Introduction

The School of Criticism I Wouldn’t Be Caught Dead In: A Polemic on Theorizing the Field

First things first: the take-away. In the interest of figuring out how a category of identity is critically put to work by Jewish literary study, this book tries to make it more difficult to assume that the study of Jewish literature is necessarily part of a larger study of The Jews as a population (or linked group of populations)—itself a concept or entity that must ultimately be taken for granted, at least in its categorical legibility, if it is going to mean anything at all. That is, we can make all kinds of noise about different kinds of Jewish populations and different modes of Jewish identification, but the problem this book addresses is the pernicious nationalism of thinking that relies on population—on the compelling security provided by a concept of population—to stabilize and underwrite the categorical identity of an archive of work. Alternatively, I suppose I could say that this book is part of a project to resituate Jewish studies in order to make room for a critical study of Jewish identity or Jewish identification, or of the ascription or detection or relevance of Jewish categoricalness, that is not grounded in the more or less ethnographically or anthropologically coded study of Jews and what they do and how they do it. Such a project would reconceptualize Jewish studies as operating precisely as the displacement of the assumption that Jewish studies is the study of Jews. But in fact I do not really want to put it this way, at least not primarily, because another thing I want this book to do is help break down the walls of the ghetto in which Jewish literary study these days so often seems to be contained, a ghetto instantiated simultaneously along three professionally powerful axes: on the one hand in the sometime seeming unwillingness on the part of fields such as comparative ethnicity studies, American studies, and multicultural literary studies to welcome Jewishness into the fold of privileged identities; on
the other hand in the unwillingness of Jewish studies (that is, as a hegemonic bloc) either to accept critical literary studies as a legitimate part of its project or to pursue a sustained critique of identity, which would likely include opening itself to thinking its counterethnic other; and, amazingly, on a third hand in Jewish American literary study’s fairly consistent aversion to sustained theorization and self-critique. But the problem I am really focused on in this book is the way in which Jewish American literary study has isolated itself. While American studies and ethnic American literary formations have been busy putting themselves through rigorous processes of self-criticism over the past forty years or so, the field of Jewish American literary history has, in a word, not. Only very recently, in the last generation, have we seen any kind of sustained push among critics in Jewish American literary history toward self-theorizing work, and even then this kind of scholarship has represented a pretty small minority. Thus, if Jewish American literary study has been excluded from the institutionally validated embrace of academic ethnicity- and American studies–based formations, we can also read this exclusion as symptomatic; in any case, though there is certainly work to pursue on the comparative and ethnic studies side of things, this book proceeds as a critique of the compensations of Jewish American literary study’s self-imposed ghetto, of its own separatist and nationalist biases, more than anything else. Thus my problem here: I am criticizing precisely the people I want to convince. In a ridiculous perversion of the Groucho Marx joke, I am trying to become a member of the club I cannot stop complaining about.¹

Even while this book is often polemical, one of its central goals is to emphasize the lines of relation and mutuality between Jewish American literary study and those institutional establishments from which it persists in alienation, such as American studies, multicultural and multi-ethnic studies, critical theory, and Jewish studies. But the path toward cooperation that The Impossible Jew takes is not one charted by comparativist methodologies. The critical future of Jewish American literary study lies in a nonidentitarian concept of identity that theorizes how the desire for historiographic reference overdetermines and disrupts the seductive coordination of identity and normalization that so often erects barriers of ostensible historical self-evidence between readily recognizable groups—and between the professional formations that
invest them; Jewish American literary study’s model of identification cannot be reduced to the representational historicism authorizing the humanities’ cognitive obsession with anthropologistic reference. A generation ago, Jonathan Rutherford argued, in describing the evolution of his own thinking about identity and difference, “Most writing on the cultural politics of difference has been formulated from marginal positions—those places that my own ethnic, sexual and class location has constructed as the Other”; the dominant paradigms through which the academy customarily thinks about difference indeed frequently take the form of minoritarian-coded practices inflected in some way by a concern with resistance. The Impossible Jew on the other hand aims to interrupt those reifying procedures that precognitively situate the thinking of difference in often nationalistically, and almost always positivistically, legible populations. Jewish American literary study can sustain a critique of how a concept of identity functions as a police form in the ethnographically limned historicist study of identifiable groups—and therefore opens itself up to an array of critical identity projects situated in other recognizable ethnic, multicultural, comparative, and/or theoretical fields. Thus though my focus is pretty much exclusively on Jewish American literary studies and the habits through which its practitioners operate in what sometimes looks very much like a golden ghetto, I hope this book can operate as a kind of goodwill gesture to the future of the critique of identity more generally.

The Impossible Jew begins with a category problem. Because it is difficult to imagine identity-based literary history without a concept of identity, those of us working in the field of Jewish American literature specifically and Jewish studies more generally need to account for the Jewishness that anchors the field—much as our friends in other identity-based fields have had to do with their field-defining concepts. Now I should say at the outset (as I hope will not be a surprise) that I am perfectly willing—even happy—to allow claims to the effect that Jewish American writers do not have to be read as Jewish American writers—according to the same logic that suggests that African American writers do not have to be read only in African American literature classes, that LGBT writers do not have to be read only in queer studies classes, that male and/or female writers do not have to be read only in gender studies classes, and so on. I still remember an anonymous reader’s report that
recommended rejection for an article I had submitted to a reputable scholarly journal some years ago (a recommendation that was heeded, I should add). The reader, imagining him- or herself (I myself imagine) unsettling the grounds of my argument (which had to do with the terms in which it is possible and/or desirable to talk about the Jewishness of literature by and about Jews), insisted that Jewish writers will be valued on the basis of the quality, not of the Jewishness, of their writing (the exact words were “Jewish American literature won’t survive because of its Judaic sources, its Jewishness so-to-speak, but solely through its literature”; I still have the letter). Though I think that is debatable, at least insofar as Kaaterskill Falls and The Chosen are still in print, I of course concede the point that the reader was trying to make. That said, this reviewer punctured precisely the problem he or she positioned him- or herself to address, which is the problem of categories and categoricalness: once one employs a category like “Jewish American literature” and expects it to do any work whatsoever, one takes on a responsibility for that category, which involves, at the very least, theorizing it. Confident (and sometimes sanctimonious) talk about an alternative between literary value and its putative others often serves as a smokescreen or diversion rooted in the purported positivity of literary work, a distraction from focusing on the habits and procedures that govern the production, circulation, and legibility of literary judgments. For the time being, at least, there are culturally viable, institutionally legible, and professionally compensated methods and practices for categorizing, reading, teaching, interpreting, and indeed publishing on Jewish literature, and it is under the aegis of these methods that a lot of writing by Jewish authors is read and discussed. It was certainly under the aegis of such methods that I had submitted the article in question for publication. That said, for a critic to recognize his or her situation within a dominant professional order does not have to be the same thing as embracing or assenting to the reproduction of this order’s institutional claim of self-evidence. The problem I start with is therefore a choice that must be perpetually confronted and reconfronted: By what right and through what procedures is the Jewishness that orients the field of Jewish American literary study anchored? Are we going to contest the Jewishness under the rubric of which Jewish American literature is professionally given—that is, as a field, as it is encountered, read, studied, cognized,
taught, known, and/or analyzed—or are we going to naturalize it by taking it for granted? Are we going to use this contestation to forge alliances with other critical projects, or are we going to take advantage of an institutional security grounded in the identity category’s legibility?

It is one thing to start with a canon of texts already certified as “Jewish” and analyze them as such, which likely participates, even tacitly, in an effort to inventory some set of elements common to those texts and to link that inventory to a claim about the texts’ Jewishness. This kind of professionalized literary historical labor, while useful, naturalizes the Jewish identity of Jewish literature and assumes the critic’s ability to recognize it; moreover, it usually links into a project to secure the coherence of a specifically Jewish subject formation that unifies all historical expressions of Jewish culture—in large part by taking that subject for granted. It is another thing entirely, however, to begin by imagining how a criticism invested in the concept of Jewish identity takes up literary practices—that is, practices that span “literature,” “literary history,” and “literary criticism”—in the interest of analyzing the modes in which they contest how texts can come to be recognized as Jewish; in this case, the burden of identity-based criticism shifts to the literary critical apparatus itself in its bearing toward texts whose categorical legibility—as Jewish—cannot be taken for granted. Such a realignment would call for a reconceptualization of the fundamental identity-based literary historical question: not What can we say about this Jewish text? but How does this text enable an identitarian literary historical practice or agency? The former question inevitably sees a legitimated historical narrative as a canon’s representational foundation: Jewish literature furnishes access to a Jewish history that we do not doubt our ability to recognize. The second question, however, arises in the absence of that kind of methodological and historiographic—and anthropological or ethnographic—confidence and therefore cannot consider the literary historical problem of identity as essentially delineated by already-legitimated regions of identitarian self-evidence (such as “ethnicity” or “population”); uncertain what Jews look like, literary criticism in this mode seeks to devise vocabularies for a discourse of Jewyness. Such a critical discourse would begin by not conceptualizing identity in literature primarily in terms of reference, representation, or property, and certainly not in the name of a unity or totality organized under the
banner of nationalism, and would instead investigate how knowledge of identity is produced, an investigation that necessarily locates itself not where individuals and groups are identifiable but rather at the limits of processes of identification and classification.

Jewish American literary study cannot ground itself in an assumption that Jews call out from the texts of history to be recognized; we must consider the categorically disruptive possibility that the act of literary historical identification is conditioned by our critical practices. Despite a recent surge in critical work on Jewish American literature, too much scholarship remains dominated by the historicist expectation of an identifiable historical subject of which literature is presumed to constitute part of the record. It is a mistake for Jewish American literary study to understand the literature ultimately by way of an identifiable and/or legible, which is at some level to say coherent, Jewish people, however pluralized such a fundamentally biologistic concept might be—usually via one or more legitimated narratives of Jewish American social or cultural history (such as assimilation, a political shift rightward, changing relations with African Americans, secularization, or post-Holocaust Zionism). By doing so, it inevitably conceives of itself as an arm of a larger, multidisciplinary narrative of The Jew that depends on a kind of nationalist logic as it confidently looks for traces of a recognizable Jewish subject. As much as the general historiographic project often articulated under the umbrella of Jewish studies (no matter a particular endeavor’s disciplinary home) may attend to the transformation and/or multiplicity of its “Jewish” object matter, it largely retains a prescriptive identitarian confidence that this object stably persists in being “Jewish.”

As I signposted at the outset, the Jewish American literary field seems now to be paying the price for such nationalist insularity, in the form of insiderism, trivialization, and ghettoization. But it is a complex process of ghettoization, with multiple and often discontinuous histories and agents accounting for it; I will take up this problem in a more sustained manner in chapter 1. Part of the problem is certainly that other fields that one might expect to concern themselves with Jewish or Jewish American identity and the machinery of Jewish identification, or that under other circumstances might so concern themselves, continue to avoid the field; thus Jewish studies is only rarely made (or thought to be) a part of academic ethnicity studies formations, and Jewish American literature
is not always included in the welter of identity groups privileged by the academic study of American multicultural literature. Anecdotes undoubtedly abound, but here is some (selective) evidence: the words “Jew” and “Judaic” and their variants show up only a handful of times in Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd’s important collection *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, for example, many simply as quotations from Deleuze and Guattari’s Kafka book and a few others in the context of Israeli Hebrew-language writing about the Israel-Palestine conflict; “Jewish” shows up only three times in David Palumbo-Liu’s 1995 *The Ethnic Canon*, and never as a serious focus, for another well-remarked example; and the word appears another handful of times in Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States*, mostly merely in lists of various ethnicities. Christopher Douglas’s *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism*, more firmly anchored in establishment English-department-based multiculturalist Americanism than these other books, explicitly eschews analysis of Jewish literature because American Jews are not a group “whose members continue to be racialized”; this clearly amounts to a kind of evasion of Jewish American literary study’s problematic status. Jewish American literature obviously carries little of the prestige or capital of ethnic literature anchors such as Latina/o, Asian American, and Native American literatures, and I wonder how many search committees advertising for jobs in broadly defined “US multiethnic lit” have Jewish literature in mind. A second contributing factor in the ongoing ghettoization of Jewish American literary study, however, is that Jewish studies as an institutional formation continues to look with suspicion on the methodologies, practices, and even archives of literary history and criticism. While disciplines such as philology remain esteemed by, and retain their capital in, the Jewish studies complex, modern literature and literary studies, particularly as taking shape in texts written in America, in texts written in languages other than the identitarian fetish languages Yiddish or Hebrew, and in texts written since 1900, continues to be undervalued—especially when this literature is taken as an object of literary studies rather than of historiography. And a third root of this ghettoization, finally, is that until fairly recently, the bulk of Jewish American literary historiography has been content to pursue an undertheorized practice. Mark Shechner has recently discussed how Jewish American literary studies so frequently
seems to lack the dynamism and self-theorization that characterize the other “ethnic” American literature fields: while many other “studies” fields consistently criticize their own methodologies and archives, Jewish American literary study frequently seems more or less fixed and complacent, even antitheoretical. According to Shechner, however, it is not that Jewish American literary studies lacks a theory of itself; it in fact has embraced one—immigration—but has so naturalized and normalized it that no one ever thinks of analyzing or mentioning it, lacking the professional will or sometimes even capacity to make it an object of thought or criticism. As will become abundantly clear (if indeed it is not obvious already), I am in *The Impossible Jew* fairly sympathetic to this argument, though I expand from Shechner’s specific focus on immigration to look at the restrictive effect of the field’s precognitive historicism more generally.

Even close to four decades since Philip Roth’s Nathan Zuckerman began mercilessly parodying the literary professional search for an extraliterary Jewish referent, too many scholars still presume that a more or less uncritical representational historicism is the best way to coordinate (I resist calling this practice “reading”) Jewish American literature’s Jew. But what happens to identity-based literary study if we no longer take for granted the location, fact, and accounting of Jewish American identification? What if the structure of the literary historical triangulation of author, text, and recognizable identity or identifiable historical subject were not taken to be self-evident, and what if we thought about Jewish American literary criticism as emerging out of a text’s resistance to categorical confidence about Jews? I argue here that what we possibly still too easily call Jewish American literature continues to be pressingly relevant as a countertext to—or decisively not, that is, a positive escape from—a historicist literary historical paradigm, ascendant at least since the 1960s and ’70s, that takes identity for granted as a secure literary historical position. One of my central arguments in *The Impossible Jew* is that if the institution of Jewish American literary study allows us to argue that Jewish identification is a relentless theme throughout Jewish American literature—and we have to admit at the very least that it certainly can be seen to be—then such identification in fact mostly only uncertainly and dubiously erupts in these texts. As Michael Kramer’s critique of literary history’s romance with “metonymic ethnicity”
can help illuminate, Jewish American literary scholarship must attend more rigorously to the destabilizing confrontation between its own desire for Jewish identity and the literature’s depiction of a miscarried Jewish identification.¹¹

To restage my encounter with the unsatisfied reviewer, therefore, we might say that the field of Jewish American literary study cannot take for granted how—but really even that—Jewish literature is Jewish. If we do not need to read writers born with a touch of the Torah brush for their texts’ “Jewishness,” then if we are interested in a literary historical concept of Jewish identity, we need to admit that the field of Jewish American literary study inheres at least partly, but undeniably and necessarily, in the often professionalized, and always institutionally situated, activity of treating literature as “Jewish”—I am not sure why or how else we would maintain the field. We do not have to maintain the field, certainly, but if we do find it important enough to maintain—and university courses, academic programs, professional conferences, and journals and publishers’ lists at the very least certainly suggest that an infrastructure persists for maintaining it—we do so by choosing to read texts as Jewish, enabling the field precisely in this choice. The categorically “Jewish” subject that Jewish American literary study—and more widely Jewish studies in general—identifies in “Jewish” texts is in fact, at least in part, consolidated by the constitutive practices through which we read, teach, and write about those texts. Jewish identity and identification are at once the field-organizing ideals of Jewish American literary study and the spectral strategic location of Jewish American literary study. But if this is a constitutive problem for the field of Jewish American literature, it also provides a site at which Jewish American literary study can contest its alienation from other fields, insofar as it is a problem that is largely shared with any “Jewish studies” work broadly pursued under the Jewish identity rubric and, more widely, by other marginal, minority, and/or ethnic studies formations.

Even as I say this, however, I must also admit that this is a realization that is belated in Jewish American literary study, as it is in Jewish studies more generally. The fact is that many other fields of ethnic study have for some time been exploring the critical ruptures that open out of this awareness. Particularly helpful to my project in *The Impossible Jew* have been Kandice Chuh’s argument for the “subjectlessness” of Asian
American discourse and Ramón Saldívar’s elaboration of what he calls a “postracial” aesthetics. Chuh’s attempt to displace debates about Asian American subjectivity that ultimately depend on some version of ethnographic identity for intelligibility is pressingly relevant to Jewish American literary studies; the point is not to construct yet another positive formulation of Jewish difference but rather to prioritize the negativity of difference by insisting that a subject only becomes recognizable and can act as such by conforming to certain regulatory matrices. Subjectlessness for Chuh is a “conceptual tool” for a “strategic anti-essentialism”; if we imagine a field (such as Asian American studies or Jewish studies) as subjectless, then rather than looking to complete the identitarian category (whether Asian American or Jewish American or anything else), to actualize it through methods such as inventing its characteristics or enumerating the various components of its differences, critics would be positioned to contest the institutional effects of the “various configurations of power and knowledge,” both inside and outside the academy, “through which the term comes to have meaning.” As a method, subjectlessness produces the subject as “always also an epistemological object.”

Saldívar’s term “postrace” lays some of the groundwork for how I put that project to work in *The Impossible Jew*. As he explains, “the term ‘postrace’ does not mean that we are beyond race; the prefix ‘post’ here does not mean a chronological ‘superseding,’ a triumphant posteriority. Rather, the term entails a conceptual shift to the question of what meaning the idea of ‘race’ carries in our own times. The post of postrace is not like the post of post-structuralism; it is more like the post of postcolonial, that is, a term designating not a chronological but a conceptual frame.” For Saldívar, the postrace aesthetic performs how “race in the twenty-first century still matters, not as a line to be crossed or as the substance of difference . . . but as a real effect of imaginary patterns of behavior.”

Jewish literary study needs to build on this kind of critical work that addresses the representational problems of identity and identification. To be sure, there has been work in what has become known as Jewish cultural studies that aims to complicate the representation of identity and its history—one thinks, for example, of such works as Jonathan Boyarin’s *Thinking in Jewish*; Ann Pellegrini’s *Performance Anxieties*; Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin’s *Critical Inquiry* essay “Diaspora: Genera-
tion and the Ground of Jewish Identity” and their edited volume *Jews and Other Differences*; David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel’s edited volume *Insider/Outsider*; Sander Gilman’s *Jewish Frontiers*; Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini’s edited volume *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*; Caryn Aviv and David Shneer’s *New Jews*; Vincent Brook’s edited volume *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*; and Jonathan Freedman’s *Klezmer America*. But such works as these remain a small offshoot in a much larger and dominant archive of identitarian Jewish studies work that too often eschews critical interrogation of its constitutive terms. Moreover, works such as these, coming out in the 1990s and the first decade of this century, were emerging in the wake of an intense academic investment in identity studies programs—a sustained professional response to a multilateral critique of essentialism across the humanities that, when taken up by the institutional bureaucracies necessary to put it to work in mounting departments, programs, and faculty positions in the various identity studies fields, had the perverse effect of contributing to the very structures of Balkanization that the lessons of antiessentialism ostensibly warned against. I am arguing neither that this historical fact evacuates these works of critical potential nor that my own work is insulated from it. But a critical Jewish studies has to work very hard to contest this inherent gravitational fall back toward identitarianism.

Critics working in the Jewish American literary field need therefore to appreciate a disruption at the heart of our enterprise: representation cannot be thought to organize our field—that is, we cannot take for granted that Jews, Jewish identity, and/or Jewish history are represented in Jewish literature—because the possibility of representation is in fact organized by the constitutive activity of the field, because much of what we can actually point to as being categorically represented in a given text is a spectral product of our interpretive desire. We can call this a hegemonic institutional formation: beginning in the authorizing expectation that already-legitimated Jewish texts necessarily link to a Jewish subject or history ensures that representation represents primarily the hegemonic critic’s own historical imagination, insofar as the already-legible narratives of Jewish history that Jewish literary history mobilizes to resolve Jewish literature are themselves the products of interpretive
will. Once the decision is made to treat a text as Jewish, the Jewish signified overdetermines the textual signifier, making the text representative of “its” Jewish identity. The Jewish unity or identity of a text is not a datum or textual attribute; it is a project, produced in the institutionally bound activity of reading and deferred through an assemblage of metonymic recognitions. Thus a text’s Jewishness can never be finally fixed or positively located; to begin analytic investigation in the assumption that Jewish “difference” is a positivity that anchors or guides historical inquiry can never amount to anything other than an instantiation of the critic’s compensated and legitimated penchant for recognizing the totalizing identity he or she wants to recognize. This is why historicism is a banal, self-confirming dead end for identity-based literary study. A critical Jewish American literary study needs to approach texts obliquely, remaining open to the resistance of interminable parodic or simulacral traces of its own interpretive desire.

Showing how an unstable anxiety about identity in writing by American Jews gets reinscribed by a professional-institutional desire—taking form in literary historical practice—to recognize Jews, The Impossible Jew seeks to liberate Jewish American literary study from a normalizing historicist project oriented around the expected recognition of a nationally coherent Jewish substance or population, however pluralized it may be, a project that imagines itself subservient to the historiography of a subject it does not ultimately call into question. I am tempted to call this kind of criticism “essentialist,” insofar as it normatively predicates itself on the existence of a historical Jewish “essence”—even if only assumed and not even explicitly so at that—that unifies the variety of historical manifestations of Jewish culture and being, no matter how much these manifestations shift or change over time or how this “essence” is defined. But this term is so overloaded by now with institutionally bound meanings, past debates, and academic canards—as to be more obfuscating than clarifying. David Biale, for example, in his early essay “Confessions of an Historian of Jewish Culture,” voiced a reasonable suspicion that most Jewish studies scholars do not have much interest in or use for “a monolithic definition of Judaism” but instead operate in the context of an interest in a much “wider set of practices,” namely, a deessentialized “horizon of Jewish culture.” Hoping to expose the “hegemonic” construction of the
“fiction” of an “autonomous” religious concept of Judaism, Biale advocated a “counter-historical” historiography that would function “to subvert established myths from the past and thus open up new possibilities for Jewish self-definition today”—such as by pointing out “the tensions and interactions between texts and contexts, between intellectual elites and the broader culture of which they are a part.” Jewish studies scholars would presumably thus be less interested in policing the boundaries of some fictively unified and “authoritative” set of religious practices than in exploring the variety of all those populations that self-define as “Jewish.” Amos Funkenstein made a parallel argument grounded in the same fundamental logic in his essay “The Dialectics of Assimilation.” And yet this gesture toward liberal expansiveness underlying such broad-gauge cultural studies approaches—or rather the structure of the theoretical move that sanctions it—betrays a fundamental identitarianism precisely in ostensibly moving beyond one. Such arguments as Biale’s and Funkenstein’s, and as have been reproduced across a mainstream of liberal/left Jewish studies scholarship that they have authorized, in fact appeal to historical diversity and the interpenetration of text and context only insofar as they rely on a structuring concept of identity that works precisely by controverting any epiphenomenal diversity. If Biale wants us to doubt the organized coherence of “Judaism,” he calls on us to recognize the organized coherence of “Jewish culture”—and indeed to reinscribe the authority of its categorical unity. The stuff of Jewish studies analysis here may be continually in flux, revising and reinventing itself, even unfixed and inessentially constructed, but the categorical identity—that is, as Jewish—of the legibly Jewish entity continually resolving into an object of scholarly regard in such work is never in any way disrupted; below all the flux and revision and reinvention, an identitarian foundation remains quite stably and always already recognizably Jewish. Such ostensibly antiessentialist arguments for historical contingency are in fact grounded in the primordial act of taking for granted an identifiable Jewish subject. So instead of using a term like “essentialist,” as I have already tipped my hand, I am using the possibly even more polemical term “nationalist,” which is also overloaded, though I hope less securely so.

The reductio ad absurdum of the kind of historicist scholarship I am challenging here is Ruth Wisse, insofar as she illustrates the
dangerous surveillance—what William Spanos describes as a process of “overseeing”—inscribed by historicism’s fall toward identitarianism. Wisse is an interesting figure of institutional power insofar as her influence is attested even in much of the work that challenges her. An indication of her leading or hegemonic role can be found in the frequency with which the phrase “brilliant but flawed” and its ideological cognates can be found in reference to her work. It is a notable gesture, a kind of heterodox obeisance: whereby scholars reaffirm her claim to the field even in marking their own revisionist stance in relation to it, thereby reinscribing her masterful position or leading function. In any case, I turn here to her work because it so starkly illuminates the theoretical and political investments of historicist scholarship. Wisse begins her gate-keeping defense of a modern Jewish canon by admitting a putative problem of canon definition, at least one as buttressed by concepts of nation and state as hers is: essentially, the fact of modern Jewish multilingualism and even multiculturalism. But she quickly belies any apparent anxiety by betraying her fundamental axiom—that “there exists a modern Jewish people” that anchors the identity of, insofar as it is “reflected” in, even the most “centrifugal”-seeming set of modern Jewish literature. Wisse opposes her mission to an apathetic or pessimistic—certainly superficial—perception of a “centrifugal” modern Jewry, marked by “the decline of religious faith, the disintegration of cohesive communities, the weakening of ethnic ties”: “Yet just as there exists a modern Jewish people, so too does a modern Jewish literature exist, and I hope to show that the difficulty of defining them does not lessen their actuality” (xv). It is as if the very grammar of that final sentence testifies to Wisse’s project: syntactically, one expects those final two pronouns—“them” and “their”—to refer to “literature,” but really, she is only interested in “modern Jewish literature” as evidence of, dependent on, and ancillary to the “modern Jewish people” that is the real subject of her nationalist project. As she succinctly puts it a few pages later, “Modern Jewish literature is the repository of modern Jewish experience. It is the most complete way of knowing the inner life of Jews” (4).

My objection to this kind of literary historical project is twofold. First, Wisse offers no theoretical account of how her “people” is “reflected” in her “literature,” mostly, I imagine, because she does not think she needs to; how does the identity or “inner life” of the “modern
Jewish people” make its way into, and therefore guarantee the categorical definition of, “modern Jewish literature”? This question is an unavoidable one for any critical Jewish literary study, but Wisse seemingly does not address it; or at least she does not find it necessary to theorize the concept of representation underlying her approach. My guess, incidentally, is that she relies on something like liberal nationalism’s culturally generative notion of race to do the job. Second, I object to the police function that Wisse ascribes to her Jewish literary canon; even as it “reflects” a unified Jewish historical body, Wisse’s category of “Jewish literature” in fact consolidates dispersed Jewry by dint of its very categorical coherence: “the works I feature derive so powerfully from a particular cultural community that they make a special claim on the members of that community to be reabsorbed by them in a cycle of creative renewal” (5). This surveilling move is an unpardonable sin for any truly critical Jewish literary study, but Wisse’s work is seemingly reducible to it. For Wisse, the history of Jewish literature and the historical Jewish subject metonymically reinforce, by testifying to, each other: though it is difficult to pin down the antecedent of her final “them,” in her clause “reabsorbed by them” (another troubling and powerful pronoun), for her it hardly matters. On this score, I am tempted to double down and call the statist normativity of Wisse’s work “Zionist,” insofar as this literary historical police function repeats the nationalist ingathering of the Diaspora that Zionist ideology promotes—a repetition or parallel notable in normalizing identitarian terms such as “reabsorb” and “renewal.” That said, I will admit that I hesitate in appealing to the term “Zionism” insofar as I do not want my work to be sucked into the intellectual vacuum that is the academic alternation between, on the one hand, the reactionary lunacy of those who equate any criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism and, on the other, untempered doltish denunciation of any scholarly privileging of Jewish identity as tarnished by an association with Israeli oppression. In any case, Wisse’s police function reproduces, more generally, a form of legibility determined and contained by the logic of the state form.

Having said this, I should point out that the effort to compile and justify an archive constitutes necessary work for critical Jewish literary study. But it is not sufficient work. And the project as Wisse conceptuallyizes and articulates it—that is, as, at a fundamental level, militantly
nationalist labor—is undertheorized, anticritical, and bullying, and it suppresses the analytical ability to contest the givenness of Jewish identity that Wisse so desperately wants professional scholarship to take for granted. Thus the real problem that I am trying to address here is ultimately not, as some readers might anticipate, the gate-keeping modality of this kind of scholarship, its desire to police who gets to count as Jewish and who does not, who is allowed into the Jewish canon and who is not; there is already a healthy body of Jewish studies work that undertakes just this critique, and many of my readers who might be tempted to respond to the preceding with a healthy “What the hell are you even bothering talking about Ruth Wisse for?” are to varying degrees likely in accord with it. The more fundamental problem—and the one *The Impossible Jew* aims primarily to challenge—is the identitarian logic that not only is fundamental to Wisse’s polemic but lies at the foundation of so much Jewish-studies-sponsored scholarship: the anthropological expectation that a legibly Jewish population (or populations) stands as the final representational guarantor of a body of literature. This is a nationalist operation that even much scholarship otherwise explicitly hostile to Wisse’s nationalist project, I think, may in fact share. My point is not that historicism is necessarily a scholarly parochialism; it is that nationalist habits of thought are the inevitable concomitant of the representative methodologies in which historicism inheres.

*The Impossible Jew* asks what happens for Jewish American literary study “after” identity. Following efforts to chart a “postracial” or “subjectless” criticism, the book works toward a postidentitarian concept of identity, one that grounds a literary critical practice that recognizes that we need a concept of identity for literary study not in order to normalize what we might call, following recent elaborations of the concept of biopolitics, a biologicist humanities practice grounded in the legibility of a historical population that today we have little choice but to understand via racialist conceptual habits structured by a concept of heritability, but precisely insofar as it enables us to critically think about the normative power of identity as an organizing principle, about the relay points whereby epistemological practices and administrative practices cross each other. Foucault’s argument that the “point of departure for the organizational line of a ‘biopolitics’ ” is the “doubling” wherein the political concept of the subject of right appears as a “population a
government must manage” provides a powerful critical tool for analyzing the ways in which population as a historical-biological phenomenon and population as a historiographic-normative phenomenon can be considered not simply relevant to each other but necessary to each other. Biopolitics’ emphasis on how a population recognized as a set of living beings falls under specific forms of knowledge and techniques that are themselves rationalized according to the demands of the management of state forces helps to illuminate or model the administrative power and knowledge practices organized by what I am calling the biologistic concept of identity in Jewish studies. Any predication of identity—as “Jewish” or ethnic or anything else—carries with it a series of critical questions about its own possibility and the practices it underwrites, including questions about what such predication allows critics to do, about the desirability of a vocabulary of identity, about the ethics of identification, about the constitution of canons, about professional habits and institutional practices, and so on. I mean the “after” in “after identity” to point toward a reimagining of what “identity” means for literary practice. Taking work such as Saldívar’s and Chuh’s as a launching-off point, I am interested in resolving critical practices potentially capable of disrupting the biologism of current representational-historicist habits of thinking about and around ethnicized identity. My goal is to show how identity does not have to circulate exclusively as the effect of a biologization that prevents analysis of its function as a form of criticism. The Impossible Jew charts the possible contours of a Jewish American literary study that neither embraces the self-evidence of identitarian markers nor believes that we simply are beyond or have superseded them but rather is dedicated to questioning the meaning and efficaciousness of the idea of identity. The Impossible Jew argues for reading “Jewish” for the historiographic, affective, institutional, and professional desires that invest the term and that in turn invest the field of the term’s application, rather than for a population to which the term ultimately, presumably, refers. Judith Butler describes a site of contestation as “the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings” and as such “never fully owned, but always only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes”; following this definition, this book contests the ineluctable relay between representation and
identity for the practices that constitute Jewish literary study, Jewish studies more broadly, and the humanities in general.

The Impossible Jew employs a literary critical concept of Jewishness not to render a Jewish population or Jewish writers as an object of historical analysis but to explore the history, meaning, and power—simultaneously and contradictorily cultural, social, political, intellectual, institutional, and religious—of Jewish identity. I want at least to begin the process of rendering the act of ascribing Jewish identity—in my specific case, the literary critical act of ascribing Jewish identity—as an object of analysis. In alliance with José David Saldívar’s project in Trans-Americanity, I have in a sense tried to turn the adjectives “Jewish” and “Jewish American” into nouns, approaching these identifying concepts, thought processes, and practices of ascription and categorization as the simultaneous vehicles and objects of Jewish American literary study—as the objects of a critical Jewish American literary practice precisely insofar as they operate as its vehicles.27 Doing so, scholars, critics, and readers can release the interpretive desire for categorical predication and even communal belonging from the nationalist documentary orbit in which it so frequently restrictively circulates. When we redirect our analysis away from an identifiable Jewish subject assumed to representationally underwrite a canon of Jewish American literature and toward an anxiety about Jewish identification that is as much a characteristic of our critical practice as it is a phenomenon in the texts we take to be proper to that practice, we reimagine too the temporality of Jewish identity: no longer anchored in the stable coherence of an ethnographically or biologically secure Jewish past, identity-based literary criticism can derive its sanction from an as-yet-undiscerned future of Jewish identifiability. The Impossible Jew hopes to open space for an alternate critical discourse about Jewish identity that would examine the desire for identification as a critical criterion for the examination of texts. In the process, I range over well-trod textual ground in my close reading of Jewish American texts, but always in order to show how that ground has suffered the imposition of a reductive nationalist28 cartography. Rather, and more significantly, than helping us understand Jews, Jewish literature can help us understand how we structure our thinking about Jews—how, as Jonathan Boyarin might put it, we “think in Jewish.”29
One final note on how I proceed in this book. *The Impossible Jew* is precisely not the kind of book that reads Jewish American literature for a particular representative characteristic or function of Jewish American literature, and it does not try to make historiographically representative claims about Jewish American texts or more or less sociological or ethnographic claims about the Jews who wrote them. I do not try to instrumentalize or impose on a sanctioned set of Jewish American texts a methodological rubric or trope or specific lens, nor do I try to recover for the field of literary study the virtues of some set of heretofore unrecognized texts. Instead, I have tried to read established texts—that is, largely uncontroversial texts considered exemplary or representative of a Jewish American canon—against the professionalizing machine of their historicist canonicity. As such, the chapters to follow appear not as episodes in a historical narrative about Jewish American literature but rather as moments in the successive elaboration of a critical counternarrative of Jewish canonicity. The book does not articulate a theoretical rubric in its first chapter and then “apply” it across a set of representative texts in the following chapters so much as it is organized around a problem about Jewish identification arising in the encounter between habitualized ways of thinking about literature and professional literary practice on the one hand and an institutionally legible canon of Jewish American literature on the other.

After chapter 1’s genealogy of the nationalist identitarianism underwriting the current academic isolation of the historicist mainstream of Jewish American literary practice, four chapters follow that proceed chronologically according to the texts standing as their analytical occasion but that try to rebuild a critical Jewish American literary study step by step. Across all four of these chapters, the book articulates a concept of particularity for the study of identity that is neither positivistically opposed to some ontological concept of universality nor grounded in what is inevitably nationalized and biologized ethnic self-evidence. Through a close reading of Abraham Cahan’s turn-of-the-century novella “The Imported Bridegroom,” chapter 2 begins this process by imagining what an identity-based literary critical practice would look like that seeks its authorization from a future of identification about which it necessarily remains uncertain rather than from a recognizable identitarian past about which it cannot but be confident. Thus liberated
from an arboreal paradigm of identity-based literary history, chapter 3 takes as its focus the ways in which a main current in scholarship on the New York intellectuals has, by preconceiving these critics as representative of the experience of a Jewish American subject, cleared ground for a racist-nationalist biographical project that reads the rise of Zionist neoconservatism from the belly of the New York intellectuals as a natural or inevitable emergence overseen by a concept of responsibility to Jewish polity; in this chapter, I show how a biologistic interpretive framework displaces the possibility of critical interrogation of the ways in which Jewishness becomes legible. If chapters 2 and 3 focus on the habits of thought in which historicist identitarianism polices a biologist nationalism in the understanding of identity-based literature, combining to displace the self-evidence of a Jewish historical subject that might serve as the presumed object of Jewish American literary study, then chapters 4 and 5 pivot to chart literary practices that reinscribe the possibility of counternormative Jewish identification outside the secure markers of a biologically self-evident Jewish history. Focusing on Philip Roth’s 1986 novel *The Counterlife*, which stands near the middle of Roth’s nearly-thirty-year-long chronicle of writer Nathan Zuckerman, chapter 4 takes its cue from Zuckerman’s claim at the end of the novel that he can only be a Jew where there are no other Jews to argue that Roth’s Zuckerman books critically illuminate the desire for Jewish self-evidence, showing that the discourse of “The Jew” demands a necessary critical text to supplement it; Roth is important to Jewish American literary study because his work stages the fundamental polemical labor of a Jewish literary history. Chapter 5, finally, argues that Jonathan Safran Foer’s 9/11 book *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* forces us to admit that its Jewishness is completely dependent on our desire to find it; the book positions us to think of identity not primarily as something represented in narrative but more fundamentally as a specter haunting the narrative place where it is desired. In figuring precisely this literary historical desire for identity, Foer’s book points us toward a responsible way to retain Jewish identity as a critical term.

Over the years I wrote this book, I toyed (of course) with the phrase “The State of Jewish American Literary Studies” or something similarly clever. The idea was a double entendre—deadpan turn to the camera—suggesting that in taking a look at the current situation in the field, I
am also analyzing a predominant statism in professional thinking about Jewish American literature. Though better sense prevailed, even a cursory look through the book insists on the importance of a critique of statism. Sometimes this is obvious, as in my discussion of the reactionary Zionism through which an autobiographical neoconservative narrative has reinscribed the legacy of the New York intellectuals. But everywhere this book aims to destabilize and denaturalize the hegemonic gravity by which literary historical thinking about identity is pulled toward historicist structures, procedures, and habits that conform with the logic of state. This includes the tendency to think of literature in terms of documentarity, representativity, and positivism and to think of identity in a cluster with nation, body, population, and subject.