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**Reflections on Editing
Jewish American Literature:
*A Norton Anthology***

ONE OF THE CENTRAL PARADOXES of postmodern literary and critical studies has been the rise of identity politics as a result of poststructuralist literary theories. That was never supposed to happen; in fact, the two seemed mutually insupportable. Yet happen it did, and most of us are familiar with why and how: the attack on the concept of transcendent meaning and truth values and the Foucaultian view that our ideas of truth are rooted in power relations (in history, culture, language, gender, and economics) initiated a long overdue challenge to the canon, as well as the very idea of canonicity. This challenge inaugurated racial and ethnic studies in this country. And even those who saw poststructuralism, and still do, as signaling the collapse of civilization, had to begrudgingly admit that this particular development wasn't all for the worse. The most conservative of literary critics might agree that there is much transcendent truth value in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, or, to begin to inch very slowly towards my topic, which is of course Jewish American literature, Anzia Yezierska's *The Bread Givers*.

Yet when poststructuralist literary theory provided the foundation for a reexamination of what we consider literary, it also opened the door to contestation over power relations, political in-fighting and some might say an all out war over concepts of literary value. At its worst, what it wreaked was the factionalization of literary studies and the narrowest claims of identity politics. Loud and insistent claims by literary partisans that they did have an understanding of the text—that is, a true understanding of the text—and that in exposing historical or political contingencies,

they had discovered transcendent and life-changing meaning, seemed somehow to pervert the teachings of Foucault. Put simply, when poststructuralism was positing the notion that truth did not exist, identity politicians slipped in somewhere in the middle and said—hey you’re right—truth does not exist—er, that is your truth, but now that I think about it, mine does. Such a move still excites many to fury. Nonetheless, there it was: at the same time that enlightened critics are deconstructing racial and ethnic categories, and telling us that such categories are imaginary, or culturally constructed, or performative, the academy has seen a virtual explosion of ethnic and racial criticism (that, however self-scrutinizing the individual critic and however historicized the approach) basically telegraph the message that these categories do exist in some real landscape and that people do perceive ethnic or racial difference—however misguided or ignorant that might be.

In fact, the disjunction between what poststructuralist theory preached and what it wrought is astounding. Go to an average bookstore in a suburban mall and you will see a plethora of new and identitarian anthologies—not only African American, but Southern American, Asian American, and Jewish American. What Barnes and Noble doesn’t know about poststructuralism, they do know about profit. What they know is this—that a collection of Native American love poetry sells more than “Grammatology.”

Such a statement about profit does have its analogy to the academy, where, everyone knows, only administrators are allowed to talk about actual money—and that is of course just to say they don’t have any. But to broaden this idea of economic efficacy for a moment: the problem with hardcore poststructuralism was that it simply did not describe what people—with the exception of my husband and a few other deep skeptics—were actually experiencing. It could not go into the world with you. One of my favorite cartoons in the *New Yorker* ran a few years back; titled “I Married a Deconstructionist,” the cartoon pictured an addled husband having a nervous breakdown about where to hang a picture.

As much as I continue to think of myself as informed and in love with poststructuralism, I have to admit that on most days it does not help me live my life. That is, I do understand most—maybe not all—but most of the words people address to me. In other words, when my four-year-old says, “Look at the cat,” I do have an idea of what she means. Not only that, if it weren’t a cat—let’s say she called a cat what I think of as a hippopotamus—I would correct her. I would exercise my hegemonic supremacy and insist that it was a cat. In other words, despite my theoretical approach to literature, I don’t really go around deconstructing my experience much; quite the contrary, convinced as I am that the world around me is more than deconstructed enough, that it is a chaotic mess where most everything makes no sense at all—I try to do my part not by deconstructing further but by attempting a tiny piece of reconstruction.

This, call it an idiosyncrasy if you like, makes me the ideal person to edit an anthology of Jewish American literature. For the Jewish experience in the U.S. has been in continual flux between deconstruction and reconstruction—or to use the operative word: reinscription—for the last 340 years. And in fact, to study the actual experiences of American Jews may be one of the rare sites where deconstruction does come fairly close to describing what is actually happening. At every phase of Jewish American history, people who have perceived themselves as Jewish have put themselves through the most classic of deconstructive inquiries: questioning, redefining, and challenging. To be Jewish in America has been to partake in a continual process of simultaneously making and shattering meaning.

To furnish an available example of this process, all one needs to do is look around: in synagogues, in newspapers, in popular culture, people argue over what it means to be Jewish. Theologians cannot decide who is Jewish and who is not. In the competing sects of Judaism, in cultural circles, and most important, perhaps, in the individual psyches of people who think of themselves as Jewish (or not), the debate remains active. And to have these discussions takes us to the place where deconstruction is not theory but practice, an actual site where meaning is contested

almost continually—and what we say when we say cat or conversion or kosher or rabbi well, we don't mean the same thing at all. Such dissensus, one might observe, is scriptural since clashing interpretations make up a major part of the Talmud. The intellectual arguments of major rabbinic thinkers have provided nourishment for Judaism for over five thousand years. Dissension, one might say, is also doctrinal, for as many undoubtedly know, there are several sects of Judaism—not only orthodox, conservative, and reform but also reconstructionist and ultra-orthodox, or Chasidic—all of which hold varying opinions on the way to observe holidays, the way to properly commemorate the Holocaust (and build a museum), the way to manage Israel, the treatment of intermarriage—and of course, the paramount question: “Who actually is Jewish?”

Even without entering the sacred halls of theology, however, we are on slippery epistemological terrain. In the secular world, as well, defining who and what is Jewish is deeply problematic. In a common sense anti-deconstructive approach to the world, surely we can observe that a good many people, especially in our profession and especially lately, go around saying they are Jews. The question is why they are saying it, for if they are not actually observing any religious practices (which is the case with a majority of American Jews), they are obviously thinking about being Jewish in another way.

Thus, while the answer to the question should be clear: Jews are people who practice the religion of Judaism, in whatever sect—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or Chasidic—the reality is more complex than that, by a mile. The predilection for seeing Jews as a people defined by many other things besides, or in addition to, those who practice a given religion has been the overwhelming tendency of cultures regardless of geography or century. Dating back to biblical times, when Jews were a tribal people, being Jewish has been associated with nationhood. The sense that Jews were marked by something more than just religious convictions has dominated modern thought and, some might argue, continues even to the present. After the founding of Israel the idea that all Jews were loyal to another homeland was

challenged, since the belief that given the opportunity all Jews would return to Israel quickly faded in the face of reality. Thus, at least in the U.S., thinking about Jews as a tribal people—a nation unto themselves—has yielded; what has persisted, however, is its contemporary equivalent: thinking of Jews as a race or ethnicity—or sometimes both.

Perhaps no one today takes seriously the notion that Jews are actually a race; nonetheless, it would be obliviousness on all our parts not to name the common trend among generations of Americans to think of Jews in racial terms. Lest one be tempted to think that such discriminations are always rooted in anti-Semitism, let me remind you that Jews often speak of themselves in racial terms, and, paradoxically, their own sense of separateness has been the source of a strong sense of identity. And while such imagined or perceived racial difference has been grist for anti-Semites regardless of century or nation, it has also worked as one of the great unifiers of Jewish identity. For better and for worse, the sense of Jews as a people, if not a nation, with certain innate differences, has persisted. Whether attributed to culture, biology, history, or religion; whether advanced by anti-Semites or by Jews themselves, ideas about Jews as a distinct race that behaves differently, communicates differently, feels differently, dances differently, laughs differently has helped to define Jewishness in the larger American culture.

In the U.S., these perceived differences have easily elided into understanding Jewishness as an ethnicity—which in some sense is epistemologically suspect, since they of course have no common nation of descent. Yet these perceived ethnic similarities sustained and enlivened the American Jewish community for more than a century. For the large number of American Jews who lost their affiliation to organized religion, many still somehow “felt Jewish.” This sense of “feeling Jewish” was at least partially accomplished by ethnic practices; many shared Eastern European backgrounds. What they ate, the way they danced at weddings, and even the way they communicated with each other signaled difference.

Indeed, this sense that something united the Jews beyond religious practice has persisted throughout time and place and, some

would argue, lingers today. Yet even if it lingers, the sense that Jews are different—indeed in any ways but those they desire to be—does not hold up to sustained contemporary analysis. Certainly, although Americans may persist in talking about ethnic “blood,” as in “It’s in a Jewish mother’s blood to worry a lot,” no serious scholar believes that there is actually something different about Jewish blood. In addition, ties to Jewishness as an ethnicity—whether imaginary or not—have loosened, as generations descend further and further from immigration. Moreover, the sense that Jews are in diaspora, that they are just waiting to return to the homeland, has vanished.

The disagreement of theologians, the evisceration of racial thinking, the fading complexion of ethnicity, the continuing decline of synagogue membership—What makes a Jew then? The practical problems of putting together an anthology of Jewish American literature when no one can agree what Jewish means seem pretty straightforward. Yet it is precisely these issues that made compiling an anthology of Jewish American literature so fruitful, so necessary, so absolutely ideal and such perfect demonstration grounds for exhibiting how poststructuralist theory can leave you in fertile fields rather than barren ones. Examining the literary output of Jews in the U.S. is a study of contingent and competing claims: it varies with time, with region, with writer, and with the larger national and political context. And it is the work of the anthology to record those changes, those reformulations, those arguments, those mobile truths. There is virtually no attempt to settle the claims of competing factions or to extinguish the longstanding blazing fires of controversy. Quite the contrary. What the *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature* will finally offer students is one big melee, one giant free-for-all, with no transcendent definition achieved, with no final foundation on which to hang their hats; instead it will offer an entirely various compilation of perspectives. Thus we offer the student something far better than transcendent truth and something—by the way—that is more faithful to the spirit of Judaism. As the rabbi of my congregation said recently when I asked him what he was willing to cop to about the nature of truth, God,

and reality: “I know that I exist; I know that you exist; and I know there’s something bigger out there than just us. That’s all I can say for sure.” And me too—that is all I can say for sure; the rest, as they say, is grist for the mill—or in this case, the anthology.

My point is well illustrated by a joke that my co-editor Jules Chametzky included in the Humor section of the *Anthology*.

During a service at an old synagogue in Eastern Europe when the Shema prayer was said, half the congregants stood up and half remained sitting. The half that was seated started yelling at those standing to sit down, and the ones standing yelled at the ones sitting to stand up. The rabbi, learned as he was in the law and commentaries, didn’t know what to do. His congregation suggested that he consult a housebound ninety-eight-year-old man, who was one of the original founders of their shul. The rabbi hoped the elderly man would be able to tell him what the actual temple tradition was, so he went to the nursing home with a representative of each faction of the congregation. The one whose followers stood during Shema said to the old man, “Is the tradition to stand during the prayer?”

The old man answered, “No, that is not the tradition.”

“Then the tradition is to sit during the Shema!”

The old man answered, “No, that is not the tradition.”

Then the rabbi said to the old man, “But the congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether they should sit or stand ...”

The old man interrupted, exclaiming, “*That* is the tradition!”

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