DEAR FRIENDS,

The Program in Jewish Culture & Society at the University of Illinois is ready for an extraordinary year of teaching, research, and intellectual fellowship!

The come out with the big news right away: Sayed Kashua is joining us as a visiting professor for the entire school year! This appointment, made possible by the Israel Studies Project, has been in the works for a long time. And we are beyond thrilled to have this singular figure on Israel’s cultural landscape as a member of our faculty! Sayed will be teaching two courses in creative writing (one on satire and one on writing for TV) and will serve as the instructor for our most advanced Hebrew classes. For more on this marvelous development, please take a look at the story about Sayed in this newsletter.

We are also pleased to host another major international conference this academic year. Organized by our Jewish historian Eugene Avrutin, it will focus on the history of the blood libel, bringing together the latest research on this equally distressing and pertinent subject. “The Strange World of Ritual Murder: Culture, Politics, and Belief In Eastern Europe and Beyond” will take place on campus from October 12 to 14, 2014 – and you can read more about it in the following pages.

Much excitement will be derived this year from our series of endowed lectures. In an all-time record, we will feature five of them in the course of 2014/15 – the Einhorn, Goldberg, Krouse, Marcus, and Rosenthal Lectures. We are so grateful to all of these families for enabling us to create intellectual excitement on campus – this year by bringing Sara Blair, Martin Kavek, Hillel Kavak, Nancy Miller, and Todd Presner to the University of Illinois!

Most importantly, though, we continue to be a presence in the classroom. Every semester, we offer about 20 courses, teaching well over 1,000 students in the process. Our long-standing Jewish Studies minor and our Jewish Studies major (established last year) are thriving as are our graduate certificates in Jewish Culture & Society and Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies.

And as I say every year, everything we do is made possible by our friends and donors. The faculty we hire, the courses we teach, the public lectures we organize, the workshops we convene – the entire presence of Jewish Studies at Illinois – it all comes from the support of our contributors. We want to thank all of our friends who continue to give with such generosity. We simply couldn’t do our work without them.

If you are interested in becoming a friend of the Program, please don’t hesitate to get in touch with me at bunzl@illinois.edu. Even the smallest contribution makes a difference!

Matti Bunzl

Director, Program in Jewish Culture & Society
Professor, Department of Anthropology
In Eliot’s novel, an Englishman discovers his Jewish lineage. Troilope’s Lopez, another “stranger in a strange land,” likens himself to Moses. As Troilope writes, “...He had no father or mother, no uncle, aunt, brother or sister, no cousin even whom he could mention in a cursory way to his dearest friend...” The fact remained that though a great many men and not a few women knew Lopez very well, none of them knew whence he had come, or what was his family. Mad Men’s Don Draper is another stranger with mysterious origins. “He could be Batman,” says Harry Crane. When Roger Sterling prods Don about his childhood, Don replies: “Think of me as Moses. I was a baby in a basket.” Mad Men’s turn-of-the-millennium depiction of America’s postwar history portrays Jewishness as a paradigmatic minority experience. “Have we ever hired any Jews?” asks Roger in the pilot, “Not on my watch.” Don replies. Such remarks would not surprise Rachel Menken, the Jewish department store heiress of Season 1. But Mad Men also features many characters who appear to be Jewish. Indeed, showrunner Matthew Weiner has said he hopes “people can tell” or “know at some level,” that certain assimilated characters are Jews. Jimmy Barrett and his wife Bobbie (whom Don has an affair in season 2) are transparently Jewish, while Dr. Faye Miller (Don’s lover throughout much of season 4) is someone whom Weiner “hopes people can tell” is Jewish.

Hopes people can tell. If so, why not give Faye an unmistakably Jewish name, or a father named Solly? And if Bobbie is “transparency” Jewish why not have her use Yiddish words, as does Don’s accountant, or the Hebrew phrase “R’chaim” for a toast, as does Roy, the young playwright who eventually comes between Don and his beatnik mistress Midge? Why does Weiner confirm the Jewish identity of certain characters in interviews, while Mad Men itself merely suggests that these and many other characters might be Jewish?

The answer, I believe, is that these characters are secret Jews: the kind whose ultimate relleent, like Troilope’s Lopez, is ambiguous identity. Historically, “secret Jew” was one of the names given to Spanish or Portuguese Jews who, though forced to convert during the Inquisition, maintained stealthy allegiance to Jewish faith. Mad Men’s updating of this narrative secularizes the motif of the secret Jew, shifting from conversion to assimilation. Season 4 introduces Michael Ginsberg, an explicit Jew who, in describing himself as “from Mars” references the

Lily Meyer and Yoram Ben Shulhai title of Robert Heinlein’s sci-fi classic, Stranger in a Strange Land (1961). More ambiguous characters such as Midge, the Barretta, Jane Sterling, and Faye, figure metropolitan Jewishness as the para-
doxical state of both revealing and hiding one’s “true” identity. Yet, Mad Men goes further still by universalizing the condition of secret Jews. The show makes Don a “virtual” Jew in whom the minority’s stubborn particularity and the major-
ity’s privileged status collide. If this is a demonstrably neoliberal phenomenon, it is also a message that has been legible in Exodus and Psalm 137 for centuries.

“Babylon,” an episode midway through Season 1, is especially illustrative. The episode begins with Genesis as Don, failing, flashes back to the birth of his half-brother, Adam. “Babylon” then moves to Exodus courtesy of a visit from the Israel Ministry of Tourism who, encour-
aged by the popularity of Leon Uris’s

officer, Don is the bastard son of a pros-
titute and a Midwest farmer. Mad Men thus makes sustaining Don’s unknowability the core of its storyline.

In the 1940s, such motifs were har-
nessed to a project of Jewish nationhood. The use of “Exodus” to denote a con-
tinuum of Jewish experience was popular-
ized through Leon Uris’s novel and Otto Preminger’s film. Central to both was the construction of the “new Jew.” Scholars have noted the remarkable casting of the
As a virtual minority in a multi-plot web, Don’s narrative intersects with the storylines of four female characters. Whereas classic realist fiction uses techniques such as free indirect narration to reveal secret Jews in the lives of others, Mad Men uses televisual forms like montage. “Babylon’s” closing montage glimpses Joan’s affair with Roger who has bought her a caged bird – an age-old symbol of female captivity. The episode highlights a new dimension of Betty’s dependence. “It’s all in a kind of fog because… I want you so badly,” she tells Don, intensifying the secret of his infidelity. Finally, with the introduction of Belle Jolie’s lipstick account, “Babylon” features Peggy Olson’s chance remark about a “basket of kisses,” revealing to her male superiors that Don’s young secretary is a creative force.

As a trio of musicians begins literally to sing the Lord’s song, the camera closes in on Don’s expression. The scene then fades to a wistful Rachel, arranging her the same question he puts to Lily and America. But in “Babylon,” when Don asks Rachel to explain “the difference,” she points to the condition of exiles singing for their captors. “Look,” she says, “Jews have lived in exile for a long time. First in Babylon. Then all over the world… and we’ve managed to make a go of it. It might have something to do with the fact that we thrive at doing business with people who hate us.” Rachel thus anticipates “Babylon” as a global condition and the exile Jews as its paradigmatic subject.

Like, “utopia,” a place that etymologically combines “good place” and “no place,” her coupling with Don, she knows, has “no future.” “Babylon” concludes with Don’s visit to Midge, his Greenwich Village mistress, and a live performance of Psalm 137: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yeah, we wept, when we remembered Zion.”

In Exodus, Kitty (played by Eva Marie Saint) tells Ari that there “are no differences” between Jews and Christians, cementing the love affair between Israel and America. But in “Babylon,” when Don asks Rachel to explain “the difference,” she points to the condition of exiles singing for their captors. “Look,” she says, “Jews have lived in exile for a long time. First in Babylon. Then all over the world… and we’ve managed to make a go of it. It might have something to do with the fact that we thrive at doing business with people who hate us.” Rachel thus anticipates “Babylon” as a global condition and the exile Jews as its paradigmatic subject.

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habitually sexually abused her during her childhood. Dylan also charged Allen with further damaging her by denying the molestation and claiming that Mia Farrow had encouraged Dylan to make false accusations as a form of retaliation against Allen’s decision to pursue the relationship with Soon-Yi. On 7 February 2014 Allen responded in a forceful letter also published in the Times that denied all wrongdoing on his part and countered by accusing Dylan of sexual infidelity and deception because she claimed that her biological son Ronan (formerly Satchel, thought to be Allen’s son) was really fathered by Frank Sinatra. Allen further insinuated Mia Farrow’s dishonesty through her alleged refusal to submit to a lie detector test during a previous investigation by Yale-New Haven hospital into Allen’s conduct in regard to Dylan; he claimed he passed the lie detector test with flying colors. On the same day that Allen’s letter was published, Vanity Fair’s Maureen Orth weighed in with a bullet point style article that firmly supported Dylan. Orth’s account claimed that Mia Farrow was never asked to take a lie detector test, and cast suspicion on the provenance of the test Allen took.

There is a huge and often very painful discourse about child sexual abuse—rambunctiously global and not disclosed, discussed, treated, or prosecuted nearly enough anywhere. Coupled with child sexual slavery these extreme abuses mean that millions of children are forced into deeply depersonalizing, traumatic situations daily. In the context of Woody Allen and his texts, there is thus a very odd juxtaposition of mostly funny films about New Yorkers and some of the worst crimes imaginable. Can we see “tame” versions of inappropriate behavior in Allen’s films? Manhattan features Allen (b. 1935) and Mariel Hemingway (b. 1961) in a romantic liaison; granted, an eighteen year old actress is a completely different case than a child, but I wonder how the Jewish-masculinities-in-crisis that Allen so manifestly displays play into all of these situations? Allen certainly reneads both admiration for Manhattan and the legitimate gripes of some “groused out” journalists. Would the picture look different if Allen inhabited a Superman-esque masculinity and (the original comic book Superman is of course a creation of Jewish men) or would that not make him more visibly into a perpetrator in the eyes of the journalists and their readers? Or would the opposite be true? Is Allen in fact creepier precisely because his masculinity is always in question? In defending himself against being a child molester Allen noted in the Times that he is severely claustrophobic and that therefore he could not have committed the crime in the location Dylan Farrow used to open her chilling account: the attic of Mia Farrow’s Connecticut residence. Perhaps Allen, the expressively called on this annuous Jewish masculinity to attempt to defuse the charge. Is this all hyper-vimension and manifest aniexy a mask to cover abuse?

In our class, we talked about how, whereas an earlier generation of literary critics forbade the importation of the biographical into readings of the text, the current trends allow for more use of the biographical in order to unpack the literary or cinematic work. In Allen’s case, given that he is the star of many of his films and that the characters he plays are almost all versions of him, it seems particularly difficult to make a strict division between author and text. More importantly, unpacking at least some of what is happening with gender in Allen’s films can perhaps shed light on the biographical in ways unflattering to the filmmaker.

As you might imagine, growing up as I did in New York in the 1970s, Allen, who is of the generation of my parents, definitly seemed like “one of us.” My entire world was inflected with Jewish culture and Jewish life. When I was growing up, there were well-kept therapists in Upper West Side. So to me, Annie Hall is in particular captures that world with a keen mesh of nostalgia, irreverence, and of course, centrality, humor. The closing scene in Annie Hall, where Aly and Annie share a table and discuss old times long after they separate takes place in a restaurant just outside Lincoln Center—or to the southern tip of my turf (which extended north to Manhattan). The fabulous and get-you-in-stitches scenes where Aly recys greens up going under the roller coaster in Coney Island were familiar not from my family but from the extended families of many of my friends. So, when the Soon-Yi scandal broke in 1992 it did not seem like a distant celebrity under scrutiny but rather someone whose work was been very active while I was coming into consciousness (I saw pretty much every Allen film as they came out—and one rainy day I even saw Allen and Soon-Yi this must have been around 1949ish) crossing the street and trying not to be recognized under their umbrella.

I was exploring Jewish anxiety in the context of Roth and thus wanted to view Allen’s films systematically in order to try to glean the cinematic version of what this literary trope performs. As it turns out, there is a funny Roth connection here because I saw pretty much every Allen film as they came out—and one rainy day I even saw Allen and Soon-Yi (this must have been around 1949ish) acrossing the street and trying not to be recognized under their umbrella.

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David Bergelson was born in a shtetl in Ukraine in 1884 and emerged as a major literary figure in the years preceding World War I. He was keenly attuned to the new ideas and trends of his own time — the developments in literature, the visual arts, music, cinema, and theater that have come to be known as modernism. In 1908 Bergelson was one of the founders of the Kiev Kultur-Lige, an association that promoted Yiddish modernist culture in multiple media. It was in Kiev that Bergelson first was exposed to Cubo-Futurist art, because of his contact with the painters Alexandra Exter and Ryback. The circle of Yiddish-speaking intelligentsia to which Bergelson belonged did not confine itself to the purely Jewish world of the shtetl. Bergelson saw no contradiction between modernist art and Yiddish. His Yiddish was markedly different from the folky verbosity favored by Sholem Aleichem, and seemed unnatural to some of his readers. Yet Bergelson did not entirely abandon the past. Emerging from a traditional Jewish milieu at the beginning of the 20th century to confront secular modernity, Bergelson had at his disposal a vast reservoir of images, stories, and interpretations drawn from Jewish liturgy, the Hebrew Bible, and classical rabbinic literature — the past preserved in textual form. Fragments and images from these texts find their way into Bergelson’s modernist prose.

He was fully committed to Yiddish as a spoken and a literary language. In one of his famous essays about the future of Yiddish, Bergelson predicted that Jews who had assimilated and stopped speaking Yiddish would be reduced to “important stammering.” The places that best supported the development of Yiddish was the Soviet Union, according to Bergelson. Having left Moscow in 1921 for Berlin, he left Berlin in 1933, when Hitler came to power, and returned to what had become the USSR in 1934. Bergelson was first exposed to Cubo-Futurist art, because of his contact with the painters Alexandra Exter and Ryback. The circle of Yiddish-speaking intelligentsia to which Bergelson belonged did not confine itself to the purely Jewish world of the shtetl. Bergelson saw no contradiction between modernist art and Yiddish. His Yiddish was markedly different from the folky verbosity favored by Sholem Aleichem, and seemed unnatural to some of his readers. Yet Bergelson did not entirely abandon the past. Emerging from a traditional Jewish milieu at the beginning of the 20th century to confront secular modernity, Bergelson had at his disposal a vast reservoir of images, stories, and interpretations drawn from Jewish liturgy, the Hebrew Bible, and classical rabbinic literature — the past preserved in textual form. Fragments and images from these texts find their way into Bergelson’s modernist prose.

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In June 1943, several months prior to the liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto and his execution, Leyb Naydus was a restless wanderer. His remarkable—and neglected—contributions to Yiddish literature today is that there is simply a dearth of critical materials on him, another aspect that drew me to him. The very small number of articles and essays tend to fall into one or another of two camps. The more or less favorable ones focus on the vibrancy of his aesthetic and cosmopolitan works while dismissing the poetry on Jewish and national themes as sentimental and weak. On the other hand, those who are disinclined to favor Naydus find his world-literary pieces derivative and pat while only in those works that explore Jewish motifs do they see what would have been seeds for mature development. That is, each camp likes what the other doesn't, and vice versa. This protean Naydus entices the modern critic to figure out a way of understanding his achievements without simply making him whatever you want him to be.

The task I set myself to is to find a way of reading Naydus that accounts for some of that critical disparity while isolating his remarkable—and neglected—contribution to Yiddish as a world literature, as a part of not apart from. Naydus criticism, in essentializing one or another idea or theme—his cosmopolitanism or his nationalism—misses the essential hybridity at work in Naydus’s poetry, a hybridity that is a creative, energetic forward force in Yiddish letters. That he inscribed his sympathies for the Zionist Socialist Workers’ Party in some of his poems, for example, need not be at odds with his self-image as a latter-day poetic Arcanaut. In fact, they were part of the same mode of self-exploration.

The book of readings of Naydus’s work I am in the middle of writing is part of a larger project on the notion of “high art” in Jewish literature (a project I’m calling The Marble Home: The Creation of Jewish High Art). In brief, with the dissolution of traditional Jewish communal structures in the nineteenth century and the stormy entry of Jews into European modernity in the nineteenth, Jewish intellectuals and writers sought to participate in every field of European society. For writers in particular European belletrist genres provided the modes and models for a Hebrew and Yiddish literature that lacked any comparable secular literary tradition, highbrow or lowbrow. When Jewish writers desired to write stories, poems, or novels they looked first to the tradition of “high” literature not only for models but also for legitimacy. It was not the bawdy carnival that drew me nearer to Naydus, with his self-congratulatory assessment: “I am the only one who has found / the beautiful sound in our mother tongue.” Naydus actively sought ways of situating his understanding of high art in a distinct Jewish conception of the world. Vaynig described this style of poetic creation as “judeoeroticism.” Naydus, however, was a reosokel cosmopolitan— as I style him, a diaspora internationalist — and one who, as it were, “put a menorah on it.” But Naydus did not understand his own creativity as achieving something ex nihilo. His metaphors insist on the innate, perhaps Naydus’s single greatest poetic achievement, the liberation of Yiddish rhyme. In light of that achievement — pitching the tens of Shim in the exotic palaces of Japheth — we can appreciate his self-congratulatory assessment: “I am the only one who has found / the beautiful sound in our mother tongue.”

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The challenge, and in some sense the relief, of a scholar approaching Naydus today is that there is simply a dearth of critical materials on him, another aspect that drew me to him. The very small number of articles and essays tend to fall into one or another of two camps. The more or less favorable ones focus on the vibrancy of his aesthetic and cosmopolitan works while dismissing the poetry on Jewish and national themes as sentimental and weak. On the other hand, those who are disinclined to favor Naydus find his world-literary pieces derivative and pat while only in those works that explore Jewish motifs do they see what would have been seeds for mature development. That is, each camp likes what the other doesn’t, and vice versa. This protean Naydus entices the modern critic to figure out a way of understanding his achievements without simply making him whatever you want him to be.

The task I set myself to is to find a way of reading Naydus that accounts for some of that critical disparity while isolating his remarkable—and neglected—contribution to Yiddish as a world literature, as a part of not apart from. Naydus criticism, in essentializing one or another idea or theme—his cosmopolitanism or his nationalism—misses the essential hybridity at work in Naydus’s poetry, a hybridity that is a creative, energetic forward force in Yiddish letters. That he inscribed his sympathies for the Zionist Socialist Workers’ Party in some of his poems, for example, need not be at odds with his self-image as a latter-day poetic Arcanaut. In fact, they were part of the same mode of self-exploration.
BRUCE ROSENSTOCK DISCUSSSES HIS NEW RESEARCH PROJECT ON OSKAR GOLDBERG

Oskar Goldberg

proof of life after death and, moreover, trying to redeem the unhappy dead.

Oskar Goldberg (1885-1952), as the New Yorker notice attests, was never shy of publicity. In Weimar Berlin, Goldberg managed to achieve a reputation among many young Jewish intellectuals as a brilliant kabbalist with a super-normal ability to penetrate the secrets of the Hebrew Bible. Gershom Scholem, deeply suspicious and perhaps slightly jealous of Goldberg’s charisma, said at the time “I am inclined to regard him as a representative of the devil in our generation.” Other assessments of Goldberg were more positive. Thomas Mann relied upon Goldberg’s 1925 magnum opus, Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer (The Reality of the Hebrews), for his Joseph novels. Franz Rosenzweig, then engaged with Martin Buber on a new translation of the Hebrew Bible into German, praised Goldberg’s book for its philological insights into the workings of the Hebrew root system. In her 1939 memoir, Margarete Susman, one of the most notable Jewish thinkers of the Weimar period, ranked Goldberg’s book alongside Heidegger’s Sein und Zeit (Being and Time) as the “two great metaphysical expositions of the world and human existence published in the German language in the interwar period.” In 1954, Jacob Taubes published an essay about Goldberg for the Partisan Review, “From Cult to Culture,” that offered a somewhat ambivalent assessment of his work. Taubes took the title of his essay from Doktor Faustus, Thomas Mann’s masterwork about the sources of fascism in the heady mix of German

Romanticism and the “twilight of the gods” mythology of death-embracing heroism. To round out his cast of characters, Mann offers a Jewish proto-fascist by the name of Dr. Chaim Breisacher. Breisacher believes that only a return to myth and cult can redeem humanity from its entanglement to the sterility of technological rationality. As Taubes points out, Breisacher is based upon the figure of Oskar Goldberg. Taubes knew Goldberg when Taubes’s father, Zurich’s Chief Rabbi, offered him shelter as he fled the Nazis in 1938. Taubes’s essay attempts to defend Goldberg against Mann’s unflattering caricature. But near the end of his essay, Taubes suggests that Goldberg was playing with fire and that he ultimately succumbed to the dangerous fascination of mythology.

I do not believe that Goldberg fell prey to the seductions of the myth of race. Quite the contrary, I find in Goldberg a powerful voice in opposition to the rising conception of the health of the state as dependent upon racial purity. My project book, Transfinite Life: Oskar Goldberg and the Vitalist Imagination, situates Oskar Goldberg within the framework of what the historian of science George Canguilhem called “a biological crisis within the human species.” Canguilhem is referring to the new technologies of mass death and the totalitarian politics of the German radical right that in the years leading up to the Second World War threatened to mechanize both the production of “healthy” life in the state and the extermination of “degenerate” life. These racial policies were often justified on the basis of what was called “Vitalism.” Vitalism or “life philosophy” (“Lebensphilosophie”) is today most often associated with the Nazi concept of the state as an organism in which racially “healthy” individuals are allowed to live in order to serve the goals of the collective body, whereas “degenerate” are eliminated. Canguilhem, perhaps best known today as Michel Foucault’s teacher, considered the rise of vitalism in the early decades of the twentieth century to be a response to the threat posed by technology and industrialization to the freedom of life to take new and unplanned forms. The rise of vitalism, he argues, equals “life’s permanent distrust of the mechanization of life.” For Canguilhem, vitalism cannot be reduced to Nazi racism. In fact, he claims, Nazism appropriates vitalism only in order to control its true emancipatory power. Nazism uses vitalism to reproduce the largest machine of all, the machine of the state. Oskar Goldberg, I will argue, represents a fascinating case of a Jewish appropriation of vitalism. Goldberg completely rejects the idea that the individual’s life must serve the “life” of the state.

Goldberg was not interested in the health of the Volk but in the emancipation of all of human life from suffering and death. It was not only through hunting ghosts that he hoped to achieve his purpose, but also by reawakening the dormant biological power within humans that had once brought the realm of the divine into physical reality on the earth. Goldberg looked to the Hebrew Bible for evidence of how Israel’s sacrificial rituals had once served as a kind of bio-engine for producing and sustaining the bodily presence of God in the midst of the people. Such a bio-engine, he thought, could be reconstructed through a new “experimental ethnology” based upon the theoretical foundation of contemporary vitalist biology and the insights gained from a detailed analysis of the Hebrew Bible. Goldberg believed that only the renewal of the bio-energetic ritual interchange...
between Israel’s God and the world could prevent the final triumph of technological rationality and the lock-step “fixation” of the machine state.

Oskar Goldberg’s work, I will argue, enables us to view the profound contestation taking place within Weimar Germany between Israel’s God and the world could be a gratuitous understatement. Not only does it impose upon it by modern technology and the nation state. Arguing that the Five Books of Moses can be read as the narrative of God’s “metaphysical war” with the “biocentric gods” that had once “colonized” the earth, Goldberg’s book proposes to his contemporary Jews an anti-Zenian, anti-colonial “transcendental politics” in opposition to Germany’s intensifying social and geopolitical fantasies of the interwar years. The story of Oskar Goldberg constitutes a chapter in the history of twentieth-century’s struggle with racialized national politics that has too long been overlooked.

Among the many debts I owe the University of Illinois, one of the largest is for the subtle yet solid guidance my dissertation director, Brett Ashley Kaplan, continues to offer, which has allowed me to explore my various interests freely without wandering too far afield. My dissertation, Being and Suffering: Toward an Existential Understanding of Memory, Trauma, and Violence, is a culmination of my linguistic, literary, and philosophical pursuits.

Existentialism, I argue, was born from the triple violence of the First World War, the Second World War, and the more diffuse violence of modern alienation. Due to this gestation in suffering, it is the philosophy of suffering and violence par excellence. My dissertation rejuvenates discussion on some of the twentieth century’s greatest thinkers and writers—Simone de Beauvoir, Emmanuel Levinas, Norman Mailer, Joyce Carol Oates, Jean-Paul Sartre, and others—by viewing their works and lives through the lens of the more recent fields of Body Studies, Memory Studies, and Trauma Studies. It also enhances and expands the discourse of these fields by injecting the insights of the above figures into the currently existing discourses. Since the authors I investigate are often both philosophers and literary writers, my dissertation maps the shared territory of philosophical and literary studies.

The traumatic effects of war are particularly salient for Beauvoir, Camus, and Sartre, who lived in occupied France and engaged in varying degrees of resistance, including Sartre’s time as a soldier and as a prisoner of war. Levinas likewise was a POW, during which time he wrote his first notable existentialist work, Existentiel and Existence. And on the American existentialist front, the trauma of the Second World War plays an equally central role. Jerzy Kosinski survived a childhood as a Polish Jew, experiences he mined for several books, most famously The Painted Bird. Norman Mailer fought in the war on the Pacific Front and wrote The Naked and the Dead about his experiences. He also wrote several other books on violence from an existentialist viewpoint. The thinking of all of these authors was forged in the suffering and trauma of these world events, and they each placed these events at the center of their literary and philosophical efforts.

Following the example of many of the writers who figure into my dissertation, I do creative writing in addition to my theoretical and scholarly endeavors. My work in Holocaust Studies has informed my forthcoming post-modern, post-apocalyptic, sci-fi novel The Doors You Mark Are Your Own (Dark House Press, 2015). Writers like Tadeusz Borowski, Charlotte Delbo, Primo Levi, and Viktor Frankl have informed the way prisons and labor camps are depicted in the novel, as well as how suffering and violence are represented.

My collection of poetry, The Cartographer’s Ink (NYQ Books), is forthcoming in fall 2014. As Andrew Hudgins, a poet laureate for the University of Illinois, has praised the collection, “[…] this impressive book ranges across memory, history, geography, and philosophy with a wider imagination than any poet writing today.” The themes of memory and violence,
HIGHLIGHTS OF 2013/14

Paul Mendes-Flohr (top left) with members of the Program in Jewish Culture & Society on the Quad of the University of Illinois. The Dorothy Grant Maclear Professor of Modern Jewish History and Thought at the University of Chicago came to our campus in September as the Krouse Family Visiting Professor. During his memorable visit, Mendes-Flohr gave lectures on “Martin Buber’s Philosophy of Dialogue Today” and “Rethinking Jewish Liturgical Memory,” discussed changes in his agenda-setting primary source collection The Jew in the Modern World with the Jewish Studies Workshop, and met individually with countless faculty members and graduate students.

Aziza Khazzoom, Associate Professor of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at Indiana University, visited Illinois in May to present her paper “The Kibbutz in Immigration Narratives of Bourgeois Iraqi and Polish Jews” to the Jewish Studies Workshop. Here she is on the left with Rhona Seidelman, whose visiting professorship in 2013/14 was supported by the Israel Studies Project.

Rachel Havrelock, Associate Professor of English and Jewish Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, held hands with History Professor Peter Fritzsche prior to the event.

Claudia Koonz, Peabody Family Chair in the Department of History at Duke University, visited Illinois in the spring to deliver the annual Einhorn Lecture, “From Eichmann to Bin Laden: Concepts of Evil from the Holocaust to the Global War on Terror” to a full house. The next day, Koonz presented her paper “Phobias and Philias” at a joint session of the Jewish Studies Workshop and the Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies Works-in-Progress Series. Here, she is holding hands with History Professor Peter Fritzsche prior to the event.

Erica Lehrer (left) and Magdalena Waligorska hanging out in the Jewish Studies Seminar Room with Matti Bunzl and Elsa prior to their joint appearance at the Jewish Studies Workshop. The two ethnographers – Professors of History at Concordia University and the University of Bremen, respectively – were in town in April to discuss their recent books Jewish Poland Revisited: Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places (Lehrer) and Klezmer’s Afterlife: An Ethnography of the Jewish Music Revival in Poland and Germany (Waligorska).

Na’ama Rokem, Assistant Professor of Modern Hebrew Literature at the University of Chicago, visited Illinois in February to discuss her fascinating book-in-progress on bilingualism and auto-translation in German-Jewish and Hebrew literature, with a particular focus on Paul Celan and Yehuda Amichai. Here she is flanked by Michael Rothberg, Head of the English Department and Director of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies Initiative, and Yasemin Yildiz, Associate Professor of German.

Hakan: Girl Seitz (with water bottle) during her presentation to the Jewish Studies Workshop in March. The humanities fellow at Tel Aviv University discussed her fascinating research on Jewish intellectuals between Palestine, Israel, and East Germany.

Michael Barnett, Professor of International Affairs and Political Science at George Washington University, was on campus in October to deliver a lecture on “American-Jewish Internationalism.”
Disciplinary faculty and graduate student events. We envisioned this group as an ongoing conversation’s workshops and we hosted guest moderators Pieter Vermeulen (Stockholm University) and Rosanne Kennedy (Australian National University), both in town for the conference, for a riveting discussion of Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman’s book, Mengele’s Skull: The Advent of Forensic Aesthetics. Events like these not only help develop and circulate new research in the fields of memory and trauma studies, but they also connect graduate students to established scholars in the field, helping students network and develop their own research and ideas.

In addition to these monthly meetings, we also took part in special events throughout the year, including screenings of two films at the Art Theater in Champaign, The Act of Killing and The Last of the Unjust. Both films are about perpetration and inspired vivid discussions amongst the group. The Act of Killing takes as its subject members of Indonesian death squads that killed a million communists and ethnic Chinese following the 1965 military coup. As they were on the “winning side” of history, the film’s protagonists have not been forced to admit their culpability in mass murders. In having the perpetrators act out their past, the filmmakers explore the implications this violent history has on these individuals, and by extension, on modern Indonesia and its diaspora. Following the film, group members had a lively debate about the ethics of displaying the viewpoint of perpetrators, and we continue to track the film’s reception as it has exposed parts of Indonesia’s hidden history to Indonesians and the world.

Our discussion about perpetration and the ethics of filmmaking was revived during a special screening of Claude Lanzmann’s The Last of the Unjust at the Art Theater, an event co-sponsored by the Initiative in Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies and the Champaign-Urbana Jewish Federation. The film portrays a figure that straddles the divide between victim and perpetrator, examining Benjamin Murmelstein, the last and only surviving Jewish Elder of Theresienstadt, and his role in managing the ghetto as well as his tenuous relationship with Adolf Eichmann. Comprised of interview footage with Murmelstein shot for, but edited out of Lanzmann’s seminal documentary Shoah, and Lanzmann’s own contemporary musings on the nature of perpetrators and the absences provoked by the Holocaust, The Last of the Unjust triggers questions about what it means to be a victim, a perpetrator, or both at once. Following the screening, professors Michael Rothberg (English), Brett Kaplan (Comparative Literature), and Liya Kaganovsky (Comparative Literature and Slavic Languages and Literatures), led a discussion about the film and joined reading group members for a dinner where we continued to consider this haunting film.

Our first year has been a great success; we have had students and faculty members from multiple disciplines across the Humanities and Social Sciences attending our meetings and participating in our events. We envisioned this group as an inclusive space, catering to students and faculty from various fields and with varying levels of familiarity with the concepts related to trauma and memory studies. As such, the backbone of our group has been our monthly meetings where we read foundational works in the fields as well as cutting edge research. Readings are suggested by group members and are meant to give our group a common vocabulary through which to discuss difficult subjects, bridging the divide between disciplines while also helping members develop their own methodologies and research. This past year, we have discussed trauma and memory through the lenses of representation and aesthetics, testimony, forensics, affect theory, and postcolonial studies, to name a few.

Last fall, we were fortunate to work with the Initiative in Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies to hold special events related to the “Diasporic Memories, Comparative Methodologies” conference. In November, we held a special session to discuss pre-circulated papers for the conference’s workshops and we hosted guest moderators Pieter Vermeulen (Stockholm University) and Rosanne Kennedy (Australian National University), both in town for the conference, for a riveting discussion of Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman’s book, Mengele’s Skull: The Advent of Forensic Aesthetics. Events like these not only help develop and circulate new research in the fields of memory and trauma studies, but they also connect graduate students to established scholars in the fields, helping students network and develop their own research and ideas.

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The highlight of the conference was the well-attended keynote lecture by Stef Craps, professor of English at Ghent University, director of the Centre for Literature and Trauma (LITRA), and author of Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma and Memory studies. Co-Sponsored by the Initiative in Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies, as well as other departments and organizations around campus, the conference brought together graduate students and faculty from around the world to discuss issues related to the future of trauma and memory studies. The conference featured new work presented by seventeen graduate students, including five Illinois students, and was well-attended keynote lecture by Stef Craps, professor of English at Ghent University, director of the Centre for Literature and Trauma (LITRA), and author of Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma and Memory studies. Co-Sponsored by the Initiative in Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies, as well as other departments and organizations around campus, the conference brought together graduate students and faculty from around the world to discuss issues related to the future of trauma and memory studies. The conference featured new work presented by seventeen graduate students, including five Illinois students, and was moderated by faculty from the University of Illinois, Illinois State University, and Ghet University.

Over the two-day conference, we discussed ways to expand the definition of trauma to patients with terminal illnesses, in Lasantha’s case, Multiple sclerosis, asking what it means to accept a trauma that one cannot by definition heal from. Other students sought to unmoor the concept of trauma from its Eurocentric roots in order to examine both the necessities and difficulties of applying the concept to places like Rwanda, the Caribbean, and Indonesia. In another thought-provoking presentation, Laura Fussel, an English student from the University of California, Riverside, examined the history of insidious trauma faced by Native American communities, arguing that trauma theory can learn from Indigenous studies in order to move beyond a Eurocentric lens and take into consideration alternative forms of kinship and issues of sovereignty that define the indigenous struggle today.
**JONATHAN DRUKER ON HIS RESEARCH PROJECT**

**“TRAUMA, HISTORY AND TEMPORALITY IN HOLOCAUST WRITING”**

As a visiting fellow at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Fall 2014, I will conduct research for a new book. **Trauma, History and Temporality in Holocaust Writing** engages trauma theory, the philosophy of history, and techniques of comparative literary analysis to explore the complex relationship between traumatic memories, the perception of time, and historical narrative as represented in canonical Holocaust texts, including survivor memoirs and fiction.

My application of trauma theory includes two innovations intended to enlarge our understanding of testimonial and literary representations of the Holocaust as documents of historical and ethical value. I employ a temporal distinction, recognized by Vladimir Janáček in the 1970s, between the “irreversible,” in which time’s incessant forward march effectively dissolves the past, and the “irrevocable,” in which the anguished past lives on in the present. In most historical accounts, the irreversibility of time is a normative concept, and the present and past are understood as mutually exclusive categories. However, I argue that powerful Holocaust texts challenge linear time governed by clocks and calendars—what Walter Benjamin called “homogeneous, empty time”—by making apparent the irreversibility of collective trauma and the haunting aftereffects of catastrophe. While conventional historical narrative locates the past in a realm beyond justice and other forms of redress, the texts under study in this book show that traumatic memories of the Holocaust are still in process and mobile, still available for interpretation and ethical consideration, and still make claims on the present.

My second innovation entails reading representations of Holocaust trauma through the lens of anti-Hegelian philosop- hy of history. In Hegel’s dialectical system, in which “the wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind,” negative experiences are redeemed and synthesized by the positive forces that move nations forward historically. However, in the aftermath of the Holocaust numerous thinkers have suggested that wounds borne by the victims of history do not heal. Instead, the victims’ unhealed voices are silenced and forgotten only to return belatedly in symptomatic form to haunt communities and nations. Theodor Adorno, for example, argues that dominant cultures always obscure their violent assimilations of the Other and repress the suffering on which nations are erected. Jean-François Lyotard claims that authorized histories function as totalizing discourses that demand conscious silence during silent periods. Although implicit, the missing term in the work of these and other anti-Hegelians— including Benjamin, Maurice Blanchot and Giorgio Agamben—is trauma.

To find out if my approach yields new insights I will test it on several canonical Holocaust texts. These insightful literary constructions of trauma employ a variety of formal and stylistic strategies to narrate the aftermath of an experience that defies narration and, in works of fiction, to describe the nature of the traumatized subject who cannot assimilate the very experience that defines her. Holocaust survivor stories, both real and fictional, do not end at liberation because the actual return from the concentration camp is never fully incorporated into the psyche. My claim is that this inability to leave the site of trauma undermines the temporal distinctions among before, during, and after that are essential to conventional historical narrative and, especially, to its systematic forgetting of the past.

Part One of my book analyzes exemplary survivor testimonies to illustrate three distinct ways that Holocaust texts relate traumatic experience to time and history. These first-person narrators share a remarkable degree of self-awareness in that they recognize their own traumas and record their symptoms. As such, these texts are not only Holocaust representations but also contributions to trauma theory. A chapter of my book focuses on Tadeusz Borowski’s This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen, a brilliant collection of short stories written from the well-informed perspective of a privileged inmate much like the author himself. Reading Borowski through the combined lens of Adorno’s philosophy of history and trauma theory, I argue that he represents the horror of Auschwitz as a latent symptom arising from the traumatic foundations of Western civilization, and that he understands the Holocaust as the latest expression of long repressed memories. In his text the traumatic space and time occupied by Auschwitz is unf developmented from the violence of which ancient civilizations aroes, but also from the Polish country-side that surrounds Auschwitz. Where other texts underscore its unique horror, Borowski’s domesticates the extermination camp, revealing its filiations with both past history and everyday life. To do this, the narrator maintains a remarkably flat, unemotional tone that normalizes the abnormal violence around him. My claim is that Borowski uses the resulting disparity between tone and content to represent the process by which a society represses its foundational traumas as it forgets the suffering of its victims. Another chapter focuses on Jean Améry’s testimonial essays in At the Mind’s Limits. My claim is that Améry boldly validates the survivor’s psychosocially damaged state by arguing that troubled memories of trauma are the sharpest lens we have for viewing the true historical legacy of the Holocaust. Furthermore, he posits an ethos of survival in the post-Holocaust epoch: the survivor of collective trauma is morally obligated, both politically and
intellectually, to resist the superficial healing that always occurs with the passage of time (what Améry calls “natural time”), and to dissuade the habit of repressing unwanted traumatic histories by forgiving the perpetrators and forgetting the victims’ suffering. Unlike Borowski, who appears to have lost faith in futurity, Améry views the Holocaust as an anomalous historical situation that could be resolved if Germans acknowledged this traumatic history and refused to embrace the self-deluding notion that time heals all wounds. Thus, “two groups of people, the overpowered and those who overpowered them, would be joined in the desire that time be turned back and, with it, that history became moral.”

A third chapter focuses on Charlotte Delbo’s Auschwitz and After, an insightful memoir consisting of dozen of fragmentary short prose and poetry sections. I am most interested in how Delbo conveys the sense of temporal rupture experienced by the survivors, and also their doubts about whether they can ever live normally after the events. “Time doesn’t pass over me, over us,” writes Delbo, quoting a fellow survivor: “It doesn’t erase anything, doesn’t undo it. I’m alive. I died in Auschwitz but no one knows it.” Unlike Borowski and Améry, who explicitly link Holocaust trauma with both history and contemporary society, Delbo stresses the frustrating divide between the survivors, who possess a terrible knowledge, and those of us who, living in the “irreversible” time of the present, cannot easily grasp these truths even if we are willing to listen to such shocking testimonies.

Part Two analyzes three novels — probably Cynthia Ozick’s The Shawl, Bernhard Schlink’s The Reader, and Primo Levi’s If Not Now, When? — to illustrate how works of fiction convey the suffering of war and the Holocaust, raising the specter of apocalyptic time. In a backhanded way, the reader is led to see the thematic link between the Holocaust and the Nuclear Holocaust, a point I hope to create interesting opportunities for reading the novels and testimonies in relation to each other, and to show how this nexus is an important element of Holocaust literature. While the testimonies derive authority from personal experience, the novels’ imagined memories perform an important tabor of their own by giving affect and psychological depth to traces of history that cannot otherwise be made to speak.

Consider, for example, Levi’s If Not Now, When?, a work of historical fiction describing the sufferings and small triumphs of a band of Jewish partisans, mostly Russian, who fight against the Nazis. In my reading, the novel offers a complex dynamic between action and paralysis, between history and trauma. The partisans do not simply live in the present time, the “now” of the novel’s title, but also in versions of the past both troubled and idealized. In the manner described by Yosef Yerushalmi (in Zakhor), and accounted for by trauma theory, present violence seems inextricably linked to past catastrophes stored in the collective memory of Eastern European Jewry. While mythic time is represented here by blurred memories of the Shtetl, and Zvi Zamir offers some hope for a history that truly progresses, the novel ends with a reference to the bombing of Hiroshima. Indeed, the Holocaust, and the now the Nuclear Holocaust, raising the specter of apocalyptic time, link the novels’ conception of trauma with Borowski’s far-reaching supposition that history is fundamentally traumatic.

While drawing significant distinctions among the three texts to be analysed, I also intend show how actual historical trauma entails multiple subject positions that, when taken together, produce a more profound account of the after-effects. In reductive but still useful terms, Delbo and Ozick locate trauma exclusively with the victims, whereas Améry and Schlink locate it with victims, as well as the perpetrators and their descendants. For Borowski and Levi, and at least in If Not Now, When?, the Holocaust serves as evidence that collective trauma has a trans-historical reach, a universality that encompasses national narratives and also the particular suffering of the victims.

Jonathan Drucker, Associate Professor of Italian in the Department of Languages, Literatures & Cultures at Brown State University, is a faculty affiliate of the Institute in Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies at the University of Illinois. He is the author of the book Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz: Reinterpreting Reflections (2009).
This summer Dancing Arabs the film adaptation of Sayed Kashua’s first novel (2002) was slated to open the Jerusalem International Film Festival in July. Directed by Eran Riklis, with a script written by Kashua that also draws on elements from his third novel Second Person (2002) was slated to open the Jerusalem Film Festival (2010), the film should have been screened at the Sultan’s Pool, a large open air arena which holds an audience of 5,000 and for which there is rarely an empty seat for this prestigious event.

Instead, the film screening was canceled twice and hasn’t been rescheduled amid fears of the rockets flying overhead, while early 2000s, his satirical weekly columns for Ha’aretz newspaper and a local Jewish weekly Ha’olam offer a wry sense of humor the difficult conditions of a middle class Arab-Israeli and the tension between his successful personal and professional life in Jerusalem and the ongoing daily prejudice, hatred, and misunderstandings that he experiences because he is an Arab.

Kashua’s television series Arab Labor (Avodah Aravit), whose title is a reference to showdy or second-rate work is a sitcom about Amjad, his wife Bushra, their precious but adorable pre-school child, their families, friends, and colleagues. Amjad, an Arab-Israeli journalist who longs to be accepted by Israeli society, and is deeply conflicted by his Arab identity resembles Kashua’s own journey. And his pragmatic social-worker wife, Israeli workmates, and traditional parents pull at his nerves and fears about what is possible for an Arab in a society in which Jews are lusted with existential anxiety and see every Arab as a threat. As the New York Times wrote about the first season, “On one hand Mr. Kashua has managed to barge through cultural barriers and bring an Arab point of view – mostly expressed in colloquial Arabic – into the mainstream of Israeli entertainment. On the other, Avoda Aravit reflects a society still grappling with fundamental issues of identity and belonging in a Jewish state which, Mr. Kashua says, still largely relates to its Arab minority as a “fifth column or a demographic problem.” Now on its forth season, the series was notable for being the first program on prime time television to feature Arab-Israeli characters and has been credited with showcasing the integration of Arabs and Jews within Jerusalem’s mixed social world. Often compared to the Crosby Show and its role in breaking racial stereotypes, Kashua has created a sitcom that challenges perceptions of the Arab deeply embedded in Israeli society.

Reflecting on his writing at a meeting we had in Jerusalem a few weeks before the film festival, when type about the forthcoming film was in full swing, Kashua and I discussed the kinds of characters he writes. Though his novels feature male protagonists, Arab Labor also presents a number of powerful female characters who challenge the stereotypes of Arab women. He said this came about because the actresses all begged for larger parts and stronger story-lines, and he’s far too scared of women to refuse them. His enduring response belies the seriousness with which he approaches his craft and his determination to disrupt deeply embedded perceptions and beliefs about Arabs in Israeli society.

Kashua’s three novels (the second, Let It Be Morning, was published in 2006) are no less significant for their ability to put a face on the at times anonymous Arab Israeli. Written in Hebrew, the language in which he feels most comfortable writing, the books offer sensitive protagonists agonized by an Arab past they no longer identify with, and a Jewish future they cannot fully assimilate into. With biting satire, they speak of the country’s racist attitudes towards Arabs while clearly re-vealing a population who is as alienated from Palestinian nationalism as they are from Jewish nationalism. With little interest in moving to a Palestinian state, they are frustrated by the service and commitment that sharing daily life in Israel brings, while constantly feeling excluded by the Jewish character of the state, its holidays, symbols, flag, and anthem. The sensitivity and comic touches that Kashua has brought to this discussion have made him one of the most important contemporary writers in Israel, and he has won numerous literary awards including the Prime Minister’s prize for
I once had a professor who began his course – the first day of the first term of an introductory course in an obscure, long-dead language – by handing each of us a photocopied hand-drawn version of an inscription. The professor took his seat at the head of the seminar table, and said, ever-so-casually, “Who would like to start?” The course assumed no previous training in reading or writing in this language. It was our first day, we had no knowledge of the writing conventions of those authors, who had been dead for thousands of years. Were we really expected to read these seemingly meaningless scribbles?! Of course not. Not one of us actually deciphered a single scribble that first day on our own. Our professor held our trembling hands – metaphorically speaking – and led us as we stumbled, terrified, through the text.

So what was the point of the exercise? Most of us interpreted the act of placing the inscription in front of us and asking us to read it aloud as a survival-hazing ritual for our first week of graduate school. A redundant demonstration of the instructor’s superior reading skills and our utter ignorance. But as time wore on in my development as a scholar, I began to reconsider this brief experience with literacy. What are the tools we must have to be competent readers of any text? For the aspiring reader of ancient literature, the answer is that reading requires conventions. Every aspect of the text is a matter of convention: from the phonological values implied by the written characters, the direction of reading, the significance of words in a certain order, the meaning of certain idioms, and the signals that allow us to distinguish, say, between a love letter from a grocery shopping list.

The texts my research focuses on – biblical literature – were written in a long, long time ago and in a place far, far away. As a result, I am even less familiar with the writing conventions of the culture that produced these texts than I am with these written in my own language by contemporary authors. The foreignness of these texts seems like an obvious quality of this literature, but in fact, it turns out to be not the case. The tradition of biblical translation and its legacy as scripture have significantly obscured the worldview and literary conventions lurking behind the text.

Take for example the final poem of the biblical book of Proverbs, a well known alphabetic acrostic praising the “Woman of Valor.” The poem has a life in contemporary Jewish liturgy outside of its scriptural context: it is traditionally sung as a song of praise for the woman of the house at the Friday night Sabbath meal. But this is not its textual context. It is the concluding poem of the book of Proverbs, which is an anthology of various smaller collections of instructions from father to son, sage advice in poetic couplets, riddles, and other related materials. This poem to a “Woman of Valor,” received proudly by beamng wives in its contemporary performed context, opens with the following line:

A woman of valor, who can obtain? Her purchase–price is more than that of precious gems. (Prov 31:10)

Those who know the poem may be surprised. Surely her purchase-price is not the translation! In fact, traditionally, the term which I have translated here as purchase-price is reflected in translations as worth. These traditional translations have appealed to our values in obscuring the text.

In the world from which these texts emerged, marriage was a financial transaction between the groom and father (or brother) of the bride. The bride–price would have been paid by the groom’s family as a way to compensate the bride’s family for the loss of the productivity of the woman in her household. I.e., there would be one less woman to grind the flour and weave the cloth, and this deprivation needed to be accounted for. Surely the price goes up as the quality of productivity rises as well; the Woman of Valor, as the poem goes on to describe, is a valuable asset for any household.

Leaving aside the obvious anachronism in praising modern women by these terms, we must also come to terms with our ignorance in encountering these texts. How can the modern reader understand ancient literature without first recovering the ancient literary and social conventions that informed its composition? How do we avoid imposing our own ideas or passing judgment? The answer is to rigorously examine every assumption we make while reading. Why assume, for example, that a poem praising a successful wife could not possibly begin with an exclamation that she was a real sparrow? And what makes us think that the term Woman of Valor refers to real women in any case?

After all, all the ‘women’ elsewhere in Proverbs are not human women, but personified abstract qualities, like wisdom or folly. Moreover, the only other female character to be described as a Woman of Valor in all of biblical literature is the impossibly idealized female protagonist of the book of Ruth.

On the other hand, we cannot be so ‘critical’ in our reading that we prevent ourselves from finding any meaning in these texts. After all, we are products of our own culture and language. My educational experience, the literature I have been exposed to, the language I speak, even the television shows and movies I watch and music I listen to, all inform my encounter with these ancient texts. I have nothing except my own language and culture with which I can compare my object of study. While purchase-price is a more faithful translation than worth, other important aspects are lost from the original in its translation. For example, in the Hebrew the couplet rhymes: the first line ends with who can obtain (yimtzai) and the second line ends with purchase–price (michra). But if I leave unretranslated to allow for these features of the original, I end up with an incomprehensible text.

I can now describe the specifics of my current project. As I mentioned, Woman of Valor is the final poem in the biblical book of Proverbs. The English-language title of the book is itself a perfect example of the imposition of our own contemporary ideas onto the ancient text. The title Proverbs is not original to the text, since biblical books did not come with titles. The title Proverbs is a translation of the shortened version of the opening line of the book, which is usually translated The Proverbs of Solomon. This opening line serves as a heading for the first nine chapters of the book, and perhaps was also intended to describe the contents of the entire anthology. But the term we have translated into English as proverb likely doesn’t actually mean proverb, that is, a pithy observation of human behavior. Why not? Because this term describes, in this very collection, material that falls outside of such a definition. The term seems to describe instructions from father to son where the father narrates hypothetical life situations and their challenges, extended poems describing personal life circumstances perhaps even our acroatic poem, Woman of Valor. Sure, there are long sections of the book whose contents fit our definition of proverb, but the term in Hebrew seems to be wider than that. My current project seeks to understand the conventions of the ancient Hebrew literary category which we have long defined as proverb, so that we may read these texts without imposing our own ideas.

What then, is a biblical proverb, and how does one read this material differently than the literature of our own time and place? My approach continues to be informed by my experience of ignorance when facing the text. The less we assume we know, the less arrogance and judgment we bring to the literature of another culture, the easier it is to open ourselves to actually learn from the text.

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Lyrics, in the Iraqi dialect of Judeo-Arabic, were woven into expressive melodies in Arab melodic modes, composing songs that simultaneously celebrate and narrate major life events while also recounting taboo subjects and veiled social criticism. An extension of pre-1950s musical practices, these improvisations allow women to comment on their experiences as immigrants in Israel. Due to the resocialization of Iraqi Jews into Israeli society, subsequent generations of women no longer improvise these songs.

This project has always been intensely personal for me. I come from a family of Iraqi Jews who emigrated from Iraq to Israel in the mid-twentieth century. In pre-1950s Iraq, Jews were well integrated into mainstream society. Not only substantial in number – comprising about a third of the population of Baghdad by the late 1940s – they also held prominent social and political positions. In just three years, however – from 1948–1951 – over 120,000 Jews left Iraq. Known as “Operation Ezra and Nehemiah,” it was the largest population airlift to date and marked the end of a 2,700-year-old Jewish civilization in the area. My mother and her family were among those who left. For as long as I can remember, my relatives have shared with me the stories of their exodus. They have spoken to me in their unique dialect of Arabic, recounting their experiences of Jewish life in Iraq and the rich details of their distinctive traditions, food, and music.

Yet as often the case in the realm of memory, their reminiscences are contested. Upon their arrival in Israel in the 1950s, Iraqi Jews underwent a systemic program of resocialization within their new environments. The immigrant absorption process led many Iraqi Jews to publicly abandon their Arabic dialect and musical preferences, including their deep love of Iraqi and Egyptian popular song. The musical improvisations of Iraqi women underwent a similar silencing. These songs, however, are themselves a site of memory, a kind of embodied practice that is not so conveniently erased or eliminated. They remain an important way for Iraqi Jews to remember Iraq.

Hatibba, an elderly Iraqi-Jewish woman, sits on her balcony in Parades Katz, an impoverished neighborhood of Tel Aviv. She improves a song in Judeo-Arabic in protest of the bride theft of her sister by a Muslim sheikh from Basra – an event that occurred almost seventy years ago. Comparing her sister to a precious drop of water, she tells of her sister’s conversion to Islam, a topic considered so shameful that these songs are in Judeo-Arabic, replicating improvised Arabic song once prevalent in Iraq, and associated with nostalgic memories of Babylon, they may be considered a form of subversive memory: an expression of forbidden nostalgia.

As these women’s songs are private and often very personal, I have at times found them difficult to access. I strive for a sensitive ethnographic approach noted in established social rapport and trust. A large portion of my time is devoted to scratch the surface of their secret world. My preliminary research suggests these songs represent a kind of creative response to cultural upheaval, providing a realm for negotiating taboos and trauma outside of the public realm. Their lyrics and melody index personal experiences, memories, and social critique, and allow women a means to voice their complex nostalgia. Though the world of Jewish Iraq no longer exists in a tangible sense, it continues to thrive in musical expression and impact Israel’s present-day society. On a personal level, researching these songs allows me to access a cultural legacy extinct in practice but vivid in memory. I know that I might never walk the streets of Baghdad and Basra, where generations of my ancestors lived and died. I will never see the house where my mother was born and raised. But I can, perhaps, know and understand Iraqi Jewry in my own way, through researching the vestiges of this vibrant legacy as it echoes in song.
Connecting the land to both a biblical right of possession and the culture of physical labor meant that the landscape served prominently in the discourse of the movement to create a national homeland in Palestine (Zionism). In addition to protecting the borders and those who dwelled within them, working the land was constructed as an act of redemption, and agricultural activities were preeminent in the political discourse. Despite internal political divisions about ways in which this might manifest—the differences between the socialist labor movements in the creation of kibbutzim, the more individualist moshavim, the relatively independent pioneer farmers and their cooperatives, and the urban pioneers building new cities, the narrative remained fundamentally the same: the land was fallow, the New Jew would make it fruitful, and both he and the country would flourish.

Tel Aviv, the greatest of all urban development narratives epitomized this ideology. Built both literally and figuratively as a city reclaimed from the very sands on which it stood, Tel Aviv was established in 1906 as a suburb of Jaffa, flourishing over the succeeding twenty years to become the dominant economic, cultural, and social center of the Yishuv (the Jewish settlement in Palestine). By the time the state was established, Tel Aviv and not Jerusalem, the historic and national capital, was the most important civil and social representation of the transformation of a modern Jewish society. While female pioneers, particularly in the early years, were expected to perform the same redemptive tasks as men, this notion evolved, and by the 1950s it had become clear that though women served in the military and in agricultural development, they were increasingly expected to fill the more traditionally domestic roles,

Aspects of those roles. On kibbutzim women could be found in the laundry, the children’s houses, or the kitchens, while in the army they were placed in auxiliary roles as secretaries, nurses, and assistants. Over time, their greatest contribution to social experience was seen as the birthing of the nation. As Ben Gurion declared, the nation needs “fertile women’s bodies to bear and raise the next generation of citizens.” This ideology, articulated by Israel’s first prime minister, in 1952, “equated military service with women who do not bear at least four healthy children.” Thus, just as males had expectations within Israeli society that increasingly informed and shaped hegemonic narratives, females also had national narratives with which they were expected to comply.

Such a clearly developed and paradigmatic cultural, social, and symbolic capital existed within the early years of the State of Israel, with roots in the late nineteenth-century pioneering ideals, that despite differing political factions and voices internally, the dominance of this discourse was incontestable. Hence, from its very beginning, modern Hebrew literature possessed a high order of cultural capital capable of mobilizing individuals. The burden of literature had become in creating political enlightenment and imbued authors with the power to critique the manner in which Zionist ideology was realized. Since the 1970s, the authority of the foundational Zionist narratives has begun to weaken. Just as the establishment of these narratives could be traced in literature, we now find significant representations of a nation at odds with the dominant discourse in mainstream fiction and poetry. In Israel, the construction of a hegemonic master narrative, came about through the filtering of the past and the creation of national memory, which involved the selection of experiences that could be formulated in the service of the national present, and the erasure of competing and alternative voices, at times in conflict with the dominant ideology and those agents who represented it.

The Yom Kippur War (1973) caught the citizens somewhat unprepared. Massive casualties and scenes of captured Israeli soldiers being led across television sets were only newly prevalent in Israel. Presented the shocking possibility that Israel was not invincible, and the imagined community might lose its physical manifestation. Four years later, the Labor Party that had dominated the political landscape for the thirty years since the beginning of the state was overthrown in a landmark election, as a result of which the Likud Party came to power. Then in 1978, Israel entered Lebanon. Though its earliest incursions into this neighbouring state served to defend Israel’s northern settlements from PLO artillery fire and terrorist activities, by 1982 the PLO had returned. Israel’s aggressive attempts to clear Southern Lebanon of Palestinian paramilitary forces undermined Israel’s longstanding diplomatic posture that its military served to defend the nation. Instead, by actively interfering in internal Lebanese politics, and being seen as complicit in the massacres at Sabra and Shatila, the country and its army suddenly faced significant public censure within Israel and abroad. For the first time the IDF saw a significant decline in its public standing. The cultural hegemony of Labor-Socialist and military elites was shattered.

Using the influence that Israeli writers traditionally possessed, fiction from the 1970s onwards criticized the state in powerful and public ways, undertaking an unsympathetic examination of institutions that had been previously sacrosanct. The image of suicide became a way to suggest that many of the mythic symbols, stories, and institutions that the public took for granted and accepted as the only model of reality had excluded all the other competing narratives that had existed simultaneously, but had been suppressed during the state-building years. By challenging the invisibility of the nation’s sacred cores, writers opened up the possibility for new, alternative narratives to be heard.

With these changes, alternative narratives—often in conflict with the traditional European, Ashkenazi, male, militarized, kibbutz, Labor-Socialist position—began to emerge, including that of other pioneers, Jews who migrated from Arab lands, Jews who were settled in Palestine as part of the old Yishuv before the pioneers arrived, and in the most recent years, an increasing acceptance of the Palestinian counter-narrative. This change in the Israeli psyche, which allowed the once heroic and resilient sabra to admit the presence of difference, has led to previously unimaginable narratives and new constructions of Israeli identity. This book explores the ways in which Israeli literature sets out to subvert, criticize, and even denounce the ideological conventions involved in building Israel while creating a new vision of a modern Israeli society, with its plurality, difference and multi-layered history.
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