was, to a large extent, less concerned with territorialism than with affiliating itself with avant-garde European styles that could catapult the ancient language, via the modern literature it produced, into the twentieth century. Nationalistically overdetermined critical readings of Hebrew literature were doomed to oblivion because the Hebrew writers who made their way onto the world’s stage, who became early participants in the discourse of modernism and modernity, problematized nationalist narratives in their styles, their subject matter, and their disregard for the popular truism of their moment.

While the particularists in Eastern Europe and Palestine were struggling to mend the ghetto wall of Jewish literary history, cultural and literary critics in Western Europe and America, also in the wake of Zunz, were promoting a different view in wide-ranging histories and anthologies, transforming the lack of a shared language and a common geography into a source of strength. Late nineteenth-century German literary historian Gustav Karpeles revealed in the notion that Jewish literature was “the ‘wandering Jew’ among the world’s literatures,” marveling how “a people without a land, living under repression and persecution, could produce so great a literature.”

Decades later in the United States, literary chronicler Meyer Waxman boasted that Jewish literature was “a literature without geographic boundaries, one which grew luxuriously on the shores of the rivers of Babylon, on the banks of the Jordan, bloomed most beautifully by the rivers Tagus and Guadalquivir, and flourished with equal vigor on the Rhine, the Vistula, and the Dnieper.” Karpeles and Waxman celebrated the diversity that Klauser and Halkin bemoaned, arguing that Jewish literature had always thrived at cultural intersections, “assimilating Persian doctrines, Greek wisdom, and Roman law; later, Arabic poetry and philosophy, and finally, the whole of European science in all its ramifications.” Just as the Jews sang the songs of God by the rivers of Babylon, Karpeles wrote, so now could modern Jewish poets “sing the songs of Zion in the tongue of the German,” or, for that matter, in all languages.

It is important not to misconstrue this Romantic quest for comprehensiveness as a postmodern acceptance of boundlessness or a valorization of intersections over boundaries. For, while they dismissed the need for geographic boundaries, Karpeles and Waxman believed that an abiding spiritual center already existed within the soul of each and every Jew. Whereas Zunz (however ambivalently) turned from the embrace of German culture to search for the unique Jewish spirit in earlier Hebrew writing, these historians believed that a polyglot Jewish volksgeist informed all cultural work performed by each and every Jew. While both Zunz and Ahad Ha’am saw modernity as an eroding force in Jewish history, the inclusionists looked through the differences that defined modern Jewish life and found that the spirit of Maimonides shone in Spinoza’s Latin, and the fire of Issiah burned in Marx’s German.

However they tried to resist it, each of these schools betrays the counter tendencies of the wall-less ghetto, implicitly embodying the intersections and boundaries of modern Jewish literary study. So construed, they form the intellectual prehistory of this volume. The strategy that we have adopted is to confront these histories in their complexities—not to resolve the issues that they grappled with or to dismiss them but to explore the sets of relations that produced and underlay them. We have thus placed the essays in a chronological order that both reflects and challenges traditional histories of modern Jewish literature, following a similar trajectory—from the Enlightenment through the twentieth century—but moving in and out of countries and languages. Similarly, the essays collected here embrace rather
Multilingualism

The question of modern Jewish literature’s linguistic identity has always been more about what Jews should write than what they do write. Putting aside linguistic prescriptions, we take it as a given that, as Shmuel Niger famously observed, “one language has never been enough for the Jewish people” and that, as Ilan Stavans has remarked, “the mere existence of a multilingual Jewish people implies, by definition, a heterogeneous bookshelf.” Indeed, a critical mass of the writers discussed in these essays were themselves bilingual or even multilingual, and we might say, following Niger, that one language has sometimes not been enough even for one Jewish writer. What interests us in this volume, however, is not simply the diversity or multiplicity of the languages in which Jews (or a particular Jew) wrote but the significance of their language choices and the relation between and among those languages.

In “Shmuel Saadi Halevy / Sam Lévy Between Ladino and French: Reconstructing a Writer’s Social Identity,” for instance, Olga Borovaya shows how one Ottoman Jewish writer was equally accomplished in adopting the literary forms of journalistic French and Ladino. For Borovaya, the significance of Halevy/Lévy lies not simply in the language switching itself but in the stylistic and programmatic shifts that accompanied writing in a particular language. When writing on Jewish themes for Le Journal de Salonique, Sam Lévy (as he was known in French) sought to entertain a highly educated and Westernized readership and, in the style of Pierre Loti’s Moroccan travelogue, was apt to create a dark, distant, orientalized picture of unmodernized Jewish life in the Ottoman Empire. When aiming to promote the Alliance Israélite Universelle–style modernization of the Jewish masses, Shmuel Saadi Halevy (as he was known in Ladino) contributed to his Ladino-language newspaper, La Epoka, adopting the encouraging didacticism of a Jewish educator. Borovaya stresses that the “social identity” of poly-lingual Sephardic literati such as Lévy/Halevy lies between these generic and linguistic forms, with their corresponding, contrasting, and deeply ambivalent attitudes toward the Jews and Ottoman Jewish culture.

Among Ashkenazic writers, bilingualism often involved two “Jewish” languages, Hebrew and Yiddish, but their relation was often equally complex and no less charged. Such was the case of Hebrew novelist, essayist, and Zionist ideologue Joseph Hayyim Brenner. In his promotion of Hebrew, Brenner is generally thought to have utterly rejected Yiddish; yet, as Anita Shapiro documents in “Brenner: Between Hebrew and Yiddish,” the Zionist writer did not abandon Yiddish, but rather wrote prolifically in Yiddish as well as in Hebrew. Shapiro pointedly observes that Brenner’s “composite attitude” toward Hebrew and Yiddish “raises questions about the dichotomy sketched by scholars of Israeli culture between the Yishuv and the Diaspora, between Yiddish and Hebrew.” Moreover, much like Sam Lévy, Brenner rigorously separated his writing linguistically according to genre and purpose. For Brenner, political culture and daily life were the legitimate domain of Yiddish and the Yiddish press, but only Hebrew could be the language of high culture. Brenner’s identity as a Jewish writer emerges, in other words, not in one or the other language but in the tenuous, hierarchical relation he posited between Hebrew and Yiddish.

For many Ashkenazic writers, unlike for Brenner, Yiddish and Hebrew were equally important vehicles of high culture, and the tension between the two Jewish languages played itself out in different, but nevertheless significant, ways. The career of I. L. Peretz, for example, like that of the most important Hebrew and Yiddish writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, can be traced in parallel linguistic arcs: Peretz produced equally rich Hebrew and Yiddish bodies of literary output. Yet his composition of specifically Hebrew neo-Hasidic writings is particularly significant. Along with others of his generation at the turn of the twentieth century, Peretz sought literary and linguistic correlatives to the paradoxes that had come to characterize their Jewish existence, bifurcated between the urban and the rural, the sacred and the secular, the subversive and the nostalgic. As Nicham Ross explains in “I. L. Peretz’s ‘Between Two Mountains’: Neo-Hasidism and Jewish Literary Modernity,” “classic neo-Hasidism does not represent the simple desire of the repentant to return to the
fold. On the contrary, it represents the attempt to induce tradition itself to return to the fold.” Peretz embodied the paradox of Jewish modernity in his Hebrew neo-Hasidic tales, bringing together Hasidic stories, generally written in popular Yiddish and associated with tradition; and modern Jewish secular literature, generally associated with Hebrew. He expanded the generic possibilities of modern Hebrew by attempting a conciliation between Hebrew and Yiddish.

The case of I. L. Peretz demonstrates that, while bilingualism sometimes resulted in bifurcation, as in Lévy and Brenner, it also produced a different kind of writing between languages: a dynamic process not simply of translating from one language to another, or from one culture to another, but of allowing languages and cultures in contact through the medium of the uniquely situated author or text to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, a language that transcends its constituent languages. Characteristic of this phenomenon is S. Y. Abramovitch’s Hebrew nusah style, thus coined by the first Hebrew national poet, Hayyim Nahman Bialik, which brought together different layers of various Jewish languages (Hebrew, Yiddish, and Aramaic) and Jewish literatures (biblical, rabbinic, and Enlightenment pastiche) into a new flexible Hebrew style that could serve as a model and a sustainable basis for modern Hebrew production. This nusah, as Bialik describes it, functions as a kind of “writing between languages,” between biblical and rabbinic Hebrew, between Hebrew and Aramaic, between Hebrew and Yiddish, between textual and oral modes, that revolutionized Hebrew’s literary vernacular possibilities and laid the foundation for modern literary Hebrew as we know it today. Created out of the relationships between different linguistic-historical strata, this style articulates faith in the synergism inherent in the deployment of many different languages and many different cultural discourses simultaneously.

It is against the background of writing between languages—a background of both difference and cross-fertilization, between Jewish and non-Jewish languages and between different Jewish languages—that we need to understand Anita Norich’s abstraction of Hebrew and Yiddish in “Hebraism and Yiddishism: Paradigms of Modern Jewish Literary History,” into general tendencies toward the affirmation of Jewish distinctiveness or the embrace of cultural cross-fertilization with other cultures. Instead of seeking to define boundaries, Norich identifies opposing forces within Jewish literature and culture: on the one hand, the tendency to preserve the partic-
modern Jewish literatures between languages appears in the case of David Boder, the Latvian-born American psychologist who completed more than a hundred interviews of Holocaust survivors in the displaced-person camps of Western Europe. In an effort to ensure that his subjects could speak "in their own language," Boder conducted the interviews in multiple languages: Yiddish, Russian, Polish, and German, as well as occasional English. In "Inserted Notes: David Boder's DP Interview Project and the Languages of the Holocaust," Alan Rosen recounts how Boder's interviews took place as well between languages—when, for example, one of his subjects, a native speaker of Polish, offered her intended American audience a concluding reflection, first in English, and then, quite differently, in Polish. Boder attributes this disparity to an understandable desire to express strong feelings in her mother tongue. Rosen, for his part, stresses a gap on the level of community and audience. Rosen also depicts another kind of linguistic in-betweeness when commenting on the work of Boder's translator, who, as a survivor himself, could, besides translating from one language to another, add a different level of authenticity to certain accounts. Indeed, Rosen reads the translator's gloss as though it were a poetic verse that, inserted between the language of the interviewer and that of his subject, "tells an epic story in hauntingly shapely form."

Figures of Space
Akin to the hybrid or "relational" genres that grew out of Jewish modernity, and like the unique styles that developed at the interstices of different languages within a highly self-conscious modern Jewish multilingual universe, migration, as both a state of mind and a physical movement, generated a dramatically new locus of modern Jewish literary discourse: "figures of space." The Hebrew narratives of tilshut, or "uprootedness," at the turn of the twentieth century, the Yiddish accounts of luftmenshen, or the later Jewish American accounts of alienated intellectuals—all these describe the psychic effects of movement from shtetl to metropolis, from country to country, and, in some cases, from faith to faith. These figures can be said to constitute "figures of space" insofar as they hover between places, finding their voice in their sense of displacement, like the classic modernist figures they were. A second cluster of essays describes literary figures or movements driven by a sense of their own "in-betweeness," bridging geographic centers or spaces. Like the talush, the luftmensh, or the alienated intellectual, the figures of space presented here do not simply present themselves as homeless. Rather, they create something dynamic and new, between spaces or places, out of the impulse to bridge, to construct, and to reimagine.

For Joseph Salvador, born in France on the heels of the Revolution of 1789, modernity itself presented the prospect that one such space, "Jerusalem"—conceived as a trope for Jewish culture—could be "lost." To this new threat of supersessionism, ostensibly denying the Jews any significant role in the future of humanity, Salvador responded with a body of writing that charted the path of Moses and the Hebrew people within universal history. As L. Scott Lerner argues in "Joseph Salvador’s Jerusalem Lost and Jerusalem Regained," Salvador’s mode of historical understanding became increasingly reliant on "literary vocabulary, genres, and techniques," which he used, ironically at times, to produce counter-histories. Salvador’s final work, Paris, Rome, Jerusalem, introduced an eschatological approach to universal history, predicting what he called a "total renewal of spirit." In order to give expression to such a novel reality, Lerner claims, Salvador invented a new genre, "epistolary history," and he relied on "Paris," "Rome," and "Jerusalem" as "symbolic sites of meaning in the forward march of civilizations." Paris was the principle of political change; Rome signified the "spirit of reaction" of the Catholic Church and all established religions; and Jerusalem, where the Hebrews had been doubly vanquished, by Christians and Romans, would return to universal history for the dénouement, guaranteeing that the ideal Mosaic republic would become the basis for world civilization.

Paris and Jerusalem, as "figures of space" in which Salvador attempted to write the Jews back into universal history, can be contrasted with the figures of space that came into play during the period of the modern Hebrew revival. Those figures of space were largely construed not in universal or mythical terms, as in Salvador’s writings, but within a discourse of homecoming where Hebrew writing became intimately interconnected with the land in which it was written. While we ordinarily associate the emergence of modern Hebrew writing first with Europe and then primarily with Palestine, a coterie of writers in the decades following World War I set up an ambitious, if unlikely, ghetto encampment of Hebrew poetry on the periphery, in the United States. These Hebrew poets in America saw themselves as aesthetically alienated from the avant-garde excesses of symbolism and expressionism that had taken over poetry in the Yishuv, perceiving
themselves as defenders of the purity and simplicity of the greatest modern Hebrew poets, Bialik and Shaul Tchernichovsky, against the “nouveau” Hebrew in use by the newer Palestinian poets. One of these poets, Alan Mintz explains in “Eisig Silberschlag and the Persistence of the Erotic in American Hebrew Poetry,” felt himself alienated even among his cohort in America. Many of the other American Hebrew poets allowed their Hebrew classicism to intersect with American influences, writing long epic poems about Native Americans and the Gold Rush and lyric poems about the shores of Santa Barbara. But Silberschlag was schooled in Eastern Galicia, and later on the streets of Vienna and Paris, before coming to America. His intellectual world was elsewhere—in the ancient world more than in the palpable present—and his lyrics, as Mintz writes, “take place in no recognizable locale so much as in the poetic state of young manhood.”

Another salient example of imaginative displacement and reconfigured space, within an American Jewish literary context, can be found in Michael P. Kramer’s essay on immigration and assimilation. All immigrant writers find themselves writing between languages and cultures. Indeed, negotiating the psychic distance traveled between worlds and imagining their place in their new home become the very subject and substance of their writing. In “The Art of Assimilation: Ironies, Ambiguities, Aesthetics,” Kramer reviews the terms under which that negotiation and reimagining took place in America by scrutinizing the polysemous nature of the charged term “assimilation.” Although literary critics in the age of multiculturalism have tended to denigrate assimilation as a betrayal of ethnicity, Kramer insists that assimilation needs to be recognized as the complex creative source and major genre of ethnic writing. By exceeding the bounds of definition, the term generates a host of intersecting political, narrative, and poetic possibilities through which immigrant writers (or those writing about immigrants) can make sense of “all the hopes and fears, the achievements and disappointments of immigrant experience.” Turning to Israel Zangwill’s 1908 play The Melting-Pot as one of the most prominent examples of the genre of assimilation writing, Kramer shows how the symbol of the melting pot is “the aesthetic analog of the multivalence of the term ‘assimilation’” and how the Anglo Jewish writer uses it to portray America as a place of flux in which, ironically, an assimilating Jew takes on the mantle of the Puritan fathers, displacing their Anglo-Saxon descendant as the quintessential American.

Moving out of an American context and into an early Israeli one, Gideon Nevo negotiates the spatial boundaries between life in the Jewish homeland and life in the Diaspora in the poetry of Natan Alterman. In his examination of the Zionist discourse of the “negation of the Diaspora” in Alterman’s polemical poetry, Nevo points out that Alterman, while highly critical of the American Jewish Diaspora, was surprisingly compassionate in his approach to the Judenrat, the Jewish administrative bodies in the Nazi-formed ghettos. While Alterman is unspiring in his assertion of the early Zionist truism that Diaspora existence is not merely distasteful but self-destructive, in his “Seventh Column,” written for the Hebrew daily Davar (1943–67), he withholds judgment of those victims of the Nazi system who thought that their leadership among the Jewish populations of the modern European ghettos would save them from the brunt of Hitler’s horrors. In “Eternal Jews and Dead Dogs: The Diasporic Other in Natan Alterman’s The Seventh Column,” Nevo reveals the “negation of the Diaspora” ideology to be less rigid than is generally assumed and shows that one of its major proponents judged some Diasporic experiences as more worthy of disdain than others.

Alterman’s critical role in the highly ideologically charged nature of literary production and reception during the early years of the State of Israel can also be viewed from a different perspective. While Alterman concerned himself with the poetics of the negation of the Diaspora in unexpected ways, particularly as a response to the Holocaust, a generation of writers—specifically, women writers of Eastern European origin—struggled during the 1960s to resist the obliterating force of the negation of the Diaspora in their own writings on Diasporic life. In “Ethno poetics in the Works of Malkah Shapiro and Ita Kalish: Gender, Popular Ethnicography, and the Literary Face of Jewish Eastern Europe,” Sheila Jelen considers the popular ethnographic reception of literary representations of pre-Holocaust life in post-Holocaust memoirs by women writers born into Hasidic families in Eastern Europe and writing in Israel in the 1960s. Malkah Shapiro and Ita Kalish, born into prominent Hasidic dynasties at the turn of the twentieth century in the environs of Warsaw, traverse time, geography, and historical cataclysm in their respective memoirs of their experiences growing up as “intimate outsiders” within the patriarchal and hierarchical milieu of their fathers’ Hasidic courts. In her analysis of the popular reception of Shapiro’s Hebrew and Kalish’s Yiddish texts, Jelen examines the “ethnopoetic” style of women writers who wrote, after the Holocaust, about the world of Eastern European Jewry before the war, specifically in Israel. Ethnopoetics, as
used here, is a hybrid of ethnography and poetics, of anthropological and literary aspirations. The writer of an ethnopoetic text responds to cultural obligations imposed by historical cataclysm to expand her literary texts beyond the literary. She employs a rhetoric that may even undermine the literary identity of her work. Ethnopoetics are born within literary texts as a response to critical and cultural forces that place those works, because of the narrators’ geographical, temporal, and historical distance from the world therein depicted, within an ethnographic, as opposed to a literary, trajectory. Jelen calls for recognition of a generic middle state, one that does not deny the ethnographic value of these women’s texts but demands recognition of their literary value as well.

Much as Jelen focuses on the popular need to read Kalish’s and Shapiro’s work as an extension of the “mythical shtetl” forged in the popular ethnographic imagination, Marc Caplan shows how Sholem Aleichem depicts Kasrilevke as a “mythical shtetl” in order to highlight the “absence of a unified temporality” in the Eastern European Jewish culture of his day, in which there lacked “historical synchronicity” between Jews and non-Jews and between modern and traditional Jews. Against a backdrop of political ideologies whose central concern was the control of territory, Sholem Aleichem de-territorializes the shtetl. As Caplan explains in “Neither Here nor There: The Critique of Ideological Progress in Sholem Aleichem’s Kasrilevke Stories,” Sholem Aleichem creates a metaphysical space that serves to mythologize Jewish space, making it appear to be “everywhere and nowhere.” Through the use of de-territorialized settings, the writer critiques “the power-based ideologies seeking to control territories, as well as the desire of Jews, even of himself, to attach themselves to a homeland that, at least a hundred years ago, seemed as spectral as Kasrilevke itself.”

The Jewish salons of late eighteenth-century Berlin, described by Liliane Weissberg, constitute liminal spaces that are strangely similar to the mythical space of Kasrilevke. Both the fictional ghetto and the historic salons served as places in which home and homelessness converged. As Weissberg observes, in “Literary Culture and Jewish Space around 1800: The Berlin Salons Revisited,” the Jewish women of late eighteenth-century Berlin who welcomed non-Jews into their living rooms lacked citizenship and, legally and philosophically, were not at home in the host culture. The salons formed part of the Jews’ houses, yet their occupants enjoyed limited access to the political and cultural life of the city. As Jews and as women, the hostesses were subject to a “double exclusion” and could not take part in the social lives of many of their guests beyond the limits of the salon. It was also thanks to their marginality, and the oddly de-territorialized spaces they provided, however, that they were able to “negotiate meetings of people from diverse social backgrounds; mediate between groups in a society that depended on clear stratification; and offer a meeting place that was not public and could thus acquire, paradoxically, public fame.”

For Russian authors Rashel Khin and Osip Mandelstam, who wrote in the liminal space between Jewish and Russian culture, Jewish life, as they knew it, assumed the valence not of a homeland or a home, but rather a “Judaic chaos.” In their writing, the latter inhabits the marketplace, in opposition to the rigorously ordered, bounded space of the cathedral, which functions as a “protective architecture” of Russian culture and a generalized, European aesthetic standard. In “The Merchant at the Threshold: Rashel Khin, Osip Mandelstam, and the Poetics of Apostasy,” Amelia Glaser describes Mandelstam’s “symbolic representation of the church as the structure of civilization, which is diametrically opposed to the market-like chaos of origin.” In his early poetry, the Russian poet started to “replicate” Christian art as a “universal form for catharsis.” Later, he succeeded in integrating Jewish culture into the broad scheme, “mapping fertile Judaic chaos beside an artistically redeeming Western art.” Glaser depicts both writers as “poised on the borderline between the outside and inside of Russian culture”; the cathedral and the marketplace function as “metaphorical locations” that enable the Jewish writers to determine their position in relation to this culture.

In mapping out the contours of the Jewish bookstore, Laurence Roth similarly focuses on a space that is both physical and metaphorical. He reflects not on liminal spaces in literature but rather on modern Jewish literature as a liminal space. In “Unpacking My Father’s Bookstore,” Roth shows how aisles and shelves resemble canons, and vice versa, as the reader-consumer treads the well-worn historical, generic, and disciplinary map of Jewish literature according to the spatial-intellectual floor plan imposed not by the theorist-critic but by the theorist-bookseller. At the same time that it is embodied in place, Jewish literature also fills the airiness of commercial activity, revealing modern Jewish literature as “a network of human behaviors, transactions, and deeds in and of their time, and . . . bookstores as places where ideas and capital collide as literal bodies.” Roth thus aims to direct debate away from Jewishness, as a quality of writing, and toward a conception of modern Jewish literature “as a historically contingent collec-
tion belonging, like all property, to those diverse individuals and communities wealthy and passionate enough to claim ownership.” In this way, each generation, through the activities of unpacking and arranging it on shelves of its own making, gives the appearance of order to what is essentially an inherited disorder.

Taken together, the essays in this volume speak to a significant redirecting of modern Jewish literary study. Many of the writers explored here—Joseph Salvador, Sam Lévy, Rashel Khin, Malkah Shapiro, Eising Silberschlag, Celia Dropkin, and David Boder, for example—have been marginal to modern Jewish literary study. They have existed in the interstices of discourses that have tried to limit Jewish literature in terms of Jewish languages or predominantly Jewish thematics or locales: our contributors have brought the figures forward, allowing the interstices to become the focus, along with the nexus of boundaries and intersections that they represent. In the case of more canonic writers, such as Sholem Aleichem and Peretz, we have tended to complicate their place in Jewish literary history by revealing the underbelly of questions that have long dominated and restricted discussions of modern Jewish literature. The essays here revisit the negation of the Diaspora in Alterman, for instance, and reexamine the relation of Yiddish to Hebrew in Brenner. And rather than fretting about the place of narratives and figures of assimilation or apostasy in modern Jewish literary history—think of Herz, Zangwill, or Mendelstam—we consider how these literary formations complicate our sense of the modern Jewish literary experience.

In many ways, the writers discussed here introduce innovations in form that relate to changes in Jewish experience catalyzed by modernity: multiple languages are suffused, and bounded spaces are interpenetrated. Our concern, in editing this volume, has not been to advocate for new categories in place of old ones but rather to open the gates of an eclectic literary production to new perspectives, continguities, and relations. These literatures are the productive site of multiple intersections. Without abandoning the questions and concerns that animated previous generations of scholars—questions of language and land, creed and culture, gender and genre—the contributors refused to be confined by them. Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries maintains the category of modern Jewish literature by opening it up to multifarious forms and possibilities. And so we return to the image of the wall-less, gateless ghetto: Jewish literatures bound to one another not by language but by languages, not by space but by figures of space. Most important, this volume offers a view of Jewish literatures understood always “in relation,” as a tightly bound imaginary body always on the verge of breaking free, yet holding back, imperceptibly and powerfully.

Notes


5. David Biale describes the extent to which Jewish culture has always consisted of such “centripetal and centrifugal forces to the point where the very opposition between them appears artificial and overly simplistic.” He has in mind pairs such as unity versus diversity, textual continuity versus cultural ruptures, isolation versus assimilation, elite versus popular, and the idea of a unified culture versus a history of multiple communities and cultures. He and his fellow contributors to Cultures of the Jews challenge the reliance of scholars on dichotomies like these. A few years earlier—and several years before joining us at the Center—Bryan Cheyette, along with Laura Marcus, took aim at a different set of “reductive oppositions,” which they claimed had impeded the serious examination of “the question of Jewishness.” They were referring to the tendency to subsume Jewish difference within the so-called Judeo-Christian tradition in a manner that emptied it of its distinctiveness, on the one hand, and to the appropriation—and evacuation—of Jewishness as the site of the universal other by “apologists for the efficacy of western modernity,” such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, on the other. See Biale, “Toward a Cultural History of the Jews,” in idem (ed.), Cultures of the Jews: A New History (New York, 2002), xvii–xxiii; and Cheyette and Marcus, “Some Methodological Anxieties,” in idem (eds.), Modernity, Culture, and the Jew’ (Stanford, Calif., 1998), 3, 12–13.


12. See Maurice Samuels, *Inventing the Israelite: Jewish Fiction in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Calif., 2009). Samuels would have been a contributor to this volume with an essay on Eugénie Foa had this book not appeared before the volume.

13. In the selective sketch that follows, we have focused, for reasons of economy, on Hebraist literary historians as representatives of what we have called the “particularist school.” Like the Hebraist school, Yiddishist scholarship—from Leo Weiner’s *History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (1899) to later works by Baal Makhshoves, Shmuel Niger, Ber Borochov, and Nokhem Shif—also tended, albeit in a different way, to view modern Jewish literary history from a particularist perspective, being “motivated,” according to Marc Caplan, “to demonstrate for a mass audience that Yiddish could function as an autonomous vehicle of modern, secular, artistic culture” (personal correspondence June 8, 2009). For a broader account and critique of Hebraist and Yiddishist schools of Jewish literary theory, see Miron, “From Continuity to Contiguity: Thoughts on the Theory of Jewish Literature.” (See also Miron’s Hebrew monograph, *Harpiya letsorekh negiah* [Tel Aviv, 2005]. The English essay is a condensed translation of the monograph.) On the Euro-American school, see Kramer, “Race, Literary History, and the ‘Jewish’ Question.”


20. Karpeles, *Jewish Literature and Other Essays*, 51. 49. It is interesting to note that in *The History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1899), Leo Weiner castigates the inclusivist, multilingualist Karpeles for his neglect of modern Yiddish writing. “Karpeles devotes, in his history of Jewish literatures, almost thirty pages to the medieval form of it,” he writes, “but to the rich modern development of it only two lines” (9).


