Diversity in the Public Sphere: Works of Fiction by Jewish-Mexican Women Writers

Catherine Caufield, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Abstract

Fictional narrative by Jewish-Mexican women writers reflects the reality of cultural diversity in México, contributing to discussions on Mexican national identity. Contextualization is provided through a gloss of the history of modern México with particular attention to the idea of nation as it emerged from industrializing countries and spread to México. The presence of Jews on that land since the earliest arrival of the Spaniards includes a range of cultural and religious manifestations of Judaism. Selections from works by Sabina Berman, Angelina Muñiz-Huberman, Margo Glantz and Esther Seligson explore the experience of living Jewishly in México, evidencing the diversity within the nation of México and giving deeper meaning to the Mexican concept of nation.

INTRODUCTION

Méxicanidad is: mariachi, mestizo, the Revolution, social movements, and even tequila. (Monsivais in Martínez Limón 2004, 11) “Countries such as México rooted their conception of national identity on an ethnic religious cultural model—mestizaje—based on fusion, assimilation and the merging of Spanish-Catholic and indigenous populations. As a resource for identity-building and national integration, this model became a central criterion for evaluating the full incorporation of minorities. (Bokser Liwerant 2008, 4) That this image has been, and still is, propagated in México is evident from the moment one walks off the airplane and past the cultural images in the airport. As an outsider working with individuals and groups ranging from Indigenous in remote regions to prominent cultural figures in major centres, mestizaje, with all its nuances, seems to be deeply embedded in the psyche. Judit Bokser Liwerant adds:

“In México, in spite the fact communal loyalties and the prevailing structural density and norms are still powerful in shaping identity, the search for new bridges between individual intimate realms and communal terrains are showing a growing relevance. Certainly these fluxes of interaction refer to diverse external centers and compete with the prevailing one-center model.” (2008, 27)

Saul Sosnowski observes that this is

“a region characterized by multiple ethnic groups and by a diversity of cultures that ceaselessly confront their own history while addressing the future with some justifiable (and fluctuating) trepidation, identity—in this instance based on the expressed will to be at once Jewish and Latin American in the various national definitions—must play a central role in these writers’ intellectual map. Origins, exile, land, peoples, and hopes for historic fulfillment within national borders are important thematic threads.” (2004, 266–267)
This essay explores this diversity within the seemingly homogenized *mestizaje* of México. Paul Ricoeur, following in the tradition of Aristotle through to Hans-Georg Gadamer, argues that human action can be recounted and poeticized. The basis of Ricoeur's argument is that human action can, must, be put into plot (story) form because human action is always articulated by signs, rules, and norms. (1991, 141) Ricoeur plays with the phrase attributed to Socrates that an unexamined life is not worth living, postulating that human action, human experience, must be narrated or human life is not worth living. Understood in this way, the fictional literature of Jewish Mexican women provides a medium through which the imagination may safely reflect on diversity in the understanding of the Mexican nation. Fictional narrative written by a selection of Jewish-Mexican women authors illuminates the plurality within the Mexican national identity.

This focus however, does not ignore or deny the significance of selecting texts written by Jewish-Mexican women for, although gender is not the framing of this present analysis, the fact of being a woman does provide an additional layer of diversity which can add to the vantage point from which the works are written. These writers are women, exercising their craft in a context, which has been traditionally very patriarchal, both from the perspective of Mexican machismo and Jewish orthodoxy. Bokser Liwerant observes: “the nationalist post-revolutionary discourse acted as an obstacle to the public expression of ethnicity;” (2008, 20) fictional literature written by Jewish-Mexican women provides a fertile ground for analytical reflection on ethnicities that existed nevertheless. These writers are, in one-way or another, also Jewish and, (in the last twenty years or so), openly admitting it in a context in which the idea of “nation” is built around a strong sense of a homogenous national identity and is also overwhelmingly Roman Catholic.¹

Angelina Muñiz-Huberman’s first major novel appeared in the late 1970s. She has continued to publish both novel and short story since that time, with the exception of several book reviews around the dates of publication, scholarly commentary on her work did not begin to emerge until the 1990s. This commentary is not voluminous. In the almost twenty years that have passed since Joaquín Mortiz put *Morada interior* (1972), Muñiz-Huberman’s first novel, in bookstores throughout the Hispanic world, only approximately thirteen commentaries have been

¹
published on this author’s substantial literary output. A number of theses have been written which include the work of Muñiz-Huberman (for example, Infante-Voelker 2003; Manini 2002; Jofresa Marqués 1998). Commentaries focus on themes of exile, identity and the construction of the self. Despite explicit references to Judaism and Jewish mysticism in the works of Muñiz-Huberman, little scholarly research has been done in this area. Similarly, Esther Seligson also began publishing in the late 1970s; however yet again, commentaries on her work do not begin to emerge until the late 1990s. Commentaries on Seligson's work are even more scant than those on Muñiz-Huberman's. Theses have been written which include Seligson's work (for example, Stuckert 1997). Margo Glantz has been widely recognized for her contribution to Jewish Mexican letters, yet little has been done in regards to how the Jewish God is conceptualized in her fiction. Sabina Berman is internationally known as a playwright, yet her novels drawn on Kabbalist thought evoke a profound and complex conceptualization of Ein sof.

As Darrell Lockhart comments, “these authors . . . have much to say regarding their marginal status not only within Mexican society but also within Jewish culture.” (1997, 159) Thus, referring to works of fiction by Glantz, Seligson, Muñiz-Huberman and Berman, this essay contributes to the exploration of diversity in the nation of México. Homi Bhabha’s proposition of nation as a system of cultural signification (from Anderson) is explored, with regard to the question: In what ways does fiction which refers to Jewish life in México reflect the cultural diversity existing in the public sphere of the Mexican nation?

Gloss of Emergence of Nation

The idea of Mexican identity as grounded mariachi, mestizo, the Revolution, social movements, and even tequila did not coalesce until the post-Revolutionary period. For three hundred years México evolved through explicitly foreign models, which defined, and struggled with, newly developing concepts of “nation” and “race.” These foreign models also articulated, and disputed, philosophies of governance. Whatever internal and external tensions were produced as a result of these struggles and disputes—in which Mexican criollos heartily participated, anxious for the decline of European colonialism and their own political ascendancy— the eventual Declaration of Independence of the Mexican Empire (1821) left México in a conceptual and philosophical
void. No longer officially subject to a foreign nation and no longer obligated to foreign structures of governance, what was México?

In the 1920s under the management of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and finally, after 100 years of political independence, Mexicans sought to articulate a uniquely Mexican identity: *mexicanidad*. Through the post-revolutionary 1930s and the preoccupation with agrarian reform, a modern, unified, conceptualization of “Mexican” emerged both didactically and through the creative arts, particularly muralism. José Vasconcelos, Minister of Public Education during the years 1921–1924, strengthened the national through commissioning works by David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, and José Clemente Orozco among others for the walls of public buildings. This sense of a nation moving forward with united momentum continued arguably relatively unhindered up until October 2, 1968, when military and police opened fire on civilians and students in peaceful protest in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in the Tlatelolco suburb of the Federal District (México City). This event overtly widened cracks in the image of an empowered Mexican people, as documented by Elena Poniatowska in *Noche de Tlatelolco*. *Tlatelolco* created an opening for consideration of alternative, such as plural, constructions of national identity. The opening has increased as national diversity is a topical issue in many nations internationally and, in relation to México, Jews and Jewishness plays a role:

“The multifaceted interplay between globalization and multiculturalism allows the public manifestation of particularism and, simultaneously, it widens the exposure to new forms of identification that seriously compete with the Jewish national identity referent. The pluralizing of referents does not operate in a linear or substitutive form; it rather presents an intricate pattern which points to new conceptions and practices” (Bokser Liwerant 2008, 29).

“Nations, like narratives,” claims Bhabha, “lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye. Such an image of the nation—or narration—might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west” (1990, 1). It is in this way that Bhabha, like Paul Ricoeur (1991) before him and Aristotle before him, link examination, and/or narration to the worthiness of living a life. Utilizing the philosophical perspective and terminology of Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004), Bhabha expresses a position, which reflects the impossibility of arriving at a definitive, uncomplicated, wholly
revealed, homogenous understanding of nation. Bhaba postulates that the articulation of the idea of “nation” emerges out of political thought and literary language; hence, bringing closure to this powerful idea is, like the physical horizon present each day in our world of lived experience, ever just beyond our grasp.

Bhabha examines how the idea of nation is imaginatively constructed through traditions of romantic political thought and metaphorical literary language. It is a different approach from that of studying “nation” as intentionally manipulated by oligarchs or demagogues for the specific purpose of economic gain, social status or political power; noting as he does that “the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality." (1990, 1)

Adopting Tim Narin's image of Janus to signify the ambivalence of the concept of nation, Bhaba draws on Benedict Anderson's notion that nation is better understood in terms of a system of cultural signification rather than in terms of political ideologies or historical evolution. Nation, as the representation of social life, is a polysemic term encompassing public and private components, progressions and regressions, universalism and particularism.

“Nation,” used anachronistically, in pre-Hispanic México referred to dark skinned peoples circulating around stone cities making sacrificial offerings and developing highly sophisticated astronomical instruments. The peoples of medieval México were part of a New Spain, a source of raw materials and labour for Spanish penninsulars, and a cultural curiosity reflected in casta paintings. During the late nineteenth century, those in elite colonial drawing rooms ruminated on ideas brought forward by continental philosophes and long-tongued images were carved into ultra-baroque edifices. It was not until the early twentieth century and the reforms of Lazaro Cárdenas that the mestizo nation and popular themes began to solidify into a national theme of mexicanidad. It was during this period of rapid industrialization in Western Europe and North America that, as Bokser Liwerant observes,

“the Mexican nation was identified by its miraculous technological progress, and then re-told through corridos, accompanied by generous servings of the nation's drink: tequila. Grassroots socialism and the romanticization of the Indigenous was integrated into the official political rhetoric of the nation. Cultural diversity provides the domain where collective identities are built, internalized, created and transformed.” (2008, 1)
IN THE BEGINNING: CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN MÉXICO

Jewish people have arguably been physically present in México since the time of the conquest (Muñiz-Huberman 2005, 25), or at least the idea of Jews and Jewishness has been present in México since the time of the conquest (Laikin Elkin 1998, 6). “From Toledo to the New World” opens with words that resonate with a Greek-influenced Ricoeurian perspective: “It's a tale about a life story. Or the tale of a life” (Ricoeur 2002, 205). Muñiz-Huberman's essay narrates a life, thereby examining it, and thus making it worth living (Socrates). She is also evoking the particular historical referent of México beginning in the 1940s and the particular experience of being Jewish in that context.

One approach to national identity is to repress this evidence of diversity in favour of a homogenous national identity that is mestizo, with its mixture of Catholic Spanish and Evangelized Indigenous blood. “In México,” writes Muñiz-Huberman, “here is a great conspiracy of silence in reaction to the unknown or different. It is a cautious society. There is great fear of what does not follow established patterns that everyone accepts.” (2002, 217) The response of “others” in this kind of context has been to create closed communities, whose vibrancy is hidden from mainstream culture. Bokser Liwerant argues that limits to Mexican citizenship strengthened the ethnic national character of Jewish identity (2008, 17):

Throughout its history, México sought its own national identity and culture as the base for national unity. Its original ethnic composition enhanced the conviction that a unified and homogeneous society with a homogeneous identity was both possible and desirable. Consequently, Jews, like other minorities, developed their communal life without the corresponding visibility in the public sphere, lacking their recognition as a legitimate collective component of the national chorus. (2008, 6)

Sosnowski disagrees, arguing that, “throughout history and in many different regions, the imposition of otherness frequently derives from the dominant culture and not necessarily from a guarded attitude of self-exclusion.” (2004, 265) These differing approaches are worked out through an historical backdrop of a specifically Jewish exceptionalism. This idea proposes that there is something special and different about the Jewish people in particular and therefore Jewish uniqueness and exceptionality are a priori categories of analysis. Based on the positions expressed by Bokser Liwerant and Sosnowki, there can be much discussion on whether this exceptionalism arises from within the community or is imposed on it from without—or if it exists at all. Whether the idea applies not only to Jews but also to other identifiable groups, and
even individuals, is so eloquently pointed out in the 1998 collection of essays edited by Ignatio Klich and Jeffrey Lesser and published by Routledge: *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America: Images and Realities.*

There is little doubt that reducing barriers, on both sides—on the part of the mainstream and on the part of self-enclosed “others”—obliges a recognition of a common humanity within a common nation, and that can lead to productive cultural flourishing. That this is the situation in México simply affirms it as a cosmopolitan nation, a civilization with its discontents:

Globalization and democratization processes have brought to Jews a new visibility in the national arenas. The prevailing concepts of national identity have been redefined to expand receptivity to multiple identities. Cultural diversity opened an ongoing discussion on the nexus between culture, society and politics from which minorities groups gained legitimacy. It also implied the elaboration of institutional arrangements and settings in order to build new codes in which plural identities are not seen as a threat to the idea of civil society. (Bokser Liwerant 2008, 19)

Literatures that are shared with the larger cultural context serve to enrich that context:

“Texts that resist a ghettoized identification and gain access to the dominant value system are promptly incorporated into their respective national literatures. To be part of a national tradition, of an ever-shifting canon, represents, in this sense, a heightened awareness on the part of the dominant culture of multiple contributions to the very definition of a plural society.” (Sosnowski 2004, 264)

Muñiz-Huberman notes that she brought Jewish literature out of the Jewish community and also that the themes of rescue and exile were topics she introduced to Mexican literature. (2002, 211) She recognizes that she “introduced a foreign element at a moment of pronounced Mexican nationalism”—and that as a consequence publishers delayed publishing her books, sometimes for years. (2002, 211) She comments that she kept writing nevertheless, despite the

“awareness of not belonging to the place where one happens to be. The feeling that the effort to belong is not worth it, so one may as well affirm the difference. Instead of assimilation, opt for tolerance of others' and one's own individuality. Insist on the rights of the minority, respect for otherness.” (2002, 216)

**JUDAISM AS RELIGION WITHIN MÉXICO**

There is pragmatic value in struggling to articulate, that which is hidden, bringing it into consciousness through words because action is grounded in an unknown variable, including the Mystery of “x” (Rudolf Otto). It is in this way that “x,” “God,” is a cultural category: It can shape socio-political action within history. The potential to bring to consciousness, as a precursor to potentially actualize, alternate ways of being gives fiction its transformative possibilities. Fiction
Diversity in the Public Sphere

offers alternative ways of conceptualizing a cultural category that is acutely significant in the deepest of ways.

Jewish culture, even if it is lived from a secular cultural and even sometimes atheistic perspective, owes its existence to events that are rooted in religious experience. It was in the 1960s that the Conservative movement “began its spread to South America. It provided the first model of a religious institution not brought over from Europe but ‘imported’ from the United States. As the Conservative movement adjusted to local conditions, the synagogue began to play a more prominent role both in community life and in society in general. The Conservative movement has mobilized thousands of otherwise non-affiliated Jews, bringing them to active participation in Jewish institutions and religious life.” (Bokser Liwerant 2008, 25) Bokser Liwerant adds:

“in recent years, in tandem with changing trends in world Jewish life, orthodox groups have formed new religious congregations . . . in México the presence of Chabad is marginal at best . . . There is a very important trend towards religious observance and ‘haredization’ [nevertheless] the extreme religious factions and the strategies of self-segregation are still marginal to the whole of Jewish life on the continent; however, their growing presence point to general processes and tendencies that are developing and shaping the space of identities.” (2008, 26)

Religious belief remains, and is seemingly increasingly so, contributes to diversity in the public sphere. In Jewish contexts, there is a common history and a shared remembering that creates and continues meaningful Jewish life around the world, including Latin America. Religious experience is ostensibly told as historical events; often stories of repression and exile such as Abraham’s move from Mesopotamia to Canaan, the exodus from Egypt under Moses, the wandering in the Sinai desert, the receipt of the commandments and the agreement to the covenant, the building of the first temple and the destruction of it. These events are re-lived in present time, the “x” expressed within them—the Mystery—form the basis for the cycle of Jewish festivals.

In recognizing Judith Plaskow’s seminal monograph Standing Again at Sinai, it is difficult to refer to “man” having a commitment to the world. Sosnowski points to the key element in the covenant when he writes that “relations among God, [humans], and the world are inextricably linked and that [human beings have] a commitment to the world.” Humans have a relationship to something “Other” and that something Other was given a Name that must not be
pronounced. It exists, It is. Yet, redemption is not solely tied to faith in It. Human beings are in relationship not only with God, but also with the historical world and that commitment is expressed through the power to survive and through claims for social justice. Sosnowski writes,

because Jewish theological and historical principles hold, among other fundamental principles, that relations among God, man, and the world are inextricably linked and that man has a commitment to the world, Judaism also finds its way into a number of literary texts. Judaism mandates preservation and life, as it commands that repression be denounced. . . . It is important to note that the adoption of Judaism—through its power of survival and claims for social justice, and the view that redemption is tied to historical workings rather than solely to faith in a God-related event—is more emphatic among authors who partake of a heterodox view vis-à-vis religious conventions and who have embraced Jewish concerns after having themselves undergone the experience of repression and exile. (2004, 265)

The 1977 novel by Angelina Muñiz-Huberman, Tierra adentro, illustrates this point and also adds to the discussion regarding the plausibility of plurality in the identity of a nation. Tierra adentro is structured with an intertextual reference to the picaresque style that was utilized during the medieval period in which the action of the novel is set. Friedman points out that through her reference to this style Muñiz-Huberman subverts the conceptualization of the picaro protagonist from one who is trapped and eventually defeated due to a socially determined place in the class hierarchy to one who finds strength and eventually freedom due to his social marker of Jewishness.

Much of the novel is interior monologue of the twelve-year-old protagonist Rafael as he reflects on his physical journey from Spain to Palestine and his emotional and spiritual journey from boyhood to adulthood. Through the unmediated revelation of his consciousness, Rafael illustrates the way in which relations among God, humans, and the world are inextricably linked, while at the same time providing fodder for an argument in support of the possibility of living Jewishly within a nation to which one is loyal.

Shortly after leaving the gates of Madrid behind, Rafael reflects, “If anything, this human skin is that of Miriam or this obsessive idea that God is our loneliness. And the turn to earth. It is all. From earth, Miriam's skin. From earth, the loneliness of God.” [“si acaso, esta piel hermana que es la de Miriam o esa idea obsesionante de que Dios es nuestra soledad. Y la vuelta a la tierra. Eso es todo. De la tierra, la piel de Miriam. De la tierra, la soledad de Dios.”] (1977, 125). Rafael poetically conflates the flesh of his lover, a profound sense of loneliness/God, and a turn to earth. God, Rafael, and the world are somehow inextricably linked.
"And the earth inside of us is felt deep, very deep, within us." [“Y se siente honda, muy honda, tierra adentro de nosotros”] (1977, 126), reflects young Rafael. Tangible earthy earth, soil and rock and plants that can be held in our hands, “earth” is something that cannot be defined and is not in any particular place, yet it is felt very deeply within; at the same time earth is something tangible and visible that can be measured and owned and inhabited. It is through the physicality of his lover that Rafael feels earth, and the longing loneliness of God. Rafael is located in two spaces, simultaneously. He is not in only one or the other. He is in both.

Similarly, Rafael is loyal to his people and, at the same time, patriotic. He dislikes having to leave Spain, and his homeland remains in his thoughts. (1977, 191) His love for Spain conflicts with his love for Judaism, (1977, 187) and the two seem irreconcilable—which, in the context of Inquisitorial Spain, they are. In the context of contemporary México however, the question is whether the orthodoxy of a homogenous national identity now permits consideration of the possibility of a plurality in the Mexican concept of “nation,” a plurality that is representative of Mexican social life. Through Sabita, the narrator-protagonist of La bobe, provides another example for reflecting on this possibility.

Lockhart writes, [Sabita] discovers in her grandmother an intriguing mystical quality represented by the Ein sof, the eternal light that converts the quotidian into the sacred. From her mother she learns the pragmatism necessary for living a dual existence. Likewise, through the intercalation of Jewish linguistic registers (Yiddish and Hebrew) with typically Mexican scenes, the author consistently weaves an identity from both cultures. (1997, 163)

Here again, the inextricable linking of relations among God, humans, and the world: Ein sof is that intangible “Other,” that kind of grounding “earth” which cannot be defined and is not in any particular place, yet the human being (Sabita), who experiences that Ein sof is located in an “earth” which is physically expressed through linguistic registers and typically Mexican scenes.

The narrator-protagonist, Sabita, is located in a diegetic context unequivocally linked to a specific historical referent of México City in the 1950s through textual markers such as “Benito Juarez” and “Manzanillo” (Berman 1990, 29), “[la calle] Amsterdam” (Berman 1990, 84), and “la colonia Hipódromo” (Berman 1990, 71) to list only a very few of these signifiers cited in the text. Sabita reflects,
“how that light can be the foundation of all possible experiences, how that unformed substance can organize itself into the incalculable multitude of existing forms, how from such slight and fleeting material the All builds itself: questions that huge could not fit in my child’s head, they didn’t even arise. From adolescence however, they became an obsession. I would turn myself inside out to get away from them, return to them in unexpected ways, distance myself again, tired of the magnitude of the subject and the subtlety of its center: that light.” [“cómo esa luz puede ser el fundamento de todas las experiencias posibles, cómo esa sustancia informe puede organizarse en la multitud incalculable de formas existentes, cómo de tan leve y huidizo material se edifica el Todo: en mi cabeza de niña no podrían caber preguntas así de enormes, ni siquiera despuntan. A partir de la adolescencia, sin embargo, se me vuelven una obsesión. Daré vueltas alejándome de ellas, regresaré a ellas por caminos insospechados, volveré a distanciarme, harta de la magnitud del tema y de la sutileza de su centro: esa luz.”] (Berman 1990, 44–45)

In this way, the young protagonist explains to the reader the way in which she seeks to understand her world through the double lens of her Mexicanness, and her Jewishness.

**Jewish-Mexicans; Mexican Jews**

Judith Laikin Elkin, founding president of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association, comments:

> “Approaching the subject from the perspective of Latin American ethnic studies resituates Jews as citizens of their respective countries, reinterprets and de-empathizes their connections to global Jewish history. This change in the focus of research—from Latin American Jews to Jewish Latin Americans encourages exploration of the engagement of this (and all) ethnic minority groups with their national societies.” (2010, 265)

Daniela Schuvaks comments: “this recent literary union of the Jewish theme alongside a pluralized Mexican culture has remained to some extent a hidden, unexplored territory.” (1996, 77) It is for this reason that, as Sosnowski argues, it is important to “protect the hyphen.” (1987, 297ff) The hyphen between nouns that indicate nationality and religio-ethnicity is a grammatical sign protecting complexity and recognition of difference from dissolving into neat categories. Sosnowski was clearly ahead of the curve in what is now a burgeoning field of acknowledgment and exploration of multiple identities. It is through resisting that homogenization and writing from that difference that fictional literature written by Jewish-Mexican women enriches contemporary discourse around “nation” in México. Like the layers of an onion being peeled back, turning the pages of fictional narrative by these authors reveals not a binary Janus but an intricately textured, multi-faced Janus—which nevertheless still draws a measure of its strength from a common body: the Mexican nation.

As do many immigrant populations, so too do Jews have some sense of connection to a country other than México. “Israel,” observes Bokser Liwerant, “offered the new generations the
opportunity to move away from religion as the only focus of identity and to stress political
sovereignty as a complement of ethnicity.” (2008, 14) In a carefully referenced paper, Graciela
Ben Dror writes: “Zionism and the position of the State of Israel within the context of the
Diaspora identity are at the very heart of modern Jewish existence in Latin America.” (2008,
235) Bokser Liwerant adds: “being Zionist in Latin America provided Jews with the possibility
of having a Madre Patria too, either just as other groups of immigrants to the country had or as a
substitute to the original ones, that rejected them.” (2008, 12) These are interesting statements
given the historically assimilationist national politics in many Latin American countries, México
being the particular case in point. Conviction regarding the importance of Israel, in the context of
nationalist México resonates with suspicions that Jews, particularly, have faced for over five
hundred years: That they are hiding who they really are. Sephardic Jews have been the object of
such suspicion in that conversos were considered to be marranos, whether they sincerely and
genuinely believed in the resurrection of Christ or not.2 First generation conversos were not
trusted to be who they said they were; yet, even if their Christianity extended back generations,
anyone with past Jewish lineage was untrustworthy. (Netanyahu in Laikin Elkin 1998, 6) Given
this kind of thinking—and Nelson Vieira notes that contemporary Latin Americans continue to
see Jews through sixteenth century eyes (2004, 274)—the question arises whether Jews who are
in solidarity with Israel and support that country can, at the same time, be loyal to the country of
México. In sixteenth century thinking, it is one or the other, it cannot be both. And if a Jew has
presumably assimilated into Mexican culture yet still acknowledges that they are Jewish, then the
suspicion is that they are not really Mexicans that their heart is really with Israel.3

Israel is not however, the only external country, which has, meaning for Jewish-
Mexicans; there is complexity not only as indicated by the hyphen, but also within the nouns
themselves! Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews developed their own spaces and institutions in
México. The former developed communities around the different countries of origin, reflecting
the fragmented character of this, itself complex, ethnic group textured as it is by different sub-
groups: Sephardim from Turkey and the Balkan countries, Middle Eastern Jews from Aleppo,
Damascus, Lebanon and Palestine, North Africans from Morocco and Egypt and small groups of
Sephardim from Italy and other countries in Europe. (Bejarano 2005, 12–13) Laikin Elkin adds:
“Bejarano reports cultural barriers among the groups, whose life in their countries of origin deeply inflects their languages, customs, and relationship to Israel.” (2010, 264)

This affirms diversity both within the nation of México, and within its identifiable—but not homogenous—groups. Results of Bokser Liwerant’s 2008 study point to “a permanent pluralization of identification” of Latin American Jewish identities and that “in spite the fact communal loyalties and the prevailing structural density and norms are still powerful in shaping identity, the search for new bridges between individual intimate realms and communal terrains are showing a growing relevance.” (2008, 31) One of those communal terrains is the Mexican Constitution, which was amended in 1991 with the Law of Religious Associations and Public Worship to give somewhat greater rights to religious groups, such as teaching religion in private schools and holding property. Bokser Liwerant observes that [the Jewish community] seeks to benefit from its new legal status in terms of public self-affiliation as a religious minority, and therefore religion in the public sphere becomes an additional source and referent of legitimacy.” (2008, 20)

New bridges are being sought in recognition of the diversity of México, yet bridges have long been sought for ways to both be present in the civil sphere and also to maintain a Jewish identity. Margo Glantz is one of the earlier Jewish-Mexican women writers to explore the challenges inherent in such bridge building.

**Judaism as Culture within México**

The narrator of *Las genealogías* is a child interlocutor curious about her family story. The story of the family, the plot of *Genealogías*, emerges through questions in Jewish storytelling style as the offspring of two adults probes her parents’ memories. This questioning style, which creates the basic structure of the novel, reveals a humour which blends laughter with suffering (Bellow 1994, 15) as it traces the history of a particular family within a particular diegetic space.

A photograph entitled “Jacobo se mexicaniza” (1981, 19) invites the reader to reflect on the character recently arrived from the Ukraine elegantly posed in charro dress. That photograph of the immigrant to México attempting to assimilate into a dominant image of Mexican culture contrasts with another photograph entitled “Jacobo, el poeta, 1936?” (1981, 92) in which Jacobo has dispensed with the flamboyant charro dress and instead presents more simply as who he is,
still located within the Mexican nation. Insight from Bokser Liwerant places the narrative within a larger context:

Liberalism attempted to define the nation in terms of its separation from the colonial and indigenous past looking therefore at the European population as a source of inspiration. Thus the struggle for religious tolerance was also conceived and argued as a necessary instrument to attract this immigration. The strengthening of society as a means to development, progress and modernization required capital, abilities, and talent that were thought to be found in the European population. For these purposes, immigrants were seen as necessary both in their human as well as material capacities . . . The Jews assigned image and identity vis-à-vis the national population took place in the framework of the immigration policies and laws, reflecting the ideal conception of national societies, its pragmatic requirements, and the changing correlation of political forces. (2008, 5)

The particular, felicitous, socio-historical circumstance of a nation seeking to whiten its population and thus the openness to European Jewry anxious to flee the centuries-long various horrors of the Continent was not necessarily in the consciousness of the individuals and families seeking peace and prosperity. It took another generation to reflect back and seek meaning from the difficult years that were absorbed in finding a foothold in a wholly different context following immigration.

Consistent with stories that utilize threads of memory to weave the plot, the narrative strategy of anachronism emphasizes the fragmentary and non-sequential character of recalled experiences. Changes in narrative voice, through the use of direct dialogue and non-literary text, add layers of ambiguity to the emerging story. This is the way the narrator receives the story from those she is questioning: a jumble of incidents that are sometimes contradictory and sometimes incomplete. Getting the whole story and thus bringing closure to it is like the concept of “nation:” ever beyond our grasp. Naomi Lindstrom quotes an observation by Otero-Krauthammer’s regarding the integration of Jewish identity: “Genealogies is composed of so many ‘multiple voices and narrative levels’ and contains so many varieties of discourse that it presents ‘the phenomenon of ‘heteroglossia,’ according to the concept developed by Bakhtin.” (2005, 117)

It is through this complex, heteroglossic narrative however, that the experience of living Jewishly in México is evoked, for example in references to historical realities such as the Centro Deportiva Israelita (1981, 126), La tribuna Israelita y La Prensa Israelita (1981, 100) and Zionism in México (1981, 156). Perhaps more interesting are allusions to Jewish contributions to Mexican culture, such as bagels and lox (1981, 58) or Jewish intertexts in literature (1981, 78).
and Jewish contributions to the national orchestra of México. (1981, 117) The context of the
diegetic world is clearly located within a Jewish heritage that continues to unfold on Mexican soil, although the author of the text (who could be confused with the narrator) “debates whether or not she belongs to the Jewish tradition.” (Glickman 1994, 307)

In his article “Jewish Literary Culture in Spanish America,” Sosnowski is writing about the broader Latin American context and therefore his observation regarding the adoption of Judaism through its power of survival and its claims for social justice also holds for Jewish-Mexican fiction:

“it is expected that within Argentinian borders, it should still be possible to find a definition of peace and social justice for the wider constituency of the local and neighboring disenfranchised, not just for the persecuted of the world, and certainly not solely for Jewish communities.” (2004, 267)

Margo Glantz’ Geneologías provides an example of the way in which Jews’ commitment to the world is manifested through a questioning approach that dates back to the pre-Christian Babylonian exile and the Talmud. Geneologías demonstrates how this questioning can unpack social justice issues.

Lindstrom comments that “the use of humor [in Geneologías serves] to express doubts about the value of prevailing social practices and assumptions, consistent with the tendency to critical questioning that is inherent in the tradition of Jewish thought generally.” (2005, 117) In a direct reference to the mythologization of the Mexican Revolution, the narrator uses an adjective which makes a reference humorous while relating that her family lived in different locations in México: “My parents knew Capuchin Street before it received the long and obsolete name Venustiano Carranza.” [“Mis padres conocieron la calle de Capuchinas antes que recibiera el largo y obsoleto nombre de Venustiano Carranza.”] (1981, 130) This is an ironic reference to the renaming of a street after one of the major political figures in the Mexican Revolution, the man responsible for the 1917 Constitution with its anticlerical elements (amended in 1992, eleven years after the publication of Geneologías and long after the historical periods referred to in its diegetic context).

“My mother also travelled. In that way she differed from Penelope, and never did she dedicate herself to weaving long fabrics for suitors, on the contrary, we went to the United States to buy clothes to sell in the illegal market.” [“Mi madre emprendió también los viajes. En eso
difiere de Penélope, y jamás se dedicó a tejer largas telas para los pretendientes, al contrario, íbamos a Estados Unidos a comprar vestidos para vender como fayuca.”] (1981, 151) provides an example of the way in which this Jewish family actively participated in the culture of the Mexican lower middle class strata during the first half of the twentieth century. Alongside their compatriots, the narrator relates the way in which the family, like thousands of other Mexican families, struggled to survive in a nation deeply marked by class differences and stark economic disparities.

**AN EXAMPLE OF THE CULTURAL RICHNESS IN FICTION BY JEWISH-MEXICAN WOMEN**

Cultural diversity thus points to an interconnectedness that, although rooted in México, participates in a global world extending beyond Mexican borders not only in space, but also in time. Narrative fiction draws deeply from the wells of the past, integrates the present, and like the alchemist turning lead to gold, looks toward a transformed future. A short story by Esther Seligson serves to demonstrate the way in which drawing on different cultural elements, including Jewish, creates a rich polysemic story that is not stereotypically Mexican, yet belongs to the Mexican national literature.

The first person narrator of “Luz de dos,” who assumes third person omniscience when shifting to the story of Pedro and Inés, tells a story of unfulfilled relationship: one such relationship is present for the narrator and the other is legend from twelfth-century Spain and Portugal. The conflation of the unrequited love between Inés and Pedro with the narrator’s present situation is complicated by the anachronistic telling of the medieval tale where, achronological fragment by achronological fragment, by the end of the short story the reader is finally able to piece together the plot of Pedro and Inés. The blurring of the boundaries between history and fiction further obfuscates the conflation between diegetic present and past: Alfonso VIII reconquered Cuenca in 1177; however, none of his fourteen children was named Pedro.

The Jewish-Mexican author, Seligson, writes this story with sensitivity to the Jewish experience. The story of Pedro and Inés is set in a context of persecution and exile, as Inés is a Jew, a woman, and the unlanded lover of the king’s son. The emotions provoked by this context are conveyed to the reader through Inés’ poems and through the perspective of the narrator, the first person “I” visiting Cuenca and Coimbra and telling the story of Pedro and Inés.
narrator’s interpretation of the medieval story conflates with the actual experience of the narrator who is in the physical presence of someone who is in some way absent. For Inés, according to the narrator, “what mattered was presence, the smell of the lilies by the spring, the warbler’s song, the lively gossip of the washerwomen at the edge of the river. The rest, the letters the separations, merely confirmed what was missing” (1980, 163). Through such interpretation of Inés’ story, the narrator seeks meaning for a present experience, “so to let you go or to go myself—is there any difference?—was to open the crack through which the weeks and hours would begin to filter, the little outside trifles that cling to the change brought about by living someone’s absence day after day.” (1980, 163) In other words, by conflating, by integrating, and by putting the story of the “other” up against an actual (diegetic) situation, the narrator creates a deeper understanding of lived experience. This too is the usefulness of considering the “other,” Jewish-Mexican literature: it gives deeper meaning to the Mexican concept of nation.

According to the narrator’s interpretation, in a context of exile Inés finds meaning in the Jewish experience, “it was there in this isolation, that Inés understood the cult among her people of physical uprooting, that insistence that ‘the true roots are found in matters of the spirit.’” (1980, 168) As Jewish people are “exiled” from dominant Mexican culture, the common response has been either to assimilate, or to cling to Judaism in self-enclosed communities, which leads only to mutual cultural impoverishment.

Schuvaks observes:

“The first important difference between Seligson’s work and that of other writers of her era is that the former identifies a central theme that no longer emphasizes the stereotypical Mexican identity, which traditionally deals with the mariachi, the revolution, and the Indigenous or mestizo culture. This is done in order to open the doors to another reality that is the México of today, with attention to distinct aspects of that culture. Among these is the Jewish presence both within and outside the intellectual realm.” (1996, 76)

Jewish culture belongs to the increasing recognition of the diversity within the nation of México. Jews enrich Mexican culture and Judaism is enriched by the Mexican context.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Jewish culture exists as part of Mexican culture, and has existed as part of Mexican culture from at least the time of Independence and arguably, Jews have participated in the development of México since the arrival of Cortés and his crews. Jewish culture is a part of the fabric of Mexican social life (Bhabha). Jewish representation of Mexican social life however, is not the
stereotypical depiction of the identity of México as nation; yet, it is nevertheless Mexican (Schuvaks). Sosnowski notes the Jewishness of denouncing social injustice and Lindstrom adds the critical questioning aspect of Jewish culture. These culturally attributed characteristics are consistent with an officially propagated Mexican lens for understanding México. Fictional narrative, which refers to Jewish life in México, contributes to revealing the diversity of this country, challenging the idea of a homogeneous nation through creative exploration of lived experience. It is an examination of a topic that is timely in terms of major issues confronting a globalized world: The role of religion and religions in negotiating peaceful ways of co-existing in the public sphere of an enormously diverse, plural, and highly interconnected world.

REFERENCES


Diversity in the Public Sphere


2 Conversos were also rejected from the Jewish community as having betrayed their Judaism, even if they were in fact marranos, crypto-Jews who continued to practice Judaism.

3 Similarly, with respect to Argentina, Sosnowski observes in his 2004 article that “doubts about Jews’ loyalty can still be heard in some quarters as part of long-standing (and growing) xenophobia” (267).

4 Muñiz-Huberman notes her own contribution, rooted in her Judaism, “I have taken historical characters, like Benjamin of Tudela, and transformed them, an example of the imaginative and renovational possibilities of Jewish thought” (“From Toledo to the New World.” 211-212).