

# Between Two Worlds



# Between Two Worlds

the Experience of Marginality

in

Irving Howe's *Jewish-American Stories*

and

Paul Zakrzewski's *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from  
The Edge*

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# Introduction

“Ultimately, I believe, all writing is ethnic writing, and all writers are ethnic writers grappling with great ambitions and a particular language and culture.”<sup>1</sup>

Every writer has a return address, a language and a culture that define who he or she is as a writer. This could not be more true for Jewish American writers and for Allegra Goodman whom I quoted here; her ethnicity is an essential resource. Being Jewish American allows her to create characters who draw from their Jewish heritage and yet, are assimilated at the same time. However, according to Goodman, “there is guilt [and] there is ambivalence and confusion about Judaism, about Israel, about synagogues.”<sup>2</sup> It is this ambivalence that she uses in her work, this negotiation of an American and Jewish identity. This results in an experience of marginality, which will be the core of this thesis.

Robert E. Park wrote in his influential essay, “Human Migration and the Marginal Man” that marginality was a process in the mind of the marginal man “where changes and fusions of culture are going on.”<sup>3</sup> Following the original sense of marginality as defined by Park, Derek Rubin refers to marginality as a “hybrid experience of being partially assimilated into two cultures.”<sup>4</sup> In this thesis, I aim to ascertain that the experience of being assimilated in both the American and Jewish cultures as an outsider was part of Jewish American fiction during the seventies, and that it is part, albeit from an insiders perspective, of Jewish American fiction from the last fifteen years as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Allegra Goodman, “Writing With a Return Address” in *Who We Are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer*, ed. Derek Rubin (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 275.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>3</sup> Robert E. Park, “Human Migration and the Marginal Man” in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York U.P., 1996), 166.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Rubin, “Postethnic Experience in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction” *Social Identities* 4 (2002), 518.

Jewish American literature of the seventies, written by post-immigrant writers such as Philip Roth and Saul Bellow, differs from that written by post-assimilationist writers such as Goodman. Scholars such as Adam Meyer and authors such as Thane Rosenbaum argue that contemporary Jewish American literature is experiencing a revival in which we can observe a resurgence of Jewish themes, themes that the post-immigrant generation of writers could not confront.<sup>5</sup>

As this revival is understood by Rosenbaum to be the beginning of a new wave of Jewish American fiction, it is important to explore this phenomenon as it is seen as a break with the post-immigrant generation. Despite this observed break there are similarities between the two generations divided by this Jewish American literary renaissance as well. One of those similarities that I focus on is marginality and although marginality might no longer be at the centre of the contemporary Jewish American experience, my research will show that the characters in the stories I explore continue to negotiate a Jewish heritage and an American identity.

Researching Jewish American fiction, one quickly finds that the Jewish American literary revival has somewhat dominated the academic debate of more recent years. In 1997, Thane Rosenbaum, writer and at that time literary editor of *Tikkun*, wrote that the magazine “is proud to be among the first to observe a new, surprisingly uncelebrated movement – the resurgence of Jewish writing in America.”<sup>6</sup> It was in the eighties that, according to Rosenbaum, Jewish authors “stopped writing about distinctly Jewish themes.”<sup>7</sup> In accordance with Rosenbaum’s observation, many scholars have witnessed a re-embracing of Jewish ethnicity in Jewish American literature since the nineties.

In contrast to Rosenbaum, Alan Berger argues that “American Jewish fiction in *the eighties displays an unprecedented determination to grapple with the problematic of*

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<sup>5</sup> Morris Dickstein, “Ghost Stories: The New Wave of Jewish Writing” *Tikkun* 6 (1997), 34.

<sup>6</sup> Thane Rosenbaum, “The Jewish Literary Revival” *Tikkun* 6 (1997), 33.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

*Jewish being* (my emphasis).”<sup>8</sup> In accordance with Berger, others like Adam Meyer argue that shortly after Irving Howe, a literary critic who argued in 1977 that Jewish American fiction had reached its peak, we see a renaissance that began in the eighties.

Although it was not until the nineties that this revival was “gaining remarkable steam,”<sup>9</sup> Andrew Furman argues that this renaissance of Jewish American culture does not represent “a resurgence of traditional Judaism per se so much as it represents its ‘transformation’.”<sup>10</sup> However, as Furman received a “fairly lackadaisical Jewish education”<sup>11</sup> and now studies the Talmud, he argues that he considers himself “very much a part (and proof) of this resurgence.”<sup>12</sup> For Janet Burstein, “the tendencies in these writings to critique as well as recollect, to see clearly as well as to honor the past, suggests that ‘return’ may overstate what appear more like gestures of urgent, but intermittent, reconnection.”<sup>13</sup>

Overstatement or not, there are theories of ethnicity, written throughout the years by Robert. E. Park, Marcus Lee Hansen and Joane Nagel, to name a few, that suggest that, contrary to the image of Israel Zangwill’s melting pot, we can see a resurgence of ethnic nationalism. Nagel argues the occurrence of this resurgence in her article, “Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture,” and along with Nagel, Park, and Hansen scholars such as Herbert J. Gans, Alejandro Portes, Richard Alba and Victor Nee, have conceptualised the adagio that what the father wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember.

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<sup>8</sup> Alan Berger, “American Jewish Fiction” *Modern Judaism* 10 (1990), 221.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Meyer, “Putting the ‘Jewish’ Back in ‘Jewish American Fiction’: A Look at Jewish American Fiction from 1977 to 2002 and an Allegorical Reading of Nathan Englander’s ‘The Gilgul of Park Avenue’” *Shofar* 3 (2004), 105.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma* (Syracuse: Syracuse U.P., 2000), 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Janet Burstein, *Telling the Little Secrets: American Jewish Writing Since the 1980’s* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin U.P. 2005), 7.

Yet can life be conceptualised as these theories imply? Although Werner Sollors argues that ethnicity is a cultural construction he also points out that this does not mean that it does not appear to be less real.<sup>14</sup> Paul Zakrzewski, editor of *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge*, one of the anthologies I will be examining more closely in this paper, tells us that the stories in his anthology

struggle to make sense of Hasidic violence, Nazi fetishes, the Holocaust industry in America, Cambodian genocide, spelling bees, JuBUs, *ba'al teshuvot* (emphasis in original), mystical revelations, and warring falafel stands – in short, they are stories that mirror the complexities of contemporary life.<sup>15</sup>

Stories have in potential the ability to mirror the complexities of life. According to Andrew Furman, this renaissance in Jewish American culture is fascinating as it must somehow manifest itself in Jewish American fiction.<sup>16</sup> Characters and context can indeed be potential spokespersons. They can reflect and comment on culture and certain aspects of society such as immigrant status or the treatment of ethnic minorities. The underlying assumption of this thesis has best been described by Jane Tompkins. Janet Burstein describes in her book that Tompkins wants us to

see literary works not just as “objects of interpretation and appraisal,” but as “powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself.” Because literature is one of many discourses that stream through our cultural lives, stories not only reflect and clarify our preoccupations but also serve as “agents of cultural formation.” ... Therefore, Tompkins argues, we need to see stories “as doing a certain kind of cultural work within a specific historical situation ... as providing society with a means of thinking about itself.”<sup>17</sup>

The stories that I examine have the potential to be representatives for their generation. Morris Dickstein, literary critic, argues that much has changed for this new wave of writers. He describes this generation as a generation which is born into a different world. A world not dominated by

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<sup>14</sup> Werner Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1989), xv.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Zakrzewski, *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), xxv.

<sup>16</sup> Furman, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Burstein, xiii.

remnants of European culture, not by struggling immigrants and their upwardly mobile children, but rather by shattering recollections of the Holocaust, by lively encounters between neo-orthodoxy and religious pluralism, by the decay of Zionism and the uneasy relations between Israel and the Diaspora, and by a tremendous variety of secular experiences, from vegetarianism and Buddhism to gay liberation and feminism.<sup>18</sup>

There are many themes in Jewish American literature. Defining Jewish American literature would have to include topics such as feminism, Jewish masculinity, mysticism, Zionism, and many others. Over the years certain themes have taken up a more prominent role; in others, writers simply might have lost interest. There are themes that this generation of Jewish American writers now feel comfortable writing about. There are some they feel no need to put forward anymore, some that might trouble them, some that might puzzle them, and other themes, as the literary revival suggests, might have regained a social prominence that inspires authors to take them up in their writings. Alternatively, as Dickstein puts it “the new emphasis on identity, the revival interest in Jewish history, Jewish festivals, and sacred texts *could not help but lead to a new Jewish writing* (my emphasis).”<sup>19</sup> New writing or not, my research will show that marginality is still experienced in the stories I will explore.

In the contemporary fiction I examine, marginality is experienced from the perspective from the insider in contrast to the experience of marginality from an outsiders perspective in the post-immigrant generation. In my thesis, I will elaborate on this as I look at how the status of the American Jew as an outsider changed to that of an insider and how this may have affected the fiction I will explore. Before I do this, I will give a critical evaluation of the Jewish American literary revival from both a literary as well as a theoretical point of view. After a evaluation of the academic discussion the second and third chapter will examine two important themes that will serve as case studies, starting

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<sup>18</sup> Dickstein, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Dickstein, 34.

with the Holocaust and continuing in the third chapter with Judaism. In these case studies, I will show how marginality is experienced by characters in a number of stories that were anthologised by Irving Howe in *Jewish American Stories* and published in 1977 and several stories that have been anthologised by Paul Zakrzewski in *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge*, published in 2003. Besides this shared experience of marginality, I will show how the changing status of American Jews has changed the experience of marginality from an experience from the outside, to one from the inside.

These themes have not been chosen by chance. Alan Berger argues that “collectively, Jewish novels are increasingly exploring the meaning of being Jewish” and that “a multiplicity of concerns emerge ... Three of the most interesting, however, deal with a re-examination of orthodoxy, an engagement with the *Shoah* and its meaning for Diaspora Jewry, and the role of gender in Jewish practice.”<sup>20</sup> Whether this literary renaissance scholars speak of is a transformation, an overstatement or indeed a revival, I believe that the post-assimilationist generation approaches themes such as the Holocaust and Judaism in a similar way, albeit from an insiders perspective, as the authors in the sixties and seventies did.

By comparing two key anthologies, one from the first decade of the twenty-first century and one from the seventies, I aim to show that the marginal position of the characters, assimilated in both Jewish and American culture, has in essence, not changed over the course of years. The analysis of a selection of the combined fifty-one stories in these anthologies shows that in the seventies as well as in the nineties, the approach to the Holocaust and to Judaism in Jewish American literature is ambivalent and that characters continue to experience marginality as they stand between two worlds negotiating a Jewish, an American, and a Jewish American identity.

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<sup>20</sup> Berger, 222.

These two anthologies separated by twenty-five years, can be taken as a representation of two different generations. Howe's anthology *Jewish American Stories*, the first of its kind, provides an excellent starting point. It is in the controversial and widely quoted introduction to his book where he argued that Jewish American literature had moved beyond its highpoint. It is an ambivalent anthology. Derek Parker Royal argues that Howe "celebrates the centrality of Jewish American literature at the same time that he mourns its passing."<sup>21</sup> The collection of Jewish American fiction features contributions by authors such as Bellow, Roth, I.B. Singer and Cynthia Ozick, as Howe anthologized stories from 1930 to 1975. According to Ruth Wisse, the anthology represents a generation of Jewish American authors that had "the acquired ease of a Jew in American literature."<sup>22</sup> A generation that was supposed to have stopped writing about distinct Jewish themes; as it entered American mainstream literature.

The second anthology is Paul Zakrzewski's *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge*. It includes twenty-five young contemporary Jewish American writers like Jonathan Safran Foer, Nathan Englander, Michael Lowenthal and Myla Goldberg. Focussing on the experience of marginality, Zakrzewski writes in his introduction that

the stories in *Lost Tribe* reflect many of the complicated themes to be found in Jewish life today: the tensions (and distance) between the religious and the secular; the search for an authentic identity, the complexity of modern ethnicity, the rise in alternative spiritual practices and mysticism; the rise of political as well as religious fundamentalism.<sup>23</sup>

The stories that I examine in this thesis are there because they can be seen as the most representative of their generations in their respective anthologies. The marginality these characters experience reflects not only the many complicated themes to be found in Jewish life, they can also be seen as representative of how marginality is experienced from an insiders status.

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<sup>21</sup> Derek Parker Royal, "Unfinalized Moments in Jewish American Narrative" *Shofar* 3 (2004), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ruth R. Wisse, "Jewish American Renaissance" in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature* ed. Michael P. Kramer and H. Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P. 2003), 191.

<sup>23</sup> Zakrzewski, xxi.

The post-immigrant generation has been defined by their experience of marginality, whereas the current post-assimilationist generation has been defined by their Jewishness. Yet, in the stories in Zakrzewski's anthology that I examine, characters still experience marginality. The changing status of the American Jew from an outsider to an insider has, in the fiction explored in this thesis, changed the experience of marginality without eliminating it. Lamenting the loss of Jewish heritage, the post-assimilationist generation seeks to redefine themselves as Jews. But they still experience marginality as if they were between two worlds.

# 1: A Renaissance?

The Jewish American renaissance involved renewal as well as continuity. In this thesis the focus will be on the experience of marginality as it figures in fictional portrayals of religious and post-Holocaust experience. Before taking a look at the experience of marginality in Jewish American fiction, I wish to give a critical evaluation of the academic discussion surrounding the Jewish American literary revival. Although the Jewish American literary renaissance can be seen as a break with the more assimilationist generation of men such as Roth and Bellow, the Jewish American literary revival is an important development in contemporary Jewish American literature and can be interpreted as a transformation rather than a break. This will be demonstrated through specific discussions of Jewish American fiction. That the Jewish American revival involves certain elements of continuity is also reflected in the scholarly debate itself which is why this shall be discussed in some detail first. However, in order to do this, we must go back to what Irving Howe saw as the end of Jewish American fiction in 1977.

## **Kaddish for Jewish American Fiction**

In 1977 Irving Howe predicted the demise of Jewish American fiction. According to him, young Jewish writers lacked the immigrant experience and cultural memory they needed to write American Jewish fiction. Critics argue that Jews in the seventies were “fully acculturated and well-integrated into American suburban and middle-class urban life,”<sup>24</sup> and Howe asked himself whether or not their acculturated experience would be enough to

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<sup>24</sup>Derek Rubin, “Postethnic Experience in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction” *Social Identities* 4 (2002), 508.

make “a distinctive contribution – as Jews- to American literature.”<sup>25</sup> Howe’s collection of Jewish American stories was to be the requiem of Jewish American fiction as he argued that

American Jewish fiction has probably moved past its high point. Insofar as this body of writing draws heavily from the immigrant experience, it must suffer a depletion of resources, a thinning-out of materials and memoirs. Other than in books and sentiment, there isn’t enough left of that experience.<sup>26</sup>

It has become quite fashionable to refer to Howe’s prediction, although it should be kept in mind that Howe was not the only one who believed Jewish American literature was over and done with. Derek Parker Royal argues in a special volume of *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*<sup>27</sup> that Howe and Ruth Wisse shared the same opinion. Both Howe and Wisse argued that Jewish American fiction had reached a critical phase. There is however one important distinction that Royal left out.

Ruth Wisse argued in 1976, a year before Howe, that “the career of American Jewish literature would seem to have reached a turning point.”<sup>28</sup> In contrast to Howe, Wisse expresses some optimism when arguing that Jewish American literature has reached a turning point rather than a high point as is the case with Howe. It should be noted that Howe expressed some hope as well but severely doubted that the post-immigrant experience would run deeply enough to enable younger writers to create new stories and to make that distinctive contribution as Jews. Howe’s introduction to the anthology *Jewish-American Stories* has been widely quoted by scholars ever since and as Royal argues, it forms the backdrop to a recent phenomenon that is the Jewish American fiction renaissance.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Irving Howe, “introduction” in *Jewish American Stories*, ed. I. Howe (New York: Mentor 1977), 16.

<sup>26</sup> Howe, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Devoted to what he as special issue editor called the “Unfinalized Moments in Jewish American Narrative” Derek Parker Royal, “Unfinalized Moments in Jewish American Narrative” *Shofar* 3 (2004).

<sup>28</sup> Ruth Wisse, “American Jewish Writing, Act II” *Commentary* June (1976).

<sup>29</sup> Royal, 1.

As guest editor of *Shofar*, Derek Parker Royal sees a stark contrast between “these grim predictions [and] what has become over the past few years an emergent body of scholarship on the most contemporary of Jewish American writers.”<sup>30</sup> This phenomenon has been defined as “a Jewish American literary revival,”<sup>31</sup> a “renaissance in Jewish American fiction,”<sup>32</sup> even “a construct[ion] and reconstruct[ion of] ethnicity and culture.”<sup>33</sup> Thirty years after Howe has been proven wrong, scholars argue that we are witnessing a renewed interest of Jewish American literature in Jewish themes. Given Howe’s definition however, Adam Meyer argues in his article “Putting the ‘Jewish’ Back in ‘Jewish American Fiction’” that Howe might have been right in his assumption that Jewish American literature had reached its high point. He argues that

to Howe, Jewish American fiction is based on certain constraints: the immigrant experience, either as a Yiddish speaker or the child of a Yiddish speaker, almost always in a Northern urban environment where the family plays an important role.<sup>34</sup>

According to Meyer, once the emphasis has been put on the Jewishness instead of the immigrant experience, we see a thriving Jewish American literary community that reaches heights unscaled by the earlier Jewish American writers.<sup>35</sup>

Putting the ‘Jewish’ back in Jewish American fiction could be the turning point that Wisse had already mentioned in 1976. If we were to believe Howe, Jewishness itself could never yield such a rich output of literature as it now has. Howe argued that

there remains, to be sure, the problem of “Jewishnessness,” and the rewards and difficulties of definition it may bring us. But this problem, ... does not yield a thick enough sediment of felt life to enable a new outburst of writing about American Jews.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Royal, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Adam Meyer, “Putting the ‘Jewish’ Back in ‘Jewish American Fiction’: A Look at Jewish American Fiction from 1977 to 2002 and an Allegorical Reading of Nathan Englander’s ‘The Gilgul of Park Avenue’” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 3 (2004).

<sup>33</sup> Joanne Nagel, “Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture” *Social Problems* 41.1 (1994).

<sup>34</sup> Meyer.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Howe, 16.

Since the nineties, Jewishness has been the subject of numerous anthologies on contemporary Jewish American fiction. Nessa Rapoport argues in the introduction to *The Schocken Book of Contemporary Jewish Fiction* that Jewish writers have found “an idiosyncratic experience and point of view out of which imaginative writing may prosper.”<sup>37</sup> Alan Berger, revered author about the Holocaust in Jewish American fiction, agrees by saying that

collectively, Jewish novels are increasingly exploring the meaning of being Jewish from within rather than from the perspective of American culture. ... Orthodoxy seems ... once again to be a driving force in Jewish American literature.<sup>38</sup>

Critics argue that the new wave of Jewish American writers such as Allegra Goodman, Michael Chabon, Melvin Jules Bukiet and Nathan Englander have rediscovered their Jewish voice.

The embracing of Jewish culture and the trend towards rediscovery results in “an unprecedented number of young Jewish Americans, raised largely ignorant of Judaism, [that] have become part of the *baal t’shuvah* (returnee) (emphasis in original) phenomenon.”<sup>39</sup> According to Furman, expert in the field of Jewish American literature and multiculturalism, young writers demonstrate that, “as the Jewish American experience has evolved, so has Jewish American fiction.”<sup>40</sup> Furman observes that becoming part of the mainstream has had a tremendous effect on Jewish American literature.

Countering their mainstream-membership Alan Berger notes that authors like Chabon, Bukiet, Raphael, Goodman, Englander, Foer and many others have found that “it is only by writing out of one’s Jewish specificity that one is likely to have universal

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<sup>37</sup> Nessa Rapoport, “Summoned to the Feast” in *Schocken Book of Contemporary Jewish Fiction*, ed. Ted Solotaroff and N. Rapoport (New York: Schocken 1992), xxviii.

<sup>38</sup> Alan Berger, “American Jewish Fiction” *Modern Judaism* 10 (1990), 222.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma* (New York: Syracuse U.P., 2000), 17.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

resonance.”<sup>41</sup> Whether that Jewish specificity is to be found in neo-orthodoxy, feminism, the *Shoah* or Zionism, this generation of Jewish American writers is more free. As Nessa Rapoport puts it: “Having won our place in American culture, we are beginning to feel confident enough to reclaim Jewish culture.”<sup>42</sup> Kremer observes in her article on recent directions in Jewish American literature that this generation is a ‘self-emancipated’ generation, “liberated to express its artistic visions in Jewish terms – a generation unwilling to accept either the constraints of the immigration/assimilation theme or the popular Roth school of social satire with its cast of stereotypical suburban Jews.”<sup>43</sup> David Sax argues in “Rise of the New Yiddishists” that the literary grandchildren of Roth are now “vastly more comfortable in their Jewish skin than previous generations of American Jewish writers ever were, and their stories reflect that.”<sup>44</sup>

It seems that reciting the Kaddish for Jewish American literature is not necessary. There should be no doubt that this young post-assimilationist generation of Jewish American writers is, as many scholars agree, reclaiming their Jewishness. Defining Jewish American literature by means of an immigrant experience, Howe might have been right in claiming it had reached its high point. Although Wisse’s observation that Jewish American literature might have reached a turning point has proven to be more accurate.

## **Ethnic Reverie**

The Jewish American literary revival can be seen as a break between the immigrant generation and the writers that are known as the post-immigrant, or assimilationist writers. A break between the assimilationist and post-assimilationist, or post-aculturated writers, is what sparked a scholarly debate about a literary revival in the nineties in the first place.

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<sup>41</sup> Berger, 226.

<sup>42</sup> Nessa Rapoport, xxx.

<sup>43</sup> S. Lillian Kremer, “Post-Alienation: Recent Directions in Jewish-American Literature” *Contemporary Literature* 34.3 (1993), 589.

<sup>44</sup> David Sax, “Rise of the New Yiddishists” *Vanity Fair* April (2008).

Scholars did not start paying attention to the literary revival until *Tikkun* magazine devoted an issue to this phenomenon. Thane Rosenbaum, literary editor of *Tikkun* at that time, was proud to be “among the first to observe a new, surprisingly uncelebrated movement.”<sup>45</sup> According to Rosenbaum, in the eighties, Jewish writers stopped writing about distinctively Jewish themes.

Although Rosenbaum was among the first to observe this new movement now known as the Jewish American literary revival, it was Berger who in 1990 saw that the “American Jewish novel of the eighties broke new ground” and that that ground could serve as “fertile soil for nurturing the imagination of novelists in the nineties.”<sup>46</sup> Unlike Rosenbaum, who focussed on the nineties, Berger saw what went on in the eighties and argued that this trend of mixing “traditional sources” with “the complexities of the present”<sup>47</sup> would help understand what Jewish writing would be like in the nineties.

Combining traditional sources with the complexities of the present would imply a continuation rather than a clear-cut break. The words ‘renaissance’ and ‘revival’ themselves already imply this as they mean rebirth. Andrew Furman argues that this renaissance does not represent a “resurgence of traditional Judaism per se so much as it represents its ‘transformation’.”<sup>48</sup> Furman argues that Judaism has not suddenly reappeared in Jewish American literature nor has it ever been absent. In recent years as the Jewish American revival implies, Judaism and other themes seemed to have surfaced to a more prominent position in Jewish American literature. In some cases these themes are perceived differently and in some cases quite similarly compared to the post-immigrant literature of the nineteen sixties and seventies. According to Burstein, some writers of the ‘new wave’ have chosen to either embrace or discard the Jewish experience and to speak

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<sup>45</sup> Thane Rosenbaum, “The Jewish Literary Revival” *Tikkun* 6 (1997), 33.

<sup>46</sup> Berger, 240.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Furman, 18.

of a “‘return’ may overstate what appear more like gestures of urgent, but intermittent, reconnection.”<sup>49</sup>

Whether this transformation or revival started in the nineteen eighties or the nineteen nineties is unclear. Not sticking to the characteristics of the Jewish case, Matthew Frye Jacobson argues in his book *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* that a more general ethnic revival started as early as the sixties. When we cast a glance back over the ethnic landscape, Jacobson argues, “whatever death or slumber ethnicity was supposedly ‘revived’ *from* in the ethnic revival, the hiatus could not have been very long. Perhaps ‘ethnic reverie’ would be a better term.”<sup>50</sup>

The lack of consensus regarding the start of the Jewish American renaissance shows that we can certainly not speak of a definite and clear break with assimilationist writing. Yes, there are many differences between the works of the assimilationist writers and the post-assimilationist writers. This cannot be refuted as the Jewish American revival, and the scholarly debate surrounding it, have made clear. However, since scholars cannot agree on whether it is a revival or a transformation, it is possible that there are similarities to be found as well. The following sections will show how marginality has continued to play a role in Jewish American literature throughout the assimilationist and post-assimilationist generation. Before making my case I will discuss how theories of ethnicity come into play when trying to explain a phenomenon such as the literary revival and how they can help us to understand it.

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<sup>49</sup> Janet Burstein, *Telling the Little Secrets: American Jewish Writing since the 1980's* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin U.P. 2005), 7.

<sup>50</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 2006), 4.

## Assimilation

According to Adam Meyer the return to Judaism, and in a broader context the literary revival, can easily be explained, or “at least systematized, by employing one of the founding tenets in the sociological study of American immigration, Marcus Lee Hansen’s thesis (some might say law) of third generation return.”<sup>51</sup> Hansen’s law of third generation return can best be described as that what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember. Like Meyer, Jacobson, states that any discussion of the ethnic revival must begin with Hansen’s law, “not necessarily because of its explanatory power, but because, in the decades since, Hansen’s law in action is in fact what the ethnic revival is widely presumed to have *been* (emphasis in original).”<sup>52</sup> According to Marcus Lee Hansen the principle of third generation interest explains “the recurrence of movements that seemingly are dead; it is a factor that should be kept in mind particularly in literary or cultural history.”<sup>53</sup> The principle of third generation return implies that “ethnic traces and trappings that had been lost, forgotten, or forcibly cast off by prior generations in their rush to Americanize were rediscovered and embraced by a younger generation who had nothing but ‘American’ culture.”<sup>54</sup> Hansen argues that this younger, American born generation, has “no reason to feel any inferiority.”<sup>55</sup>

Although Hansen’s thesis offers an important justification for what we have come to know as the Jewish American literary revival (whether it started in the sixties, eighties or nineties is irrelevant pointing this connection), there are other theories that offer some valuable insights as well. Herbert J. Gans for instance talks of a symbolic ethnicity. The third generation is less interested in their “ethnic cultures and organizations ... and are

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<sup>51</sup> Meyer, 108.

<sup>52</sup> Jacobson, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Marcus Lee Hansen, “The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant” in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York U.P., 1996), 206.

<sup>54</sup> Jacobson, 3.

<sup>55</sup> Hansen, 207.

instead more concerned with maintaining their ethnic identity.”<sup>56</sup> Once maintaining an ethnic identity becomes the main concern, ethnicity, according to Gans, “takes on an expressive rather than instrumental function in people’s lives, becoming more of a leisure-time activity and losing its relevance.”<sup>57</sup> Although the visibility of a symbolic ethnicity provides support for the existence of a revival, Gans argues that what appears to be a revival is probably “the emergence of a new form of acculturation and assimilation.”<sup>58</sup> Like Jacobson, Gans questions the phenomenon rather than the existence of the revival itself.

The surge of identity politics in the nineties sparked the question of whether assimilation is dead. The evocative title of Nathan Glazer’s article “Is Assimilation Dead?”<sup>59</sup> shows that by the nineties the time when assimilation was an unquestioned concept had passed. In 1997 Richard Alba and Victor Nee, authors of the article “Rethinking Assimilation,”<sup>60</sup> claimed that “assimilation has come to be viewed as a worn-out theory which imposes ethnocentric and patronizing demands on minority peoples struggling to retain their cultural and ethnic integrity.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the assimilation of, for instance, Jewish-, Asian- and Native-Americans, had come, as Gregory Jay argued in 1991, “at the cost of their cultural heritage”<sup>62</sup> and as we have seen with Jewish American literature, Jewish cultural heritage once again stepped into the limelight.

Despite the surge of multiculturalism, assimilation, given a proper context in history, still has its use. Jewish American literature would not have evolved the way it has

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<sup>56</sup> Herbert J. Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America” in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York U.P., 1996), 434.

<sup>57</sup> Gans, 435.

<sup>58</sup> Gans, 440.

<sup>59</sup> Nathan Glazer, “Is Assimilation Dead?” *The Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Sciences* 530 (1993), 122.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Alba and Victor Nee, “Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration” *International Migration Review* 4 (1997).

<sup>61</sup> Alba and Nee, 827.

<sup>62</sup> Gregory S. Jay, “The End of ‘American’ Literature: Toward a Multicultural Practice” *College English* 3 (1991), 267.

without assimilationist writers. The younger generation of writers owe a lot to the post-immigrant generation although the influence of the immigrant writers should not be forgotten as well. Allegra Goodman speaks of this in her essay. She says that

the Jewish writers of my generation are the inheritors of two traditions of Jewish fiction. One is the tradition of writers such as Chaim Grade, Sholem Aleichem, and I.B. Singer. ... The other tradition that comes down to us is that of Jewish American writers such as Roth and Bellow.”<sup>63</sup>

The younger generation of Jewish American writers like Goodman, Bukiet, Foer and Englander are a product of two traditions, that of assimilation and multiculturalism. Like their literary ancestors, contemporary Jewish American writers live between two worlds. Between their Jewish and American identity, contemporary Jewish American writers have become American and cling to their Jewish heritage. Their ancestors, the post-immigrant generation, were Jewish and as their fiction shows, had a desire to assimilate into American culture leaving them experiencing marginality. This experience of marginality remains, albeit in a different form, part of the post-aculturated writers’ work as they have assimilated and now cling to their Jewish heritage.

An important aspect in the fiction of the post-aculturated generation is that their experience of marginality now comes from a different angle. This change in the Jewish American situation can best be explained by the changing of the insider/outsider status. Because just as Furman argued, along with the changing of the Jewish American experience, Jewish American fiction changed as well. This change of the Jewish American experience from outsider to insider has to do with Jewish Americans becoming part of the mainstream. Exploring the fiction in Howe’s *Jewish American Stories* and Zakrzewski’s *Lost Tribe* we will see how this changing status also changed the experience of marginality. Therefore it is useful to explore this insider/outsider status of Jewish Americans in the next paragraph a bit further.

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<sup>63</sup> Allegra Goodman, “Writing With a Return Address” in *Who We Are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer*, ed. Derek Rubin (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 268.

## A Mainstream Minority

In this paragraph I will be looking at the specific situation of Jewish Americans in American society focussing on their insider/outsider status in the twentieth century. In 1990, Alan Berger argued in his article “American Jewish Fiction”<sup>64</sup> that Jewish novels are “increasingly exploring the meaning of being Jewish from within rather than from the perspective of American culture.”<sup>65</sup> This change of perspective could be explained by what David Biale calls the Jews’ “desire to preserve their identity as a minority”<sup>66</sup> and that desire in turn originates from the assumption that Jews have become part of the majority. However, before we get to the interplay of acculturation and assimilation I must begin with Israel Zangwill’s *The Melting Pot* as Zangwill’s play is not only the beginning of assimilation, it singles out the Jews as the “the toughest of all white elements that have been poured into the American crucible.”<sup>67</sup>

Does Zangwill imply that Jews are resistant to assimilation? According to Biale’s analysis of Zangwill’s play “Jews will no longer preserve their separate identity but, like other immigrants, will become something new.”<sup>68</sup> Biale explains that American Jews “constitute a kind of intermediary ethnic group, one of the most quickly and thoroughly acculturated yet, among European immigrant ethnicities, equally one of the most resistant to complete assimilation.”<sup>69</sup> This interplay of acculturation and assimilation now takes place in, what David Hollinger argues to be, a postethnic era in which assimilation and the straight-line-theory have been replaced with ethnic retention and pluralism.

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<sup>64</sup> Berger, 221.

<sup>65</sup> Berger, 222.

<sup>66</sup> Biale et al., “Introduction: The Dialectic of Jewish Enlightenment” in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>67</sup> Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot* (New York, 1926).

<sup>68</sup> David Biale, “The Melting Pot and Beyond: Jews and the Politics of American Identity” in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 21.

<sup>69</sup> Biale, 31.

Negotiating a reconciliation of assimilation and pluralism, Gans argues that ethnic retention, the process in which acculturation is avoided and ethnic ties are retained, will still exist, even when acculturation increases. He writes that

the two approaches can still be reconciled in the third generation, for even if its members should repeat the experience of the European immigrants and begin to assimilate, they will retain a number of ethnic relationships and some associated ethnic practices.<sup>70</sup>

According to Gans, an “ethnic identity is even compatible with assimilation.”<sup>71</sup>

Biale argues that, whether they liked it or not, “Jews in postwar America had become white.”<sup>72</sup> Re-embracing their Jewish heritage, as the Jewish American literary revival implies, must be seen from a perspective in which the Jews in America became white and being white meant being part of the majority. Although the Jewish American status has changed from being an outsider to being part of the white majority, Biale argues that “the Jewish strategy has often been to continue insisting on minority status.”<sup>73</sup> This insistence on their minority status meant for some contemporary Jewish American writers asserting their Jewishness. These writers voluntarily chose to (re)construct their Jewishness in their fiction. Biale suggests that Jews are becoming “a good example of just such a community by choice.”<sup>74</sup> Once an outsider, the Jewish American has become part of the white majority. Rather than their predecessors, who are considered major American writers, contemporary Jewish American writers are now considered part of the white majority and are asserting their Jewish heritage in their fiction. Among other things, their status as insiders would help to explain why the Jewish American literary revival took place

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<sup>70</sup> Herbert J. Gans, “Toward a Reconciliation of ‘Assimilation’ and ‘Pluralism’”: The Interplay of Acculturation and Ethnic Retention” *International Migration Review* 4 (1997), 880.

<sup>71</sup> Gans, “Toward a Reconciliation of ‘Assimilation’ and ‘Pluralism’” 883.

<sup>72</sup> Biale, 28.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Biale, 31.

As part of the mainstream, Furman argues Jewish American writers have been excluded from the multicultural debate as they are no longer seen as a minority. Although evidence suggests that Jews are indeed a minority, Furman, like Biale, perceives a “rarely articulated but growing assumption that Jewish Americans have somehow forfeited their minority status because they have ‘made it’ in America.”<sup>75</sup> Karen Brodtkin Sacks makes a similar statement in her article ‘How Did Jews Become White Folks?’<sup>76</sup> Nessa Rapoport wishes to stress that “in an era in which people are struggling to grant each ethnic tradition its cultural and moral due, we (Jewish Americans, ed. R.E.) had best not mistake our material and sociological acceptance in this country for an entirely identical literary history.”<sup>77</sup> Now that Jewish Americans are regarded as mainstream, we can assume, as Berger argues, that Jewish American writers write from the inside.

The idea might rise that only the contemporary generation of Jewish American writers wish to assert their Jewish identity. I believe that this assumption is incorrect. The assimilationist generation and literary fathers of the contemporary generation wrote about being Jewish as well. The first Jewish immigrants, followed by other waves of Jewish immigration and generations of American born Jews will “have [had] something to say about their communities within America, and about the tensions between their cultural inheritance and this country’s”<sup>78</sup> says Rapoport. In the stories I will be examining this is certainly true.

Although Jewish American literature has become mainstream it continues to embody the “distinct values and preoccupations of a decidedly minority culture.”<sup>79</sup> An out of the ordinary status as Jews consider themselves “insiders who are outsiders and

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<sup>75</sup> Furman, 8.

<sup>76</sup> Karin Brodtkin Sacks, “How Did Jews Become White Folks?” in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jen Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple U.P. 1997), 395 – 401.

<sup>77</sup> Rapoport, xxix.

<sup>78</sup> Rapoport, xxviii.

<sup>79</sup> Furman, 11.

outsiders who are insiders.’<sup>80</sup> In the current postethnic era, they choose to be Jewish.<sup>81</sup> Whether an insider or an outsider, whether part of a minority or part of a majority, the contemporary generation of Jewish American fiction writers still experience marginality and as the following case studies will illustrate; that insider status still has its effect on the experience of marginality.

Of course there are those that do not write from an insider perspective. There are those that experience their Jewishness as something inescapable and there are those that are somewhere in between. Marginality may no longer be the central tension of Jewish American writing as Derek Rubin argues, but arguably it has ‘survived’ the ethnic revival. In the following sections, I aim to show that the experience of marginality in Jewish American fiction is to be found in the stories of the assimilationist writers as well as in the fiction of the post-assimilationist writers. Whereas the post-immigrant generation negotiates their Jewish heritage whilst in the process of being assimilated, the postethnic generation experiences marginality as well. Only this time marginality is experienced from the insiders perspective as they negotiate their assimilated identity whilst willing to retain their Jewish affiliation. By asserting their Jewishness they truly become a mainstream minority.

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<sup>80</sup> Biale et al., 5.

<sup>81</sup> Biale, 31.

## 2: Remembering

This section will examine the similar experience of marginality in the post-immigrant and post-assimilationist generation. We will be looking at how marginality is experienced in the following Holocaust themed stories; *Envy; or, Yiddish in America* (1969), *Who Knows Kaddish* (2000), *The Surveyor* (1966), *Ordinary Pain* (2002), *How to Make It to the Promised Land* (2003) and *Dreaming in Polish* (1998). These stories, written by Cynthia Ozick, Binnie Kirshenbaum, Henry Roth, Michael Lowenthal, Ellen Umansky and Aimee Bender, are representative of the experience of marginality in both generations as the characters in these stories are assimilated into both Jewish and American culture. Even though a break can be observed with Holocaust themed Jewish American fiction from the post-immigrant generation there are also similarities. However, to understand the experience of marginality as a transformation rather than a break in Holocaust themed fiction, it is useful to first take a look at the Holocaust in Jewish American literature.

Although this section will show that a transformation rather than a clear cut break can be observed in Jewish American literature, the Holocaust has divided an entire generation in a before and after and has become an integral part of Jewish identity. The offspring of Holocaust survivors are what Alan Berger calls “second-generation witnesses” and according to him their artistic works bear witness to the “*presence of an absence* (emphasis in original).”<sup>82</sup> Ellen Fine argues that this absence has left a generation with a difficult task, namely “to imagine an event they have not lived through, and to reconstitute and integrate it into their writing – to create a story out of History.”<sup>83</sup> Reconstituting and

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<sup>82</sup> Alan Berger, *Children of Job: American Second-generation Witnesses to the Holocaust* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 1-2.

<sup>83</sup> Ellen Fine, “The Absent Memory: The Act of Writing in Post-Holocaust French Literature” in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 41.

integrating this horrible event, the Holocaust seems to constitute an experience of marginality as it is an important part of Jewishness although the current generation has not experienced it. As the following section will show, many young fiction writers struggle with this part of their Jewish heritage.

Whether the second generation *can* write about the Holocaust is irrelevant for this thesis. What is important is to accept the premise that the inheritance of the *Shoah* has had an impact on forming a Jewish American identity. The extent of this impact is expressed in a 1989 survey that revealed that the *Shoah* “ranked first as a marker of identity for American Jews.”<sup>84</sup> In his article on Jewish American fiction, Berger concludes his section on the *Shoah* with the words that “remembrance is crucial to identity.”<sup>85</sup> The absence of this experience and the integral part it has in Jewish identity leaves writers experiencing marginality. Marginality in this sense is still a hybrid experience of being partially assimilated into two cultures yet, in my opinion, this can be about a culture within a culture as well. As second generation witnesses the authors that have been mentioned before are partly assimilated in the Holocaust history that has been handed down upon them. Yet, they are the only ones left to explain those horrors, horrors they have not experienced themselves.

## **Remembrance Fiction**

In this section it is not so much the literary representation of the Holocaust itself that needs to be explored here. It are the themes of memory and loss. Zakrzewski accurately observes in his introduction that: “these stories don’t claim any direct relationship to the Holocaust;

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<sup>84</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *In Search Of Jewish American Culture* (London: University Press of New England, 1999), 186.

<sup>85</sup> Alan Berger, “American Jewish Fiction” in *Modern Judaism* 10 (1990), 229.

rather, they explore the complexities of remembering.”<sup>86</sup> Therefore I shall speak in this section of remembrance fiction because besides the Holocaust, contemporary Jewish American fiction, such as Kirshenbaum’s *Who Knows Kaddish* (2000) laments the loss of Jewish culture not merely in spite of Nazi Germany, but also because of assimilation.

In Howe’s anthology there are only a few stories that can be directly linked to the Holocaust. This would underline the assumption that it took some time, perhaps even until the ethnic revival of the nineties, before the Holocaust could emerge as a theme in Jewish American literature. Berger argues that in 1979 there had not appeared a great deal of second-generation novels and it was not until Helen Epstein’s book *Children of the Holocaust* (1979) that according to Lev Raphael the second generation was put on the map. Among those writers who are part of the Jewish American literary revival and second generation are, perhaps most notably, Lev Raphael who recently published *My Germany* (2009), Melvin Jules Bukiet who’s *After* (1996) dealt with Holocaust survivors, and Thane Rosenbaum, who made his debut with *Elijah Visible* (1996), a collection of nine stories in which the legacy the Holocaust paralyses the main character Adam Posner. Given these books, one could argue that there is indeed a connection between the emergence of the ethnic revival in the nineties and the emergence of remembrance fiction.

However, as early as the nineteen sixties, we see the appearance of Holocaust survivors as fictional characters in the works of post-immigrant writers. Dorothy Seidman Bilik argues that Bernard Malamud’s *The Magic Barrel* (1958) and Philip Roth’s *Eli, the Fanatic* (1958) were among the first.<sup>87</sup> To assume that it was not until the nineties that the *Shoah* regained prominence in Jewish American literature is therefore false as there are many novels that feature the Holocaust or Holocaust survivors. Bilik names, among others, Saul Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970); Cynthia Ozick’s *The Shawl* (1980); and

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<sup>86</sup> Paul Zakrzewski, *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), xxiii.

<sup>87</sup> Dorothy Seidman Bilik, “Fiction of the Holocaust” in *Handbook of American-Jewish Literature: An Analytical Guide to Topics, Themes and Sources*, ed. Lewis Fried (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

Arthur Cohen's *In the Days of Simon Stern* (1973). Berger adds to this list Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer* (1979) and the unconventional *Maus* (1986), by Art Spiegelman. Remembering Jewish heritage by means of Holocaust survivors in the early sixties, seventies and eighties shows that despite the differences, there are also similarities between the fiction of the post-immigrant and post-aculturated writers.

Stories such as Ozick's *Envy; or, Yiddish in America*, Kirshenbaum's *Who Knows Kaddish* and Henry Roth's *The Surveyor* illustrate that the theme of remembrance and the experience of marginality has continued to be a topic in the works of both post-immigrant and post-assimilationists writers. Yet, as has been mentioned in the introduction of this section, there is a difference between the stories anthologized in Howe's *Jewish-American Stories* and Zakrzewski's *Lost Tribe*.

In Howe's anthology, one of the stories Bilik mentions is Malamud's *The Magic Barrel*. Along with *The Magic Barrel*, Howe anthologised Henry Roth's *The Surveyor* and Ozick's *Envy; or, Yiddish in America*. All three stories do not have an explicit connection to the Holocaust but do have a distinct remembrance theme. *Envy; or, Yiddish in America* for instance was written, in Ozick's words as "a lamentation, a celebration, because six million Yiddish tongues were under the earth of Europe."<sup>88</sup> The story tells the tale of the envy felt by two Yiddish poets towards the Yiddish novelist Ostrover who, by the grace of a translator, has found literary fame with a broad audience.

The stories that explore the complexities of remembering in Zakrzewski's *Lost Tribe* are easier to spot as they often have a more tangible and easier to spot relationship with the Holocaust. Stories like Kirshenbaum's *Who Knows Kaddish* in which the loss of European Jewry is linked to the loss of Jewish heritage, or Michael Lowenthal's *Ordinary Pain* are representative of the marginal experience in contemporary Jewish American

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<sup>88</sup> Cynthia Ozick, "A Bintel Brief for Jacob Glatstein" *Jewish Heritage* (1972), 60.

literature because of their approach to remembering. The main character in *Ordinary Pain*, a boy named Larry, who is due for a bar mitzvah and enrolled in Hebrew school, consciously lies about his grandfather's death saying he was shot trying to escape a Nazi death camp. As Larry creates his own Holocaust identity, Lowenthal asks himself "do we miss standing in the spotlight of suffering?"<sup>89</sup> Besides the stories mentioned above, Ellen Umansky's *How to Make It to the Promised Land* and Aimee Bender's *Dreaming in Polish*, anthologised in *Lost Tribe*, are representative of the experience of marginality in contemporary Jewish American literature as well.

### **"Another Kind of Loss, but Loss Nonetheless" <sup>90</sup>**

Malamud's *The Magic Barrel*, one of the oldest stories in Howe's anthology and according to Bilik one of the first stories to feature a Holocaust survivor, would seem to offer a good place to start. However, *The Magic Barrel* is, in my opinion, no remembrance fiction. Although the main character, a rabbinical student named Leo Finkle, suffers a great deal in search for a wife, a suffering from which he draws consolation as he is a Jew and Jews, according to him, suffer, we can hardly speak of a remembrance theme or even an implicit connection to the Holocaust. Lawrence Dessner suggests that the real theme of *The Magic Barrel* is "the ambiguous evidence of the presence of the supernatural."<sup>91</sup>

Leo Finkle's search for a Jewish wife with the help of a Jewish marriage broker does however offer a nice contrast to Susan Sherman's *Knitting One* (2003) anthologised in *Lost Tribe*. In *Knitting One*, Dotsy, a single assimilated Jewish woman, comes across a rabbi who, when he finds out she is not married, offers to have her "under the *chuppah*

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<sup>89</sup> Michael Lowenthal, "Ordinary Pain" in *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge*, ed. P. Zakrzewski (New York: HarperCollins, 2003): 264.

<sup>90</sup> Binnie Kirshenbaum, "Who Knows Kaddish" in *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge*, ed. P. Zakrzewski (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 182.

<sup>91</sup> Lawrence Dessner, "Malamud's Revisions to 'The Magic Barrel'" *Critique* (1989), 252.

within a year!”<sup>92</sup> Although going to knitting class can be interpreted as a return to Judaism, the contrast between Dotsy and Leo Finkle is striking as the latter searches for a Jewish wife whereas the first, according to the author only dates WASP men.<sup>93</sup>

The present-day dilemma of whether or not to marry a “tribe member,”<sup>94</sup> is far removed from remembrance fiction. A little less removed from that is Ozick’s *Envy; or, Yiddish in America* that was written in honor of the six million that were killed. Hillel Halkin argues in his article *What is Cynthia Ozick About?* that *Envy; or, Yiddish in America* has

demonstrated what now seems so obvious that it is hard to fathom what took so long, or why more writers did not take up the challenge immediately--namely, that it was possible to write important American Jewish fiction from within.<sup>95</sup>

*Envy; or, Yiddish in America* is the story of two Yiddish poets and their jealousy towards the successful Yiddish writer Ostrover. Writing in Yiddish and having no translator, the Yiddish poet Edelshtein essentially fights for the preservation of Yiddish literature. Why only Ostrover? he asks himself

Ostrover alone saved? Ostrover the survivor? As if hidden in the Dutch attic like that child. *His* diary, so to speak, the only documentation of what was. ... Ostrover was to be the only evidence that there was once a Yiddish tongue, a Yiddish literature? And all the others lost? Lost! Drowned.<sup>96</sup>

Edelshtein cannot understand why Ostrover is favoured over other Yiddish poets and writers. No matter how long he has been “Yankified” as he calls it, he will never be able to write in English the way he can in his mother tongue, his *mamaloshen*.

The Yiddish tongue that has been lost is a central theme in Kirshenbaum’s *Who Knows Kaddish* (2000) as well. *Kaddish*, a Jewish prayer of mourning, is an important element in Jewish liturgy. The main character in Kirshenbaum’s story finds herself at a

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<sup>92</sup> Suzan Sherman, “Knitting One” in *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge*, ed. P. Zakrzewski (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 80.

<sup>93</sup> Sherman, 94.

<sup>94</sup> Sherman, 95.

<sup>95</sup> Hillel Halkin, “What Is Cynthia Ozick About?” *Commentary* 1 (2005).

<sup>96</sup> Cynthia Ozick, “Envy; Or Yiddish In America” in *Jewish American Stories*, ed. I. Howe (New York: Mentor Books, 1977), 137.

cemetery in the state of Swabia, a region in Germany where in 1939 the Jews went “the way of the Shakers and the pterodactyl. ... Poof. Gone and never to return.”<sup>97</sup> Knowing what happened and still mourning her mother’s death she feels that

I ought to say Kaddish for them, for these Jews extinct. I want to say Kaddish for them, and I want to say Kaddish for my mother too. No one did that for her, for my mother. No one said Kaddish for my mother. I want to, but I cannot. Here in the state of Swabia, I stand before the grave of the last Jew, and I mourn because I do not know how to say the Jewish prayer for the dead.<sup>98</sup>

For Kirshenbaum, the story represents a profound sense for what will never be.<sup>99</sup> She writes that for the first time, “I really considered ... the loss of a future for the Jews of Europe, which made me think of American assimilation as another kind of loss, but loss nonetheless.”<sup>100</sup> In the determination to reclaim that loss whilst being assimilated into American culture the reconciliation of ethnic retention and assimilation Gans spoke of can truly begin.

Both stories are written more than thirties years apart but share a general sense of loss and can be interpreted as a jeremiad of multiculturalism as both Ozick’s and Kirshenbaum’s characters are in a sense disgruntled by the loss of their Jewish heritage. The marginality that both characters feel is striking. Edelshtein as a neglected poet longs to preserve Yiddish literature but in doing so, he must assimilate by translating them. In *Who Knows Kaddish* the Yiddish culture that Edelshtein has fought to preserve has perished and assimilation has taken its toll. Both characters find themselves caught between their Jewish and American identity. In Edelshtein’s case, the pressure to become ‘Yankified’ is something he resents whereas the character in Kirshenbaum’s *Who Knows Kaddish* is on the other side of the spectrum. An American who mourns for a legacy that she has in a

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<sup>97</sup> Kirshenbaum, 181.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Kirshenbaum, 182.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

sense lost. In that respect the story fits the mould of the Jewish American literary revival that has been discussed earlier on.

The similarity between these stories lies in the experience of marginality, although this marginality is experienced from different sides as the perspective changes from outsider to insider. Edelshtein longs to be an insider but is still in essence an outsider as he wants to assimilate and have his work translated in order to preserve Yiddish culture. Now part of the majority, Jews have found their translators and for some becoming an insider has come at the cost of having lost part of their heritage. Although both characters in Kirshenbaum's and Ozick's stories experience marginality, both do so in their own way.

### **The Presence of an Absence**

Another representative story that Howe anthologized with a distinct remembrance theme is Henry Roth's *The Surveyor*. It tells the story of Aaron and Mary Stigman who, with the help of surveying instruments, aim to find the exact site in the city of Seville on which Jews condemned by the inquisition were put to death. The "perceptible presence of legacy,"<sup>101</sup> as Virginia Ricard and Henry Roth describe it in their article "Against oblivion: Henry Roth's 'The Surveyor'," adds to the most important aspect of *The Surveyor*; namely

the question of the past- more specifically the Jewish past – and the survival in the present. Aaron Stigman ... is not merely taking measurements, but in a sense taking stock, and the past, too, belongs to the world he wishes to understand.<sup>102</sup>

This goes for the character in Kirshenbaum's *Who Knows Kaddish* as well but something of *The Surveyor* resonates in Aimee Bender's *Dreaming in Polish*.

In *Dreaming in Polish* the mother of the main character, Celia, drags her along to concentration-camp museums. Although Celia does not like going, her mother, she writes, "somehow, craved it. I watched her hands tremble as she looked at the biographies pasted

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<sup>101</sup> Ricard and Roth "Against oblivion: Henry Roth's 'The Surveyor'" *Journal of the Short Story in English* 44 (2005).

<sup>102</sup> Ricard and Roth.

on the walls, and wondered what she was thinking.”<sup>103</sup> Those Holocaust museums could be interpreted as the modern day equivalent of Aaron Stigman’s wreath. Both the wreath as well as the Holocaust museums allow the characters to make a connection with their Jewish past. The wreath and the Holocaust museums are therefore symbolic as they embody the presence of an absence. In here, the experience of marginality is concealed as Roth and Bender struggle with this presence of an absence. Their characters have not experienced the Holocaust themselves but through the wreath and the Holocaust museums they are able to seek out and be confronted with an important part of their Jewish heritage. Although the Holocaust is ever present in Jewish identity the experience of marginality lies in the confrontation with this past that is present but can only be remembered.

What makes Bender’s story so interesting is that it actually criticizes the ‘remembrance industry’ that has sprung after the Holocaust. Bender writes that writing *Dreaming in Polish* was about “trying to manage my own ambivalence about the Holocaust museums I’ve visited.”<sup>104</sup> Having a mediated experience of the Holocaust seems to be of importance to the mother as she talks about riding cattle cars and a museum that has “the best simulation of Auschwitz in the world.”<sup>105</sup> According to Bender we are at a loss to figure out how to help people remember this horrible chapter in human history although she acknowledges the purpose these museums can have.

The ambivalence of remembering and making sense of the Holocaust has been dramatized in Ellen Umansky’s *How to Make It to the Promised Land*. The camp where the teen Lizzie is spending her summer, recreates in the form of a game, a Polish ghetto, including yellow stars, ID cards and Nazi officers. The challenge is to escape deportation. Questioning how people would make sense of the Holocaust, both Bender and Umansky

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<sup>103</sup> Aimee Bender, “Dreaming In Polish” in *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge*, ed. P. Zakrzewski (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 281.

<sup>104</sup> Bender, 292.

<sup>105</sup> Bender, 281.

depict characters that feel no immediate desire to remember the Holocaust. As Umansky writes in her own words: “I wondered how teenagers in well-off, secure world of West Los- Angeles in the 1990s ... would make sense of the Holocaust, how such horrors would, or wouldn’t, be assimilated into their lives.”<sup>106</sup>

Lowenthal’s *Ordinary Pain* asks the same question only he represents the difficult theme of remembering in a different way. Larry, the boy in *Ordinary Pain* “hungers for the status conferred on victims of historic injustices [and] engages in a frightening revisionism”<sup>107</sup> claiming his grandfather was shot in a Nazi death camp attempting to escape. Larry uses, or rather abuses, his Jewish history to gain popularity with his classmates. The lie and the popularity that result from it, allows Lowenthal to comment on how we remember the Holocaust just like Bender does with Holocaust museums and Umansky with the frightening recreation of a Polish ghetto.

Like Kirshenbaum’s character, the characters in *Ordinary Pain*, *How to Make It to the Promised Land*, and *Dreaming in Polish* experience marginality from within as they reflect on the Holocaust as the second and third generation. In the works of authors like Kirshenbaum and Umansky, struggling with the presence of an absence and commenting on how the Holocaust is remembered results in an ambivalent approach to this theme. The marginal position that the second and third generation feels with respect to remembering expresses itself in *Ordinary Pain*, *How to Make It to the Promised Land*, and *Dreaming in Polish* in such a way that it would seem as if remembering itself has become a topic of debate.

Remembering the Holocaust and the ambivalence that is experienced as a result of this presence of an absence is often to be found with the authors themselves rather than the characters in their stories. After each story in Zakrzewski’s anthology the author comments

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<sup>106</sup> Umansky, 344.

<sup>107</sup> Zakrzewski, xxiii.

on his or her work in a vignette. In these vignettes one can read that Lowenthal, Umansky and Bender all express a sincere struggle with the horror they have never experienced themselves.

In this respect these three stories differ from remembrance fiction written in the nineteen sixties examined in this thesis. The fiction in Howe's anthology does not feature stories in which this struggle explicitly takes place. One explanation for this is could be that the resources of this generation have been "irrevocably altered by the actualities of Auschwitz."<sup>108</sup> Bilik argues, that "we of the post-Holocaust world, know of terrors never imagined by previous generations."<sup>109</sup> To put it simply, for this remembrance theme to arise, a new generation, once removed from the Holocaust, needed to be born. This could also explain why there are more stories in *Lost Tribe* that deal with this topic than Howe's *Jewish-American Stories*.

Despite the differences, we can conclude that the shared experience of marginality in the stories underline the assumption that Jewish American fiction of the post-immigrant generation can be similar to Jewish American post-assimilationist fiction. The difficulty that some characters in these stories have with assimilating the Holocaust into their lives is an indication that marginality has not left the Jewish American stage and that the position of American Jews as an ethnic minority in a majority culture can still be explained in terms of marginality. Although the Holocaust itself can be seen as an inescapable past, we should bear in mind that the remembrance theme is a defining aspect for several generations as Ozick and Kirshenbaum demonstrate.

As we have seen, *Ordinary Pain*, *How to Make It to the Promised Land*, and *Dreaming in Polish* are different from the fiction in Howe's *Jewish-American Stories*. They do not share the same remembrance theme. Except for Roth's *The Surveyor* and

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<sup>108</sup> Bilik, 416.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

Ozick's *Envy; or, Yiddish in America* remembering appears to be no theme in Howe's anthology. This perhaps because the post-assimilationist generation knows more of the terrors and the impact the Holocaust has had. Because there are so few stories in Howe's anthology that have a remembrance theme, the changing status of insider/outsider with respect to this theme is hard to detect and therefore hard to verify. Yet, Howe's anthology remain representative for its generation. The remembrance theme between Ozick's and Kirshenbaum's story is remarkable and in this particular case, the changing perspective from outsider to insider is more perceptible but the lack of more evidence makes it hard to validate this.

### 3: Modern Orthodoxy

The second theme that has a prominent place in Jewish American literature is Judaism. This theme is different from the Holocaust as the Jewish faith finds its origins thousands, rather than sixty years ago. Alan Berger argues that the Jewish literary preoccupation with orthodoxy is a “long standing feature of American Jewish novelists.”<sup>110</sup> It is therefore reasonable to assume that Judaism has been a theme in Jewish American literature long before the Holocaust first appeared in Jewish American fiction in the nineteen sixties. Berger mentions examples like Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) and Anzia Yezierska’s *The Bread* (1925). According to Berger, “both have protagonists who, while rejecting orthodoxy, nevertheless continue to view it as the standard of authentic Jewish experience.”<sup>111</sup> Stephen Whitfield argues that “Judaism cannot be equated historically or made logically identical with Jewish culture.”<sup>112</sup> Be that as it may, during the Jewish American literary revival in the nineteen nineties Judaism has regained significance as a factor that has determined, as far as that is possible, a Jewish identity.

In this section we will be looking at the similarities between Philip Roth’s *Defender of the Faith* (1959) from Howe’s *Jewish-American Stories* and Tova Mirvis’ *A Poland, a Lithuania, a Galicia* (2003) from Zakrzewski’s *Lost Tribe*. As has been argued in the previous section, despite the differences between fiction of the assimilationist and post-assimilationist generation there are similarities as well. However, this time the focus will be on stories with a Judaic theme rather than a remembrance theme, and the marginal place its characters reside in as they negotiate a Jewish and American secular identity. At the end of this section, I will examine how besides a shared experience of marginality, the complex

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<sup>110</sup> Alan Berger, “American Jewish Fiction” *Modern Judaism* 10 (1990), 222.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *In Search Of Jewish American Culture* (London: University Press of New England, 1999), 199.

status of the insider/outsider status has changed the experience of marginality from one experienced by an insider, to that experienced by an outsider.

Contemporary Jewish American fiction is, according to Lillian Kremer: “pervasively Jewish in its moral insistence and its reference to Judaic texts.”<sup>113</sup> She argues that in the works of, among others, Cynthia Ozick, Arthur Cohen, and Hugh Nissenson, Jewish religious thoughts and values are among the most significant themes. The resulting literature she concludes, “captures the essence of Jewish experience as deeply and intricately as Christian sensibility is conveyed in the works of James Joyce and Flannery O’Connor.”<sup>114</sup> Kremer argues that a Judaic religious, textual and historical content has “often replaced the secular Jews of Bellow and Roth and the Jewishly uneducated figures in Malamud with characters steeped in Jewish learning.”<sup>115</sup> However, to assume that Judaism had no significance in the fiction of the post-immigrant generation is wrong. Susannah Heschel argues in her article “Imagining Judaism in America”<sup>116</sup> that

increasingly after 1960, large numbers of American Jews rejected assimilation and turned instead to a revival of religious observance and belief. The problem was that most had lost their connection to Judaism ... Belief that they needed to restore the authenticity of Jewish identity and revive Judaism as a religion became the concern of the post- World War II generation, and for that they turned to the European Judaism that had been destroyed in the Holocaust.<sup>117</sup>

Reviving Judaism as a religion after the nineteen sixties in order to counter assimilation underscores the assumption that the Jewish American revival finds its origins long before the nineteen nineties as some argue.

Roth’s *Defender of the Faith* taken from *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) offers a good example of Judaism and how marginality is experienced in Jewish American literature

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<sup>113</sup> S. Lillian Kremer, “Post-Alienation: Recent Directions in Jewish-American Literature” *Contemporary Literature* 34.3 (1993), 571.

<sup>114</sup> Kremer, 576.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Susannah Heschel, “Imagining Judaism in America” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. M.P. Kramer and H. Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2003).

<sup>117</sup> Heschel, 40.

from the post-immigrant generation. In Zakrzewski's *Lost Tribe* it is Mirvis' *A Poland, a Lithuania, a Galicia* (2003) that shares the theme of Judaism and the experience of marginality with Roth's *Defender of the Faith*.

## **Between a Secular Identity and Religious Fervor**

Let me begin with Roth's *Defender of the Faith*. This short story first appeared in Roth's debut *Goodbye Columbus* in 1959 and earned Roth literary fame as he won the National Book Award in 1960. Not without controversy, Roth tells us that the stories in *Goodbye Columbus* were condemned by the Jewish community for "ignoring the accomplishments of Jewish life [and] as Rabbi Emanuel Rackman [proclaimed:] 'for creating a distorted image of the basic values of Orthodox Judaism'."<sup>118</sup> Roth's work has been attacked as being "dangerous, dishonest, and irresponsible."<sup>119</sup> Accused of being self-hating the question raised after *Defender of the Faith* appeared was, according to Roth; "What will people think?"<sup>120</sup>

*Defender of the Faith* is a story about a man who, in Roth's own words

uses his own religion, and another's uncertain conscience, for selfish ends; but mostly it is about this other man, the narrator, who, because of the ambiguities of being a member of his religion, is involved in a taxing, if mistaken, conflict of loyalties.<sup>121</sup>

The narrator is sergeant Nathan Marx who is rotated back to America to spend the remainder of the war with a training company. He is immediately approached by Sheldon Grossbart who, as a Jew, tries to use their shared religion to receive certain privileges. Grossbart expects that with a Jewish sergeant in charge, "things might be a little different."<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Philip Roth, "Writing About Jews" in *Who We Are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer*, ed. Derek Rubin (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 42.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Roth, *Who We Are*, 50.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Philip Roth, "Defender of the Faith" in *Jewish American Stories*, ed. I. Howe (New York: Mentor Books, 1977), 375.

Instead of cleaning the barracks on Friday nights like other privates, Grossbart wishes to go to service without suffering the accusations of the other privates. Stressing that it is “a matter of *religion* (emphasis in original),”<sup>123</sup> he gets Marx to talk to his Captain who makes it official that Jews can go to service on Friday nights. Marx feels cornered into explaining the situation as well as defending it. It places himself in a marginal position as he understands Grossbart’s wish to go to *shul* but on the other hand fails to see why Grossbart refuses to adapt and continues to “stick out like a sore thumb”<sup>124</sup> as he puts it.

Another example of how sergeant Marx finds himself stuck between his Jewish and, if you will, assimilated identity is when Grossbart writes a congressman about the army not serving kosher food. Marx now has to answer to Captain Barrett about Grossbart and as a reader you get the sense that he refuses to take a stand, sugar-coating Grossbart’s dietary laws. Instead of Marx saying Grossbart is a little strange, he changes his approach and tells the Captain that “he’s a very orthodox Jew and so he’s only allowed to eat certain foods.”<sup>125</sup> Not condemning Grossbart, Marx’ actions can be interpreted as having sympathy for Grossbart as well as sympathy for the Jewish cause. However, on the other hand Marx has his loyalty towards the army and stresses that Grossbart should, for the time being, “*be the same* (emphasis in original).”<sup>126</sup>

A third example of the marginality Marx experiences in Roth’s *Defender of the Faith* is when things come to a climax between him and Grossbart. Grossbart accuses Marx of being ashamed of his, what can be interpreted as, Jewish heritage and once more stressing their shared religion Grossbart asks for a weekend pass so that he can celebrate Seder with his relatives. Not sure why Grossbart acts the way he does, Marx asks him why he wishes to be different, why he begs for special treatment. Although Marx sympathises

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<sup>123</sup> Roth, “Defender of the Faith”, 376.

<sup>124</sup> Roth, “Defender of the Faith”, 392.

<sup>125</sup> Roth, “Defender of the Faith”, 383.

<sup>126</sup> Roth, “Defender of the Faith”, 392.

with the boy, (he eventually gives Grossbart the pass) one can feel Marx' constant negotiation between what is perhaps best described as his Jewish and Gentile identity.

In the end Marx betrays the trust Grossbart placed in him by transferring Grossbart to the Pacific instead of stateside like Grossbart had arranged for earlier on. Roth describes this action of Marx as "an act he can believe to be honorable."<sup>127</sup> The irony of this twist is that Marx, by turning against his faith truly becomes the defender of it as

the cause of the whole Jewish faith is set back when Jews like Grossbart get special favors for themselves, for other people will mistakenly attribute Grossbart's objectionable qualities to the Jewish people as a whole.<sup>128</sup>

However, neither Marx nor Grossbart can be seen as a stereotype. According to Roth,

Grossbart is not The Jew; but he is a fact of Jewish experience and well within range of its moral possibilities. And so is his adversary, Marx, who is, after all, the story's central character, its consciousness and its voice.<sup>129</sup>

As we have seen both Marx and Grossbart experience their Jewish heritage in a different way. Except Marx is portrayed as having conflicting loyalties towards that heritage as he is in Roth's own words

a man who calls himself a Jew more tentatively than does Grossbart; he is not sure what it means -means for *him* - ... confronted by what are represented to him as the needs of another Jew, he does not for a while know what to do.<sup>130</sup>

Those conflicting loyalties and the fact that Marx does not know what it means for him to be a Jew makes *Defender of the Faith* an interesting story in which marginality is experienced between a secular identity and religious fervor.

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<sup>127</sup> Roth, *Who We Are*, 53.

<sup>128</sup> Author unknown, <http://ftp.ccccd.edu/mtolleson/2328online/2328notesdefender.htm>

<sup>129</sup> Roth, *Who We Are*, 52.

<sup>130</sup> Roth, *Who We Are*, 53.

## Between Minimal Orthodoxy and Religious Fervor

Marginality in Jewish American literature is not something that solemnly belongs to the past. Several stories in contemporary Jewish American literature continue to have characters struggle with their Jewish and American identity. In Zakrzewski's anthology there are several stories with a distinct Judaic theme in which its characters experience marginality regarding their Jewish American identity. The following story that I shall discuss is *A Poland, a Lithuania, a Galicia* written by Tova Mirvis. Just like *Defender of the Faith*, it combines Judaism with an experience of marginality, albeit less subtle and without the complex irony of Roth.

According to Zakrzewski, *A Poland, a Lithuania, a Galicia* is “an amusing look at how one family copes with a young man's religious transformation.”<sup>131</sup> In Mirvis' story a young man, Bryan, returns home after two years of yeshiva in Israel. Before he left, the boy was preoccupied with basketball, but now worries whether or not he has enough time to study the Talmud. His religious fervor results in changing his name from Bryan to Baruch, reciting the morning prayers, transforming his room so it is appropriate for a yeshiva boy, and making his mother's kosher kitchen even more kosher. His parents feel that Baruch's religiosity has gone to far. Searching for his roots they believe that “their son wanted to pass through Ellis Island in reverse.”<sup>132</sup>

Interestingly, it is not Baruch who, by defying his mother and father, is stuck between two worlds. It are his parents who, suddenly confronted with the religious fervor of their son, find themselves renegotiating their Modern Orthodoxy. They had laid out a line of moderation for their kids. “They believed in the integration of religious and

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<sup>131</sup> Paul Zakrzewski, *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), xxiv.

<sup>132</sup> Tova Mirvis, “A Poland, A Lithuania, A Galicia” in *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge*, ed. P. Zakrzewski (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 402.

secular.”<sup>133</sup> The minimal Orthodoxy of his parents offends Baruch. They wouldn’t understand that he wants “one world, authentic and whole ... They would talk about integrating and assimilating the best of both worlds.”<sup>134</sup>

But Baruch gets his mother doubting whether or not she is a *frum* (meaning devout) Jew. Although she acknowledges that their observance of Judaic law is not perfect, she believes that “with a gentle hand and patient heart,”<sup>135</sup> her son could be persuaded back to their way of Modern Orthodoxy, integrating the religious with the secular. Obviously Baruch’s mother does not agree with what she believes is a turn for the worse. For Baruch, she imagined a life that would fit the description of a Jewish American, fully assimilated and still in touch with his Jewish heritage. Although Baruch experiences a form of marginality as well, negotiating his secular family with his religious identity, he has made a choice and embraced his Jewishness in a rather radical way.

His mother however has conflicting loyalties as she says she has raised her son to be religious, “just not this religious, to take it as seriously as we do, but no more.”<sup>136</sup> Combining the religious with the secular, she has remained true to her Jewish heritage without discarding what could be seen as an American identity. The core of Mirvis’ comment is not embodied in Baruch’s religious fervor or his parents reaction, it is his sister reaction who continues to call him Bryan and openly objects his strict obeying of Judaic laws. Whereas his parents, and especially his mother give room to his religious fervor, his sister obstructs it, adding to the complexity of the story.

Baruch’s return to Judaism fits the mould of the Jewish American literary revival in which it has been argued that Judaism has regained more significance in Jewish American literature. However, Judaism has been a theme in Jewish American literature long before

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<sup>133</sup> Mirvis, 400.

<sup>134</sup> Mirvis, 408.

<sup>135</sup> Mirvis, 416.

<sup>136</sup> Mirvis, 415.

Tikkun spoke of a revival. As has been argued before, this thesis does not deny that a break or a revival can be seen in Jewish American literature, but focuses on the characters shared experience of marginality in stories in Howe's *Jewish-American Stories* and Zakrzewski's *Lost Tribe*.

The insider/outsider status in *Defender of the Faith* is a matter of interpretation. Marx can be seen as the insider as he is the one who is part of the majority whereas Grossbart is the outsider as he is the one who sticks out. On the other hand, both Marx and Grossbart can be seen as insiders as they are both part of the white majority. However, from Grossbart's viewpoint, Marx is the outsider. Although both experience marginality, Marx experiences this more tentatively as he is the main character who is forced to renegotiate his comfortable assimilated life. Both Marx and Grossbart are examples of Jews who are part of the majority. In contrast to Marx, Grossbart finds this status confining his Jewish identity. Grossbart emphasizing his Jewish identity and minority status recalls to memory the fictional characters after the literary revival. However, Grossbart emphasizes his Jewishness for the wrong reasons. He uses his status as a minority within a majority to receive certain privileges whereas the post-assimilated generation sincerely laments the loss of their culture.

The story of Marx and his counterpart Grossbart is a story about assimilation. Marx' remark about the fact that Grossbart continues to stick out like a sore thumb is an indication of how Marx longs to be part of the majority. He does not wish to be different or emphasize his Jewishness in any way, seeking recognition as a person, not as a Jew.

The idea that contemporary Jewish American fiction is written from an insiders perspective helps with the interpretation of the insider/outsider status in *A Poland, a Lithuania, a Galicia*. A story that, because it is about a families internal struggle with their son and brothers religious zeal, can be interpreted as written from an insiders perspective.

Like Grossbart, Baruch wishes to emphasize his Jewishness. Baruch feels that his family has gone too far in assimilating and have lost their Jewish heritage. It is typical for the fiction after the literary revival to criticise the concept of assimilation. Where Marx comes out on top in Roth's story, it is the distance between a Jewish and American identity that prevails in *A Poland, a Lithuania, a Galicia*. This distance is symbolised in the conversation that Baruch and his father don't have as they wonder: "Is this my father? This is my son?"<sup>137</sup>

The beauty of stories like *Defender of the Faith* and *A Poland, a Lithuania, a Galicia* is that its characters are complex and experience duality when it comes to their Jewish heritage. Written more than forty years apart, both the characters of Marx and Baruch's mother are troubled by conflicting loyalties. They are forced to renegotiate their Jewishness and assimilated identity by another person. That person, whether it is Grossbart or Baruch, uses their shared Jewish identity to pressure the other person. Forcing them in a position to choose between their secular and religious identity. However, neither Marx, nor Baruch's mother, wishes to make that choice. Being in the marginal place they are, they have found a way to integrate their Jewish heritage with their, if you will, secular and assimilated identity. In this respect, there is a similarity between the stories.

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<sup>137</sup> Mirvis, 421.

# Conclusion

The characters in these stories examined here have a potential to speak for certain generations of Jewish American writers. However, sergeant Marx, Baruch, Dotsy, Lizzie, Larry and Leo Finkle are fictional characters and some would argue that they can only represent just that; fiction. These characters however have the potential to be spokesmen for, at least some part, of the Jewish American community. They can be, as Tompkins said “powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself.”<sup>138</sup> Having the ability to be more than just a reference to the real world the fiction explored in this thesis has the potential to offer some insights in the position of American Jews as part of an ethnic minority in which, according to Furman, “marginality and alienation ceased to define the Jewish American experience.”<sup>139</sup> However, in the fiction explored in this thesis that experience of marginality remains.

The focus of this thesis is on the similarities between the post-immigrant and post-acculturated generations rather than the differences. There is no denying that there are many literary differences between these two generations of Jewish American fiction writers. Ever since *Tikkun* wrote of a Jewish literary revival in which young Jewish American writers have grown confident enough with their Americanness to explore their Jewishness, many scholars like Furman, Berger and Kremer have written about this phenomenon. Although we cannot speak of a definite break with the past, Jewish American literature has certainly changed and is in many ways different from what it once was. The basis of that difference is the assumption that Jewish Americans have moved from being an outsider to being an insider. Their current status as an ethnic minority within

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<sup>138</sup> Janet Burstein, *Telling the Little Secrets: American Jewish Writing since the 1980's* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin U.P. 2005), xiii.

<sup>139</sup> Andrew Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma* (Syracuse: Syracuse U.P., 2000), 16.

the majority has led to the discussion of what Andrew Furman calls the multicultural dilemma (or crises as Derek Rubin calls it) in which the post-aculturated generation of Jewish American writers have responded to their ethnic minority with majority status.

The new wave of post-aculturated writers who are part of this revival have embraced their Jewishness with a new emphasis on identity as Morris Dickstein articulated in *Tikkun* in 1997. The first section of this thesis offered the reader not only an insight into this phenomenon but also a theoretical background of ethnic return as besides literary critics, academics have discussed this phenomenon as well.

Although the editor of *Jewish-American Stories*, Irving Howe, might have been right in predicting the end of Jewish American literature as defined solely by an immigrant experience, Adam Meyer argues that by putting the emphasis on Jewishness, Jewish American literature reaches unscaled heights. Reclaiming their Jewishness, certain themes such as the Holocaust and Judaism (re)gained prominence during the Jewish American literary renaissance.

That we are witnessing a Jewish American literary revival is something, as the first section shows, scholars can agree on. However, they cannot seem to agree on when this return to ethnicity first took place and whether or not 'return' is the correct term as some would prefer reverie or an "urgent, but intermittent, reconnection."<sup>140</sup> This lack of consensus shows that we cannot speak of a definite break with the assimilationist writers. Although an explicit break might not be the case, it is certainly arguable that Jewish American fiction has changed over the course of years. Yet it are the similarities between the stories in Howe's and Zakrzewski's anthology that I have focussed on and the marginality that the characters in these Jewish American stories experience in particular.

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<sup>140</sup> Burstein, 7.

The experience of marginality is defined by Robert E. Park as: “a period of transition, when old habits are being discarded and new ones are not yet formed. It is inevitably a period of inner turmoil and intense self-consciousness.”<sup>141</sup> It is a theme that continues to be seen in these stories. The negotiation between a characters Jewish heritage and their loyalty towards their equally important assimilated American identity can be found in both Howe’s and Zakrzewski’s anthology. It is arguable that the post-accultured generation broke away from the post-immigrant’s generation “nagging sense of alienation and marginality that provided the essential grist for the fictional mills,”<sup>142</sup> but that, although the experience of marginality is no longer the core experience of contemporary Jewish American literature, it can still be found in the stories explored here.

As this thesis has shown, Jewish American fiction in the post-immigrant generation was very much the fiction of the outsider and, as has been argued by others before me, the experience of marginality and alienation was at its core. Now that Jews have become insiders their experience of marginality has not vanished, only its focus has changed as we now see the experience of marginality by an insider. Although this experience might at first be different, the characters in the fiction that I have explored, continue to negotiate their Jewish affiliation (voluntary or not) with their American identity.

The continuation of certain themes in Jewish American literature is not that surprising. Literature gradually develops itself and as we have seen, Judaism and the lamentation for the loss of Jewish culture has been part of Jewish American fiction for a long time. A renewed interest, or a renaissance of Jewish American fiction implies this. A literary revival, or a rebirth of certain themes, can only take place if those themes have been part of Jewish American literature before. As for the reasons why we are witnessing this revival Rapoport feels that “we are beginning to be confident enough to reclaim Jewish

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<sup>141</sup> Robert E. Park, “Human Migration and the Marginal Man” in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York U.P., 1996), 166.

<sup>142</sup> Furman, 16

culture.”<sup>143</sup> According to Kremer this generation is freer to explore religious experience. Others like Finkelkraut argue that the losses of the Holocaust have Jews trying to compensate by preserving their shared Jewish heritage.

In the first section, the theoretical, rather than the literary debate, is between multiculturalism and assimilation. It leaves the specificities of the Jewish American case behind and offers a broader context. It gives us an opportunity to see the Jewish American literary revival from a wider perspective. Offering context begins with referring to Marcus Lee Hansen as Jacobson argues that Hansen’s law is what the ethnic revival is widely presumed to have been. Meyer also refers to Hansen’s law of third generation return as a plausible explanation of the Jewish American literary revival. If the grandson indeed wishes to remember what the father wishes to forget, Gans argues that the ethnicity of the third generation is a symbolic one.

According to Gans, ethnicity takes on an expressive form rather than an instrumental one. He argues that what can be seen as a revival is actually a combination of acculturation and retention. In the stories that have been explored this has been true for both the assimilationist and post-assimilationist writers. Characters of both generations negotiate their American culture whilst willing to retain (or at least lamenting the loss of) their Jewish ethnic ties as we have seen in *Who Knows Kaddish* and *Envy; or, Yiddish in America*. Between the extremes of those that denounce their Jewishness and those that re-embrace their Jewish heritage there are many that struggle with what it means to be a Jew in a American society.

Lamenting the loss of the six million or Jewish heritage in general, the second section gave a good sense of how the characters in for instance *Who Knows Kaddish*, *Envy; or, Yiddish in America*, *The Surveyor*, *Ordinary Pain* and *Dreaming in Polish* have

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<sup>143</sup> Nessa Rapoport, “Summoned to the Feast” in *Schocken Book of Contemporary Jewish Fiction*, ed. Ted Solotaroff and N. Rapoport (New York: Schocken 1992), xxx.

different ways of coping. Although there are thirty years between some of these stories, they can all be interpreted as a jeremiad of multiculturalism. My analysis shows that the characters in *Who Knows Kaddish* and *Envy; or, Yiddish in America* both lament the loss of their Jewish heritage. However, whereas Edelshtein feels the pressure to become ‘Yankified’ the character in Kirshenbaum’s *Who Knows Kaddish* is on the other side of the spectrum. An American who mourns for a legacy that she has, in a sense, lost. It is an example of how the outsider/insider status of Jewish Americans has changed and how as a result of that, marginality can still be experienced from within.

*Ordinary Pain, Dreaming in Polish* and *How to Make It to the Promised Land* are stories that represent their writers struggle with the Holocaust as shown in the vignettes after each story in Zakrzewski’s anthology. Characters such as Lizzie, the teen that gets caught in a Nazi invasion reenactment, or Larry, the boy who turns his deceased grandfather into a death camp victim, are spokesmen for the marginality experienced by their writers. As has been argued, it is a marginality experienced in a different way. Not so much a negotiation between a Jewish and an American identity but rather a negation between the past and the present. Since the Holocaust is an inescapable past for the post-assimilated generation, I believe that Jewish American writers have no other choice but to approach this theme from their insider position. The characters that we have seen resonate an ambivalent attitude towards remembrance fiction. The debate about whether or not this generation is able to write about this tragedy is irrelevant at this point but having no firsthand experience leaves them, in my opinion, in a marginal place and a culture within a culture.

Ultimately, the experience of marginality lies in the desire to write about the Holocaust as it is for many Jewish Americans an intricate part of their heritage. It is the

drive to, in Ellen Umansky's words, "explain the unexplainable,"<sup>144</sup> trying to make sense of the Holocaust and "how such horrors would, or wouldn't, be assimilated into their lives."<sup>145</sup> Indeed, this is true for the stories anthologized in *Lost Tribe*. However, this assimilation of the Holocaust can be interpreted as a result of the evolvment of the theme rather than a revival. As has been argued in the second section, it is not just about the Holocaust, it is about remembering and not forgetting an essential part of Jewish heritage. Exploring the stories in *Lost Tribe*, I have come to the conclusion that marginality continues to be part of those stories and in that respect, there is a similarity between the fiction that I have explored that was written in the seventies and that written in more recent years. On the other hand I believe that the stories written in *Lost Tribe* reach a certain metaphysical level as they deal with the issue of remembering itself as well as dealing with the issue remembered.

As well as the Holocaust, Judaism has been an important theme of Jewish American literature. It has been argued that in order to counter assimilation, a large number of American Jews turned to a revival of religious observance. In the stories that have been explored, characters experience marginality when it comes to Judaism, often negotiating their secular and religious identity. The status of Jewish Americans as insiders has left these characters experiencing marginality from the inside. Lamenting the loss of their Jewish identity as Americans, the characters in these stories symbolize the Jewish American literary revival, as they reclaim and renegotiate their Jewishness.

In Philip Roth's *Defender of the Faith* and Tova Mirvis' *A Poland, a Lithuania, a Galicia* the characters of sergeant Marx and Baruch's mother are forced by another person to renegotiate their Jewishness. Although they have made their choice to assimilate the religious and the secular, their loyalty towards their Jewish peers is questioned. Opposing a

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<sup>144</sup> Paul Zakrzewski, *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 344.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

mediation of both worlds, Baruch and Grossbart have chosen to let Judaism be a bigger part of their lives than Marx or Baruch's mother. Whatever the intentions are of questioning the Jewishness of these characters, it gets Marx and Baruch's mother thinking. The similarity between these stories lies in the experience of marginality that manifests itself in characters that question themselves whether or not their secular identity has become predominant.

At the beginning of this thesis I stated that the marginal position of the characters, caught between a Jewish and American identity, had in essence not changed over the course of years. Although the turnaround of the insider/outsider status has effected the approach to the remembrance and Judaism theme in the stories explored in Howe's *Jewish-American Stories* and Zakrzewski's *Lost Tribe*, further research would be advisable. It is my opinion that the fundamental nature of negotiating an American and Jewish identity in stories like *Defender Of the Faith* and *Who Knows Kaddish* has not changed. Whether it is fiction from the seventies or the stories written in more recent years, Jewish American characters have a heritage that is inescapable and whether it is a voluntary affiliation or not, other Jews will remind them of their shared ethnicity. Whether the characters were secular or religious, orthodox or moderate, assimilated or not, American or Jew, the Jewish American has experienced marginality ever since he first arrived, as if he would be between two worlds.

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