
Sarah Hammerschlag’s *The Figural Jew* is a lucid exploration of the metaphorical usage of “the Jew” in a primarily philosophical, but also literary and political context. The book is of great interest to anyone who has dealt with conceptualizations of Jewishness, the avatars of particularism and universalism, exile and uprootedness, the constitution of communities, and the discourses of “belonging” to an ethnic, cultural, national or religious group. By linking historical research, literary theory, and philosophical reflections on language and identity, and by making her insights relevant for a political context, Hammerschlag performs a *tour de force* supported by excellently argued expositions of relevant parts of the work by major modern thinkers. *The Figural Jew* features a precise introduction to the theoretical context of her argument, a historical reconstruction of pre-war French anti-Semitic stereotyping, and four chapters discussing with great clarity and erudition the metaphorical treatment of “the Jew” in Sartre, Lévinas, Blanchot and Derrida. Hammerschlag’s ambitious and far reaching argument raises crucial questions, a number of which are, however, not fully addressed or resolved in her book.

Hammerschlag puts her finger on a curious transformation, in post-war France, of the formerly negative image of the Jew as the embodiment of uprootedness. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, a conscious identification with “the Jews” became for many intellectuals a rebellious political gesture by which the legitimacy of both particularist and universalist models of identity could be subverted. Taking her lead from a famous slogan of the May ’68 student protests, “We are all German Jews,” Hammerschlag reconstructs the history of this metaphorical use of “the Jew” in the works of some of its most prominent advocates such as Sartre, Levinas, Blanchot and Derrida and, to a lesser extent, Jean-François Lyotard, and argues that this gesture offers the prospect of a concept of political identification that is open
to anyone, Jew and non-Jew alike, but precisely in such a way that no one can actually appropriate it.

From a theoretical perspective, Hammerschlag’s greatest achievement lies in her exploration of the performative power of literary language and its potential impact on political configurations. Hammerschlag shows how literature’s capacity to blur the boundaries between the literal and the figurative, its self-reflective attentiveness to the materiality of language and its complex means of signification eschewing singularity and generality alike open up a space between the particular and the universal. As a result, literary language can not only demystify and subvert ideas of fixed and essentialist identities but—and this is the more original and important point of this book—provide alternative ways of invoking references to particularist characteristics. This occurs via a process of “troping,” of using these references in a metaphorical sense, which renders them available to all, independently of one’s origin or background. At the same time, Hammerschlag’s attention to the historical context in which the making and reversing of the values attached to such identities takes place, avoids the pitfall of regarding “identity-markers” as entirely arbitrary.

The strength of Hammerschlag’s analysis lies in not confining herself to giving an account of how this trope became consolidated throughout the works of the above mentioned thinkers, but in putting this discussion back into the concrete historical context from which she believes it emerged. Hammerschlag maintains that the absence of this approach explains both why many critics, especially in the United States, feel outraged by this figuring of the Jew in French theory, and why at the same time their criticism doesn’t quite hit the mark. As Hammerschlag argues, both the argument that this gesture deprives “ethnic Jews” of their distinct identity formed by a specific history and religious, cultural heritage, and the criticism that it offers yet another essentialized representation of Jewishness actually come down to reasserting the legitimacy of the dominant forms of identity politics that this gesture precisely wants to destabilize. Hammerschlag shows that this gesture doesn’t simply turn “the Jew” into an empty signifier for self-difference as such, but actually transforms a historically negative image into a trope, which, because it self-consciously testifies to its own fictional character, can offer resistance to the dominant modes of political identification that are always founded on a mythological narrative of a pure origin. Hammerschlag forcefully demonstrates