Hana Wirth-Nesher, ed.


The question of American exceptionalism has for long influenced scholarship across disciplines, including political science, sociology, history, literature, and the numerous “ethnic studies” programs that have emerged since the 1960s on college campuses. This is particularly true regarding Jewish studies, which itself has grappled with the question of Jewish exceptionalism throughout time and place. Thus the adages “America is different” and “Jewish chosenness” are often present, at least implicitly, in the study of American Jewish cultural history. For the Jews who settled in America, the governing ideology of religious freedom, unfettered socio-economic mobility, and political participation as (white) citizens meant, in theory, that the unfulfilled promises of the European Enlightenment could be realized in a land of immigrants built by immigrants. With the rise of racial anti-Semitism in nineteenth-century Europe, from France to Russia, culminating in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, the question of what went wrong in Europe became as much a question of what went right in America. Without the omnipresent fear of impending pogroms, mass expulsions, and the erection of ghetto walls, the tension between the preservation of heritage and the lure of assimilation has shaped the American Jewish experience in a way that proved impossible in Europe, where legislated and violent anti-Semitism impeded and largely prevented the entry of the Jews into a modern multi-ethnic secular society.

But the tension between heritage and assimilation, religious insularity and secular cosmopolitanism, and, ultimately, the reconstruction of Jewishness to fit America so the Jews, in turn, could shape America has not necessarily been the primary concern of American Jewish cultural producers, even though scholars of American Jewish culture have given it primacy. The dialectic of tradition, change, acceptance, triumph, an outmoded framework of analysis, not only fails to capture the richness of American Jewish culture but has also marginalized the place of the Jews in the larger context of American cultural studies, because the Jews no longer qualify as marginalized ethnics. Such is the premise behind *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, edited by Hana Wirth-Nesher, a six hundred page collection of essays by thirty-one different authors that eschews limiting conceptual frameworks in favor of an expansive and elastic approach toward assessing Jewishness in America, along with the writers, artists, musicians, actors, and comedians who have created this rich cultural tapestry.
The organization of the volume and the diversity of subjects covered attest to Wirth-Nesher’s goal of revising the standard narrative of American Jewish cultural history. Although there are subsections divided by time period and genre, neither is used as the overarching structure of the book. Chapters on Yiddish American poetry, Hebrew in America, and Jewish cinema are complemented by thematic pieces, including essays on the depiction of Native Americans in Jewish culture, Israel in the Jewish imagination, and New York as a unique site of literary production. The volume also upends the traditional narrative by including as many essays on neglected and seemingly insignificant topics, such as Ladino literature, comic books, and queer Jewish performance, alongside the well-known and well-worn topics of Yiddish theater and Holocaust memory. Superhero comic books and graphic novels, for example, offer insight into the construction of Jewish identity through a visual medium, illustrating how depictions of the Jewish body can express the legacy of historical trauma and fantasies of Jewish power.

Equally important is the notion that “American literature” transcends the political boundaries of the United States, as the two essays on Canada and the Caribbean illustrate. Although on the surface it may seem that Canadian Jewish cultural producers would merely replicate what their brethren produced south of the border—both countries are former British colonies, both are largely made up of miscellaneous immigrant communities, both have Christian majorities—Canadian Jewish culture is in fact distinctive for a variety of reasons. For instance, English and French bilingualism as official Canadian policy coupled with the large presence of a French Sephardic community in the province Quebec have complicated the relationship between Jewish culture and language: a Jewish immigrant who writes in English in New York is adopting the language of the host culture, but one who writes in English in Francophone Montreal is abandoning his inherited minority language in favor of another minority language. Accordingly, language is not always a reliable yardstick for measuring assimilation; the written text must be assessed within its larger ethno-cultural context, and visual markers of identity, be they in print, on stage, or on screen, often say more about Jewishness than the printed word could ever say.

It is to the volume’s credit that the authors do not attempt to construct a uniform definition of “Jewishness” or “Jewish culture.” Even if it were feasible to do so, it would have imposed a detrimental constraint on the material analyzed. Stephen J. Whitfield argues that Jewish American popular culture does “not look especially Jewish,” if by Jewish one means “explicit traces of Judaism or ethnicity” (p. 584). For Whitfield, “subversiveness and democratic