

Introduction: Purim and the Cultural Poetics of Judaism—Theorizing Diaspora

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It would be fair to say that, with only certain exceptions, scholarship on Jews and Jewish culture has reproduced the cultural conditions of Jewish existence as marginal and ghettoized. *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the dominant paradigm of Jewish studies from the nineteenth century until recently, has done very little to integrate the study of Jewish culture with the history and theory of culture in general or to bring Jewish cultural materials and practices to bear on theorizing about culture in general. To be sure, this has had positive effects as well. There is no gainsaying the enormous philological achievement of the “Science of Judaism,” an achievement which has made a more critical practice of the cultural study of Jewishness and Judaism possible today. But this “ghettoization” has had negative implications for both the understanding of Jewish culture and the conditions it created that enabled various disciplines to ignore problems presented by “the Jews,” most notably, for ethnography (see J. Boyarin 1991). Recently, however, the paradigm has begun to shift. In the last few years, critical readings of Jewish texts and history have begun to appear in the privileged canonical sites of (especially) American cultural production. Jewish texts are now being treated in mainstream journals of cultural analysis, such as *Representations* and *Critical Inquiry*; moreover, within cultural-historical studies of (especially) European culture, the presence of the Jews and their sociocultural difference are being regarded as necessary components of all research. The most

obvious example of this phenomenon is the recent research conducted by Natalie Zemon Davis.

The papers collected in this special issue of *Poetics Today* are intended to further this development. To that end, our call for papers included the following information:

The Jewish festival of Purim seems to hold particular promise for interesting theoretical and descriptive work in cultural poetics. This is because we have here an unusually complex intersection of different cultural and social practices. Since these different practices originate in different historical and social milieux, but remain active in the later phases of the culture, an opportunity is provided here for research in both diachronic and synchronic poetics of culture and their intersection. I will outline here some of the areas of interest which this topic raises.

1. *The Book of Esther*: Ancient fiction, fiction understood or presented as historiography. Jews and the Other. Representations of oppression and alienation. Feminism and misogyny. *Esther* as a midrash on Amaleq. Description (self-referential) of social practice within the book itself. Marduk and Ishtar. The Book of Esther as a letter and as a text.

2. *The midrash on Esther*: Midrash as intertextual practice. Satire.

3. *Tractate Megilla*: Halakah and Aggadah as signifying practices. Halakah as prescribed social practice. The relation between ritual and myth, historical memory and practice.

4. *The practice of Purim*: Carnival and carnivalization. The Fast of Esther. High cultural practice versus low cultural practices. Their intersections—drunkenness as institutionalized practice. Purim. Torah. Parodies. Women on top and the world turned upside down. Relations between Jewish practices and Gentile practice (polysystems). The *Purimspiel*.

5. *Concretizations of Purim in history*: Local and family Purims.

The intention of this call for papers is to attract scholars whose work is normally defined as anthropology, social history, and literary criticism to combine forces in showing the possibilities for a critical, theoretical study of Jewish culture.

The collection offered here presents a certain “state of the discipline” of Jewish cultural studies—“state” as in “state of the Union” rather than “state of the art.” It indicates not only how far we have come in bringing Jewish cultural poetics out of the ghetto and into the mainstream, but also how far we still have to go. In the remainder of this brief introduction, I will attempt to indicate some of the directions in which I think research into Jewish culture needs to proceed and develop before commenting on the specific achievements of the individual contributions to this special issue. My starting point will be, naturally enough, an explanation of the choice of Purim as the central focus for the collection.

Purim is the holiday of Diaspora. It is the only Jewish holiday that celebrates an event which took place in Diaspora, and, as such, it is

a key symbol of Jewish culture, for Diaspora has been the primary cultural feature of Jewish existence for *more than* two thousand years. To emphasize the words “more than” is tantamount to declaring that Diaspora is not a condition foisted upon the Jews, but a cultural practice, because the myth of the forced Diaspora requires that it begin after the destruction of the Temple, while in fact at the time of the destruction of the Temple, more Jews already lived abroad than “at home.” As W. D. Davies (1984: 176) has put it so well: “We think too easily of Jews as *Palestinian*; they were even more a *Mediterranean* people.”

Diaspora, as concept and as historical phenomenon, disrupts and threatens cultural practices of nationalism as well as disciplinary practices in the cultural sciences, which assume a unitary culture more or less bounded in space. Diaspora—dispersed cultural identity—invented by the Jews, has become a privileged model for postmodern identity theory even when not acknowledged as such.¹ Since the multifarious practices of Purim, from the production of the Book of Esther to the historical analysis of Purim rites (historical analysis taken here to be contiguous with Purim practice itself), crucially symbolize the practice of Diaspora for Jews, studying Purim holds promise for the theorizing of Diaspora. It was with this in mind that we set out to gather a series of papers on Purim and cultural poetics.

Both synchronically and diachronically, Purim begins with the Book of Esther, the description of a paradigmatic threat to the existence of the entire Jewish people in Diaspora. The threat having been averted, the book informs us that the Jews staged a festival to celebrate. That celebration, rather than remaining a one-time event, became an annual holiday for Jews all over the world. Purim is observed with two public readings of the Book of Esther, written as if it were the royal proclamations which form a major part of it—both the proclamation of destruction and the counter-proclamation of redemption and revenge. In addition to these readings, a prototypically Jewish high-cultural practice, various “low” cultural practices are explicitly prescribed in the halakic literature or by custom. These include public drunkenness, treated by the Talmud as an obligation, and the performance of plays that include cross-dressing, which the rabbinic authorities tried unsuccessfully to suppress. These observances have continued unabated up to the present. Purim presents an opportunity, then, for scholarship to be pursued outside the usual disciplinary modes, for scholars whose work is normally defined as anthropology, social history, literary criticism, and so on to combine forces in dem-

1. There is, in fact, a new journal devoted entirely to the theory of Diaspora.

onstrating the possibilities for a critical, theoretical study of Jewish culture in particular and of cultural poetics in general.

Purim is the text of Diaspora par excellence. Its founding narrative is set in Persia and thematizes the situation of the Jews as a subculture within the larger world—literally—as we are told that the rulers of Persia reigned over 127 states from India to Ethiopia. Moreover, the Jewish protagonists of this narrative have names that are patently cognate with those of the supreme Babylonian gods Marduk and Ishtar. The paradigmatic cultural situation of Diaspora is thus: “There is a nation, apart and scattered, which does not keep the king’s customs”; a nation apart and scattered, but maintaining its separate identity through practices that render it different from all other people, thus arousing murderous hostility yet managing to survive nonetheless. This is the founding text not only of Purim, but of Diaspora—indeed, the earliest and ultimately the privileged model of all diasporas. In modernity, Esther’s situation became a potent symbol for the situation of closeted gays (Sedgwick 1990: 75–82). Furthermore, some of the most central practices of Purim, as it developed in history, apparently originated among the Babylonian Jews, who, understandably, seem to have adopted Purim as their special holiday.² The carnivalesque practices that evolved in Babylon particularly emphasize Purim’s cultural connections. Moreover, these practices seem to reflect explicit connections with very ancient rituals of death and rebirth, even of dying and reborn gods, transmuted, of course, into a Jewish historical and monotheistic key, but not altogether abandoning their deepest cultural roots. Not surprisingly, the Haman who was hung from a tree and the God who was hung on a cross were also culturally associated so that Purim soon became a locus of tension and resistance between Christians and Jews, an issue addressed in the first paper of this collection.

Elliott Horowitz’s “Rite to Be Reckless” demonstrates how Purim practices have historically been a mode of asserting the identity of Jews vis-à-vis their Others from at least the Byzantine Empire on. What is fascinating about Horowitz’s paper, however, is his demonstration that Purim retained that function even for the scholars of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, whose descriptions of Purim practices shifted with the shift in attitudes toward Gentiles that World War II produced in them. Non-Jewish scholars, including anti-Semitic ones, have also written about Purim in ways that thematize Diaspora existence for Jews, as seen from without. On the other hand, the ways in which Jewish scholars (sometimes the same scholar at different historical stages) either played down or emphasized Purim practices as rites of revenge

2. Thus it is for the Book of Esther alone, of all the books of the Bible, that we have a Babylonian midrash.

for Gentile hostility serve as an index of that (paradigmatically same) hostility in the present.

Harold Fisch's essay, "Reading and Carnival," is a subtle analysis of the semiotics of Diaspora in the Tractate *Megilla* of the Mishnah (although I doubt if he would describe it quite that way). Fisch draws an effective contrast between the laxness prescribed by the Mishnah for the observance of Purim and the punctiliousness prescribed for observing a very similar holiday, Hanukkah. One could add to his list, by the way, the requirement to sing the Hallel psalms of praise on Hanukkah (thus making it like Passover), which is not required for Purim *because the miracle occurred outside the Land of Israel*. Fisch explains this difference in semiotic significance as being due to the fact that, while Hanukkah is a story "of heroic resistance, the Purim story is one of accommodation." Both, however, are ultimately stories of resistance. The difference between them is that overt aggression is a weapon of the strong, while resistance through accommodation is a weapon of the weak, the weapon of Diaspora par excellence. Using his customary modes of intertextual analysis, by which Jewish cultural elements are read as reversals through accommodation to oppressive elements in the surrounding culture, Fisch reads Purim not as Carnival, but as counter-Carnival, not as a breaking down, through imitation, of the barriers between Gentile and Jew, but as a reinforcement of those barriers through a kind of parodic imitation. I (not Fisch) suggest that such a process is particularly characteristic of and appropriate to Diaspora and, therefore, that it is no accident that Purim is, as I have said, the holiday of Diaspora par excellence.

David Resnick's paper, "Esther's Bulimia," focuses directly on the Book of Esther as the center of a discursive practice having to do with both ethnicity and gender. Resnick's startlingly original article examines "how the classical Jewish view of Diaspora life as inherently unstable (hence threatening) is reflected in Esther" and then "how that view is actualized in cultural food practices." Applying Mary Douglas's insights into the ways whereby practices of the individual body within a culture reproduce ideation and even sub-ideational elements regarding the corporate body, Resnick reads Esther's feasting and fasting in relation to the customary feasting and fasting of the Purim festival to this day. He argues that the modern, cultural (gender-based) disorder of bulimia nervosa provides a useful analogy for understanding the symbols of Esther and of Purim, and for explaining why Esther had to be a woman.

Mieke Bal argues in "Lots of Writing" that some aspects of the Book of Esther which until now were simply unavailable for interpretation have become accessible because we are addressing different questions to cultural texts, questions that have never been asked before. Bal ex-

explicitly thematizes this possibility as a historical process whereby what was hidden from readers in the past becomes visible in the present. However, given her clear stance against “evolutionism,” I think it is also clear that what was visible in the past may become invisible in the present. Bal draws an analogy with the new possibilities for reading the Genesis narrative which feminism has opened up: “The unstable beginning of patriarchy (as represented in Genesis 2–3) is visible from the vantage point of the equally unstable end of patriarchy that we are currently witnessing.” Like Fisch, another “literary critic” in our collection, Bal focuses on the thematization of reading and writing encoded by the book and claims that this thematization has only become possible as a result of our present defamiliarizing perspective on writing itself. Among many other points in her rich and complex discussion, Bal focuses, like Resnick, on Esther’s double bind: “Bound to obey both her relative and her husband, Esther is forced to disobey both men in order to obey, thereby emancipating herself from the power of the two men.” If, for Resnick, this double bind is that of Diaspora existence, rendered as peculiarly female, and this emancipation occurs through the body and eating, for Bal, this double bind and resistance to it refer to the even more generalized dominations (gendered and ethnoracial) of discourse and resistance to them. Esther the character becomes a type of “resisting reader”—and writer—and the Book of Esther becomes a very important political text on several levels. As always, Bal carefully articulates her own reading practice, thereby extending the paper’s significance beyond the individual interpretation.

In Brenda Deen Schildgen’s “Blind Promise: Mark’s Retrieval of Esther,” the purview of a cultural poetics of Judaism is extended via a reading of the Book of Esther as an intertext of the Gospel of Mark.³ Schildgen makes very effective use here of the notion of intertextuality (particularly of Gérard Genette’s development of it) not only to explore Mark’s literary use of the story of Esther in his narrative of the death of John the Baptist, but also to interpret Mark’s understanding of the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. Reclaiming the early Christian texts as a cultural development of first-century Judaism gives cultural poetics a very powerful instrument with which to examine Jewish culture as a field of possibilities, both realized and unrealized, of paths both taken and not taken, as a history of cultural choices rather than the organic unfolding of a single cultural impulse. I would question only Schildgen’s suggestion that the appropriation

3. New Testament studies was a very active branch of Jewish studies earlier in the century, but then seems to have fallen into neglect among scholars of Judaism (not among Jewish scholars) until the very recent revival of Pauline research in Jewish scholarship.

of the Tanakh by Christian writers was dependent on its precanonical status. As is evident in midrashic practice (D. Boyarin 1990), such intertextual appropriation takes place even when the earlier text has attained a formal canonical status.

Having begun the collection with a consideration of one type of present practice, scholarly historical research, we also conclude this special issue in the present, albeit with an entirely different present practice. The final paper is Shifra Epstein's ethnography of the Hasidic custom of the drinking banquet for Purim. Although her paper consists primarily of straightforward documentation of the customs of the Bobover Hasidim observance of Purim, these very customs have generally been excluded from the scholarly study of Judaism until now. The opposition between the official "high culture" studied by scholars and the "low culture" (of marginalized groups of Oriental, Hasidic, and female Jews) has been one of the mainstays of research in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* tradition. Even the bare rehearsal, then, of Hasidic customs, and especially their post-World War II renovations, raises powerful questions about Jewish culture and the ideological function of its research and description. In particular, Epstein demonstrates how Purim has become for these Jews an opportunity both to remember and mourn their own losses in the Holocaust and to "act out" their fears and insecurities regarding the present.

This last statement could be seen as emblematic of the paradigm shift in Jewish scholarship that this collection of papers signifies. The scholars whose work is presented here, as well as many others (including those whose work is relatively new to me), are all committed to bringing the critical study of Jewish culture into the center of cultural studies by interrogating Jewish cultural materials in precisely the ways that the English Renaissance, ancient Greece, and nineteenth-century America, among others, have been interrogated. This perhaps still nascent phenomenon will eventually have the double effect of increasing our understanding of Jewishness as a way of being human and of complicating the generalizations that can be made about culture at the descriptive and theoretical levels. If "Purim and the Cultural Poetics of Judaism" advances this project to any degree, it will have achieved its goal.

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