

# H-Net Reviews

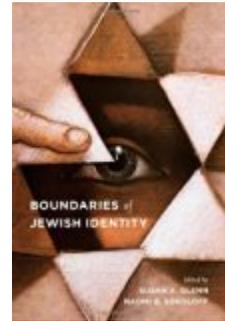
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan A. Glenn, Naomi B. Sokoloff, eds. *Boundaries of Jewish Identity*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010. viii + 249 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-99054-5; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-99055-2.

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## The Shifting Boundaries of Jewish Identity: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Multiple Identity Narratives and Histories

This highly readable co-edited volume challenges many of our assumptions about what and who is Jewish. Cutting across disciplinary boundaries, this volume makes clear that no category of Jewish identification, identity, or ideology is without its surprises and instabilities. And while some of the authors and their theses are not entirely new, the placement of their work within one volume offers new perspectives on the salient controversies about genetics, stereotypes, race, ethnicity, intermarriage, multiculturalism, apostasy, and Jewish identity. Prior to a postmodern turn in intellectual inquiry, most discussions of Jewish identity assumed the existence of an “essential Jewish self.” More recently, feminist and postmodern critiques have forced us to make explicit the political uses of linear and essentialist constructs, especially when doing identity research. This edited volume does just that and more.

In the first chapter, “Are Genes Jewish?,” Susan Martha Kahn writes about the conceptual ambiguities inherent in contemporary rabbinic debates about the appropriate uses of new reproductive technologies. Connecting with many of the book’s themes about who is a Jew, Kahn shows us how contemporary rabbis must consider just how Jewishness is transmitted by the mother: Is it the mother’s egg, or is it the act of gestation and parturition? Each discourse about genetics—population, medical, and/or rabbinic—constructs the gene differently, thereby affecting the way in which we understand who

and what defines a Jew. Kahn concludes that the consequences of the Jewish embrace of new genetic technologies are still uncertain. Genetic technologies have the potential to reify the genetic basis of Jewish identity or amplify its ambiguities, depending on who is developing the technologies and to what purpose such genetics are being employed.

This lead chapter sets the stage for the remaining chapters by heightening our awareness of the shifting boundaries of Jewish belonging/identity from analyses of the embodied individual to the body politic. Almost every chapter gives us insights into the translanguagual, transnational, and multicultural aspects of Jewish heritage and the import of this to changing definitions and approaches to the study of Jewish identity. In her wonderfully amusing chapter, Susan Glenn points to the paradoxes of the discourse on “looking Jewish” and Jewish body stereotyping by concluding that the social practices that maintain these “primordial concepts” of Jewish identity “play on both sides of the divide” (p. 84). She suggests that bodily stereotypes are used by Jews for the maintenance of an ethnic/authentic Jewish identity, as much as they are foisted upon them by hostile others. She concludes, for instance, that “Funny, you don’t look Jewish,” invokes “both universalism and tribalism in an anxious ritual of Jewish connoisseurship” (p. 84).

Gad Barzilai demonstrates the ways in which a multi-

cultural Israel is shifting boundaries and helping to create new categories of identity. He shows how demographic changes in Israel challenge the political monopoly of Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews over the definition of who is a Jew. Naomi Sokoloff shows how an Arab voice can transform Hebrew fiction by offering us a view of Jewish identity through the voice of a cultural outsider who has turned insider. Moving beyond Israel, Erica Lehrer discusses Polish Jewish differences around definitions of Jewishness when describing Holocaust tourism, where the Holocaust tourists are primarily Jewish and the Polish tourist agents are not. Jonathan Freedman looks to the syncretic, rather than the foundational, aspects of group identity in multicultural America, when he puts into question a number of narratives commonly held about Jewish assimilation (rapid assimilation, upward mobility, and ascension to whiteness) by focusing on *conversos*, Marranos, and crypto-Latinos in the Southwest of the United States.

The importance of historical time and individual timing on shifts in identity boundaries and practices are not lost in this compact volume. Shulamit Magnus expands upon the activity of boundary drawing and maintenance by examining the creation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries within Russia of the group she calls “good bad Jews”; Jews who converted to Christianity opportunistically or for personal reasons but who used that position to help Jews in situations of duress. She calls for more study into this fascinating phenomenon that was considered by Jews and by organizational and rabbinic Jews of their time as good and perhaps even heroic. We can conclude then that even the boundaries between loyalty and apostasy can be redrawn as complementary within certain moments of history. Lila Corwin Berman cleverly situates Jewish mothers’ alleged permissiveness, seen as responsible for their children’s eventual decision to intermarry, as part of a larger pattern of childrearing in America, especially after WWII, when permissiveness was promoted to counter the so-called authoritarian personality. Calvin Goldscheider shows the porous nature of ethnic boundaries by asking new questions of old data. Laada Bilaniuk ends the volume with an emphasis on the centrality of language in the conceptualization and performance of identity.

Albeit rather widespread in its coverage, this is an engaging and highly readable edited volume. There is, however, one potential problem. The volume demands that each reader suspend her/his disciplinary assumptions/ biases before reading and assessing its contents.

It suggests that the study of the shifting boundaries of identity and the very meaning of identity demand an interdisciplinary perspective. This book asks us to relinquish our disciplinary assumptions about why and how we study Jewish identity and identity making (or for that matter any study of identity) and engage in an exploration across disciplines and perspectives. The strength and vitality of this otherwise potentially disconnected set of readings rests in its interdisciplinary assumption that boundary making is a profoundly social experience. All categories of Jewishness, assume the editors and the authors, are contested by the lives that people actually live.

Indeed, this very point that the recognition that what is practiced may be different from what is preached when analyzing identity is an issue I emphasized in my review of contemporary social science approaches to American Jewish identity.[1] Because most social science investigations, especially large survey studies, are designed to measure religiosity as if it existed in some objective and measurable reality within individuals: behavior, beliefs, and patterns of belonging are placed on a continuum of more or less and/or are measured as better or worse in comparison to other generations or to other contemporary Jews. Therefore, many contemporary scholars have noted that “doing” Jewish in such models is equated with “being” Jewish. However, studies framed to gauge “more or less” and “better or worse,” cannot, for the most part, capture the many complex, sometimes contradictory, if not ambivalent, expressions of religious identity among American Jews today. Egon Mayer asks: “Do Jews actually have something called a ‘Jewish identity’? Did they have something called ‘generational status’?” They do and they did, he answers, “to the extent that social scientists were able to fit such theoretical constructs around the messy nuances of shared experience.”[2] Similarly, in a sophisticated warning about substituting a priori categories for interpersonal relations, Chandra Mohanty suggests that if we “know” the lives women lead prior “to the historical and political analysis in question,” then we have specified “the context after the fact.” She writes, “Women are now placed in the context of the family, or in the workplace, or within religious networks, almost as if these systems existed outside the relations of women with other women, and women with men.”[3] Like Mayer and Mohanty, many critics, including myself, worry that contemporary social science research substitutes a priori constructs of ethnic and religious identity for the “messy nuances” of women’s and men’s individual and shared identity experiences.

This volume challenges the use of “more or less” dis-

tance from an “authentic” and “traditional” Judaism, as a valid and reliable measure of religiosity. It, as I do in my review, questions: Whose life, whose rituals, and whose experiences legitimately make up the core of Jewish tradition and knowledge? If we are to effectively address the nature and expression of religiosity among contemporary American Jews, we must ask whose experiences, whose lives, whose “Judaism” serve as the yardstick from which we measure authenticity, decline, intensity, or strength of contemporary religious Jewish identity. If, as Stuart Hall suggests, “identities ... are multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions,” then an intellectual framework for the study of identity must include a “living tradition” whose definition fits multiple identity narratives and histories.[4]

This book brings together interdisciplinary perspectives that make visible and vocal those experiences, and, at times, the heretofore hidden and theoretical/conceptual biases that have kept them invisible. It is highly compatible with a critical approach to the study

of identity and identity making, a perspective that is increasingly finding its way into the study of identity and identity making scholarship.

#### Notes

[1]. Debra Renee Kaufman, “The Place of Judaism in American Jewish Identity,” in *Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*, ed. Dana Kaplan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 169-186.

[2]. Egon Mayer, *Secularism Among America’s Jews* (Washington, DC: Association for Jewish Studies, 2001), 3.

[3]. Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” *Feminist Review*, 30 (Autumn 1988): 61-88; 68.

[4]. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222-237; 223.

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