

⌘ INTRODUCTION

“Jewishness,” Alterity, and the Ethics of Representation

While issues of racial, sexual, and economic difference have become central to debates on Latin American culture, both within the social sciences and the humanities, little has been written about representations of “Jewishness” in the Latin American literary imaginary.¹ Despite the fact that Jews inhabit every Latin American country—from a small community in Nicaragua to a significant population in Argentina—they are not generally considered a substantial presence in the literature of that region.² Indeed, when I was beginning my research, interviews with numerous Latin American literary scholars yielded such answers as “Are there any Jewish figures in Latin American texts?” or “Do you mean Jewish writers?” or “That’s not my area of specialization—why don’t you talk to someone in Jewish Studies?” And yet, Jewish characters and other representations of “Jewishness” can be found

in writers as canonical as Machado de Assis, José de Alencar, José Asunción Silva, Mário de Andrade, Jorge Luis Borges, Roberto Arlt, Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Ricardo Piglia, and Silviano Santiago.³ It is curious that despite the substantial incidence of Jewish figures in widely read texts, the phenomenon has gone largely unnoticed. This paradox of simultaneous invisibility and prevalence merits further investigation: what is it about the notion of “Jewishness” that lends itself to such diverse texts, written in dramatically different historical, intellectual, and political moments, and why has such a dynamic been overlooked?

In order to address this lacuna in the existing scholarship this book traces the symbolic presence of “Jews” and “Jewishness” in late-nineteenth- through late-twentieth-century aesthetic works from Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Colombia, and Nicaragua,⁴ and analyzes the uncanny but repetitive use of the “Jew” in order to articulate original aesthetic and political subjectivities. By reading “Jewishness” as a *wandering signifier*, a mobile sign that travels between literary texts and sociohistorical contexts, I simultaneously pursue two avenues of inquiry: literary representations of “Jewishness” and anxiety surrounding difference in modern Latin American culture.⁵

The issues I raise in this introductory chapter can be understood as falling into three concentric circles that mirror the levels on which each textual reading can occur. I devote a section to each level. In the first section, which corresponds to the innermost circle, I treat inventions of “Jewishness,” how this concept is constructed as a rhetorical device and to what ends. I argue that “Jewishness” functions as a wandering signifier that, while not wholly empty, can be infused with meaning based on the needs of the textual project in question. By engaging with work by European and North American intellectuals who highlight the prevalence of the signifier “Jew” in the Western imaginary, I aim to expose the constructed nature of “Jewishness.”

In the second section I broaden, and relocate, this question in two ways. First, I bring the problem of representing “Jewishness” to Latin America, to a new and radically unique set of cultural, ideological, racial, and political circumstances. Within the context of Latin America, not only do Jews possess distinct histories relative to their European and North American counterparts, but they also come to occupy new spaces within the cultural landscape on a symbolic level. Second, I suggest that anxiety, desire, paranoia, attraction, and repulsion toward “Jewishness” are always in tension with (or representative of) larger attitudes toward otherness, whether racial, sexual, religious, national, economic, or even metaphysical. This is particularly sig-

nificant in Latin American countries, in which ethnic others are more often of indigenous or African descent, and in which Jews tend to make up a smaller minority relative to other ethnic communities. This raises the question of representing "other others" through the figure of the "Jew."

In the third section I take into account the idea of representation in general. Engaging with the concepts of ethical and rhetorical language in the work of the Jewish-Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, I ask if it is possible to ethically represent the other within the literary text, or whether the act of representation necessarily involves the objectification and, therefore, a kind of figurative obliteration of the other. Questioning Levinas's critical stance with respect to art, I search for possible holes in thematizing discourse through which what Levinas calls "the face of the Other" can enter the literary text.

THE SIGNIFIER "JEW"

Though the idea of the symbolic life of the "Jew" has not been discussed within the context of Latin American letters, a number of scholars have analyzed representations of "Jewishness" in European (and, to a lesser extent, North American) culture and art in recent years. To what can this surge in research be attributed? Have the Inquisition and the Holocaust, both of which targeted Jews as their primary victims, stimulated such interest? When grappling with issues of violence, evil, and the collective and individual subjectivities that these events uphold, have intellectuals turned to the question of the "Jew" to explain such phenomena? Or is it simply that the "Jew" has marked—historically or symbolically—the limit of subjectivity in the European imaginary? Regardless of the motivation, these debates have raised the critical issue of how "Jewishness" works on a figurative level, exploring diverse representations of the "Jew," that other which has stood at the center of pre-modern and modern European cultural and political discourse.

Max Silverman, Zygmunt Bauman, Slavoj Žižek, Bryan Cheyette, and Laura Marcus are among those who have considered the fascinating existence of the "figurative Jew," that is, the idea of "Jewishness" that pervades Western culture and that, while related to "real" Jews, is not always grounded in the experience of Jews and Jewish communities historically.⁶ These thinkers—who range from philosophers and literary critics to social scientists—explore codifications of "Jewishness" that function on a metaphorical plane, underscoring the radical flexibility of "Jewishness" as a rhetorical concept;

as the French literary scholar Max Silverman contends, “Jew” is one of the most malleable signifiers” (1998, 197). Bryan Cheyette, in his work on Jewish figures in British literature and culture, also alludes to the malleability of the “Jew,” highlighting the “protean instability of ‘the Jew’ as a signifier” (1993, 8). Zygmunt Bauman, who in his sociological research has analyzed questions of modernity, postmodernity, ethics, and the Holocaust, describes “Jews” as “flexible and adaptable; an empty vehicle, ready to be filled with whatever despicable load ‘them’ were charged of carrying” (1991, 52). What is remarkable is that beyond serving as a scapegoat for the ills of society, “Jewishness” is imagined with remarkable liberty: Jews have been viewed as dominant by the lower classes and as parasites of society by social and political elites. As the Slovenian radical philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek argues, “The figure of the Jew condenses opposing features, features associated with lower and upper classes: Jews are supposed to be dirty and intellectual, voluptuous and impotent, and so on” (1989, 125). Moreover, they have been appropriated “by the most disparate of ideologies” (Cheyette and Marcus 1998, 5), as well as within distinct historical periods.⁷

It is this rhetorical malleability alluded to by Silverman, Bauman, Žižek, Cheyette, and Marcus that I would like to highlight in my study of Latin American texts. I propose the idea of the wandering signifier both as a play on the hackneyed image of the “wandering Jew” and as a way to think about the mobility of the signifier “Jew” itself. To begin with, the stereotypical configuration of the “wandering Jew” possesses its own contradiction. This mythical figure—which emerges in the medieval Christian imaginary and is explained as both a punishment for the allegedly “Jewish” responsibility for the crucifixion as well as a personification of diaspora—reappears in the modern period through the German concept *der ewige Jude*, which literally translates as “eternal Jew.”⁸ Cheyette and Marcus have commented on the paradoxical use of the eternal to refer to an itinerant figure: “The fact that ‘the Jew’ can be perceived to be both ‘wandering’—unfixed and contingent on historical circumstance—at the same time as being ‘eternal’—or unchangeable and immutable—points to an equivocation at the heart of the timeworn German phrase” (1998, 5). Second, the idea of the wandering signifier highlights the consistent use of the “Jew” as a rhetorical figure, one that always appears within the order of representation. The signifier “Jew” is unique in that while it behaves as any signifier does (empty form ready to be infused with content), it exhibits the particular ability to signify contradiction; thus, for example, the “Jew” can simultaneously be represented as both oppressor and

pariah, rich and poor, doctor and patient, asexual and hypersexual. The wandering signifier, like *der ewige Jude*, takes part in simultaneously fixed and mobile discursive practices. Unease surrounding "Jewishness" is intrinsically connected to the ambivalence with which it is read and to the paradoxes inherent in its form.⁹ There is a double movement at work: society creates an ambivalent figure out of its anxiety, and its anxiety is in turn fueled by the contradictory figure it has imagined.

These formulations of "Jewishness," furthermore, are not restricted to modernity; indeed, similar representations of "Jewishness" date back to antiquity. In pre-modern times (dating from antiquity to the Middle Ages), the "Jew" represented Christianity's other. The French art historian Tamar Garb elaborates on the contradictory position of the "Jew" within the Christian imaginary: "Placed at the source and origin of Christianity whilst representing an eternal witness to the possibility of its denial, the Jew has provided a crucial point of differentiation for Christian theologies, a referent in relation to which the specificity of Christian belief and practice has been demarcated and defined" (1995, 20). Bauman signals a similar paradox in pre-modern Christian views of Jews and Judaism: "[Jews] were venerable fathers of Christendom and its hateful, execrable detractors. Their rejection of Christian teachings could not be dismissed as a manifestation of pagan ignorance without serious harm to the truth of Christianity" (1991, 37). The precarious positioning of the "Jew" as both source and limit of Christian theology creates a double bind for the Christian subject, as "Jewishness" simultaneously represents the conditions of possibility and the impossibility of its existence.

Yet in his discussion of modern anti-Semitism, Bauman contends that the Jewish other did not present as great a threat to pre-modern Christian society as it did to modern secular European society. He argues that rather than embodying the wholly other, Jews represented yet another caste in a multiple-caste system: "In pre-modern Europe the peculiar flavour of Jewish *otherness* did not on the whole prevent their accommodation into the prevailing social order. The accommodation was possible because of the relatively low intensity of tension and conflict generated by the boundary-drawing and boundary-maintaining processes. . . . In a society divided into estates or castes, the Jews were just one estate or one caste among many" (1991, 35). While Bauman focuses on medieval Christian society, the case of Jews in Muslim Spain supports his view that coexistence is possible within a pre-modern social structure. In their work on medieval Spanish culture, the cultural historian Américo Castro and the literary critic María Rosa Menocal both describe an

environment of relative tolerance among Jews, Muslims, and Christians in the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule.¹⁰

After the commencement of the Reconquest, of course, the social mixing of the three religious groups began to pose a formidable threat, leading to the Inquisition, the obsession with *pureza de sangre* (purity of blood), and the eventual expulsion of the Jews in 1492. The particular situation of the *conversos* (Jewish converts), who provoked a great deal of suspicion even after their conversion to Christianity, highlights the fear and apprehension toward that which cannot easily be defined as other. The converso perhaps best exemplifies the dynamic that within modernity took the form of assimilation and secularization. In both cases the unrecognizable, hidden Jew was difficult to identify and hence define; thus, the seeds of modern ambivalence toward the Jew can be traced back to the fear of the converso.

But if pre-modern definitions of Judaism are expressed within a religious vocabulary, with the Inquisition and Expulsion serving as the most violent consequences of such discourse, the Enlightenment's secularizing tendencies redefined the idea of "Jewishness" throughout the West. As Christian theology ceased to be a dominant narrative, scientific discourse took over as modernity's central paradigm. Because the religious alterity of Jews no longer held the same weight as it had before this period, a new pseudoscientific category was imagined in order to maintain the attempt to articulate Jewish difference. With the invention of race, Jews were no longer cast as spiritually other, but rather as biologically distinct from the non-Jewish subject. This rationalization became especially crucial as Jews themselves began to secularize. As they assimilated to the dominant culture and shed visible signs of difference (beards, *peyot*, *kipot*, *tzitzit*), it became impossible to distinguish Jews from their non-Jewish counterparts.¹¹ In some ways, Jewish difference became even more threatening as it grew increasingly difficult to identify, as the French essayist Alain Finkielkraut suggests: "Anti-Semitism turned racist only on the fateful day, when, as a consequence of Emancipation, you could no longer pick Jews out of a crowd at first glance" (quoted in Nochlin and Garb 1995, 11).

Žižek, for his part, explains modern anti-Semitism by turning to the example of the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegal 1956), in which the aliens' resemblance to humans makes them "all the more uncannily strange." He likens this phenomenon to the treatment of Jews: "This problem is the same as anti-Semitism. . . . Jews are 'like us'; it is difficult to recognize them, to determine at the level of positive reality that surplus, that evasive feature, which

differentiates them from all other people" (1989, 89). Indeed, the French anti-Semite Edouard Drumont claimed to feel sympathy toward the traditional Jew, who exhibits his otherness, but remarked, "I do have it in for the Jew who is not obvious" (Bauman 1991, 58). In the Nazi propaganda film *Der ewige Jude* (Hippler 1940) images of religious Jews from a Polish ghetto are juxtaposed with images of assimilated, clean-shaven German Jews while the narrator explains, "Hair, beard, skull cap, and caftan make the Eastern Jew recognizable to all. If he appears without his trademarks, only the sharp-eyed can recognize his racial origins." The same voice details how the German Jew changes his outward appearance in order to deceive non-Jews: "It is an intrinsic trait of the Jew that he always tries to hide his origins when he is among non-Jews." Those Jews who are second and third generation, and who have intermarried, look even more like Germans; even the elite German Jews are foreign bodies, and therefore dangerous to the German people. While the "Jew" as a paradoxical figure may have already been in existence before the onset of modernity, Jewish secularization and assimilation hinder the ability to distinguish between self and other, adding to the anxiety and inflating the malleability of the "Jew."

Contemporary continental philosophical discourse on difference and displacement has also appropriated the "Jew" as its figure, further highlighting the flexibility of the signifier "Jew." Jacques Derrida, for example, posits Hellenism against Judaism as a way to articulate the competing logics of Western philosophy and its others. In "Violence and Metaphysics" Derrida illustrates the impact of Levinas's work on the "Greek" philosophy of Heidegger and Husserl, calling his influence "a dislocation of the Greek logos" (1978, 82). Even his attempt at the end of this essay to complicate the dichotomy between Judaism and Hellenism by asking, "Are we Greeks? Are we Jews? But who, we?" fails to fully dismantle the oppositional categories that structure and strengthen his critique of Levinas's ethical philosophy (*ibid.*, 153). Similarly, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1990) utilizes the concept of "the jews" to signify a broader notion of alterity, a category into which he would place himself (note the quotation marks and lower case "j," which he uses to emphasize the fact that he is not talking about "real" Jews).¹²

Yet where can the line be drawn—and I pose this question to my own work as well—between critically exploring appropriations of the figure of the "Jew" and reifying notions of "Jewishness," even "Jewishness" as signifier? Does the analysis of the use of the "Jew" as signifier allow the Jewish other to be present, or is it, too, a tool to discuss a secondary agenda (in my

case, Latin American representations of difference and the ethics of representation)? Or is the question posed by the Jewish cultural theorists Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin—where are “real” Jews here with a specific history?—an inevitable road to the essentialization of the notion of “Jewishness”?¹³ Going by the Boyarins’ research, which complicates, rather than reduces, notions of “Jewishness,” I would say that the answer cannot be a simple “no.”¹⁴ Their argument brings up the issue of the connection between symbolic “Jews” and real Jews, that is, Jews with specific local and translocal histories.

In order to address the Boyarins’ question it is important to consider several issues. First, it is crucial to focus on the chasm between imaginary “Jews” (whether characters in a novel, images in a painting, or Lyotard’s “jews”) and real Jews, that is, living and breathing people (or people who once lived and breathed) who either define themselves or are defined as Jews. But this classification itself is infinitely problematic, and one hits a dead end when attempting to clarify this category. Are Jews those who observe the laws of the Torah? Keep kosher? Live in Israel? Are born to a Jewish mother? A Jewish father?¹⁵ These questions are interminable and ultimately reductive. Like the art historian Linda Nochlin, I am not interested in “some ‘real,’ essential Jewishness lurking beneath a surface of lies and clichés, a reduced essence beyond the excessiveness of the stereotypical Jewish persona of art, literature, and propaganda, but rather that excessiveness itself; the almost hysterical repetitiveness of myths and exaggerations . . . which constitutes the repertory of represented Jewishness in modern times” (Nochlin and Garb 1995, 10). The insistence on excavating “authentic Jewishness” is risky and potentially more reductive than the stereotypes that would hide such “Jewishness.” In this sense, I am in agreement with Žižek, who warns against the temptation to replace prejudiced attitudes with “accurate” perceptions: “It is not enough to say that we must liberate ourselves of so-called ‘anti-Semitic prejudices’ and learn to see Jews as they really are—in this way we will certainly remain victims of these so-called prejudices. We must confront ourselves with how the ideological figure of the ‘Jew’ is invested with our unconscious desire, with how we have constructed this figure to escape a certain deadlock of our desire” (1989, 48).¹⁶ For this reason, throughout this volume I will remain focused on the excessive constructions of what ultimately is a fictional concept while keeping in mind the historically grounded unease that has inspired such inventions, as well as the violence that has resulted from these not-so-generous imaginings.¹⁷

Although I attempt to warn against investigations into "authentic Jewishness," I nonetheless believe that it is critical to consider the existence of real people who have lived as Jews—whether by religious observance, patrilineal descent, participation in Yiddish theater or Zionist socialism, or by having been victims of the Holocaust or other forms of anti-Semitic violence—without limiting the boundaries of this category. In other words, real people died in concentration camps because they were determined to be Jews. This is perhaps the most vivid example of the violent and unmistakably real consequences of symbolic constructions of "Jewishness." In addition to signaling the gap that exists between the real and imaginary "Jew," then, I would also acknowledge the complicated relationship that exists *between* these concepts. Garb underscores the tension between what she terms the textual "Jew" and the historical Jew: "The situating of the Jew in the text does not deny his or her experience in the world. Indeed, in so far as the text is of the world, in its material as well as its symbolic manifestations, to situate the Jew in the text is both a refusal of some preexisting known and uncontested Jewish identity, which we either accept or reject, and an assertion that it is in the world (and the symbolic systems through which we try to understand it, indeed articulate it at all) that identity is formed" (1995, 30). Garb's argument is useful in that it complicates the division between "text" and "world"; the textual "Jew" simultaneously transcends and affirms history. Writing or imagining "Jewishness" imposes a rupture with reality, while at the same time entering into an intertextual dialogue with each previous iteration of "Jewishness." In this sense the figurative "Jew" lives in both text and world, while "real" Jews are impacted by the fictions that define them (and that they themselves define).

Another issue to consider is the actual Jewish population in the place where a symbolic "Jew" has been constructed. The interpretation of a text written before many Jews lived in the country in which the text was written must differ from the reading of a text published during the height of a wave of Jewish immigration. On the one hand, "Jews" can be present in the imaginary of an individual or society that is wholly unfamiliar with "real" Jews, as the religious historian Norman Cohn has demonstrated: "Regardless of the real situation of Jews . . . [anti-Semitism] can be found among people who have never set eyes on a Jew and in countries where there have been no Jews for centuries" (quoted in Bauman 1991, 38–39). At the same time, anti-Semitism itself can be fueled by frustration resulting from the contradiction between the mythological "Jew" and the Jew next door as previously segregated groups

begin to interact.¹⁸ Bauman characterizes the inevitable confrontation of competing images of real and imaginary Jews as one consequence of modernity. “Their previously unnoted incompatibility had now become a problem and a challenge. Like everything else in the rapidly modernizing society, the problem had to be ‘rationalized.’ The contradiction had to be resolved; either by total rejection of inherited imagery, as hopelessly incongruent, or by rational argument providing new and acceptable grounds for the same incongruence” (ibid., 44). Thus, while encounters between these incompatible categories could potentially call into question prevailing stereotypes, allowing for the substitution of the figurative by the real, these contradictory realities more often than not inspire anxiety that leads to a desire for acute rationality. Such logic, characteristic of modernity, has produced ideological positions responsible for the violence of the Holocaust, according to Bauman.

A final issue has to do with the possibility of agency. Although it is not my objective to assess the possibility of Jewish agency, this is a problem that is central to the question of representing “Jewishness.” “Jewishness” can operate on a symbolic level with or without the possibility of Jewish agency, as is evident in several texts by Jewish writers who utilize metaphors of “Jewishness” to articulate a secondary preoccupation, such as the problem of exile. In these cases, the rhetorical function of “Jewishness” does not depend on the existence or lack of Jewish agency. Rather, “Jewishness” is “used” on a symbolic level by both Jews and non-Jews—and by philo-Semitic and anti-Semitic writers alike—albeit toward differing ends.¹⁹

The writings of Cheyette and Marcus, Bauman, Silverman, Žižek, Boyarin and Boyarin, Garb, and Nochlin prove helpful in theorizing the symbolic presence of “Jewishness” within the European imaginary, but do not sufficiently account for this phenomenon in Latin American literature and culture. Though some of the questions postulated by these writers can contribute to an analysis of Latin American discourse on “Jewishness,” particularly in light of the mobile nature of both real and symbolic “Jews,” it is necessary to approach the problem from a culturally and historically specific perspective.

LATIN AMERICA’S OTHERS

In a 1951 lecture entitled “El escritor argentino y la tradición” (The Argentine writer and tradition) the essayist, poet, and short-story writer Jorge Luis Borges reflects on the place of the Argentine writer, as well as on the possibil-

ity of innovation within the peripheral cultural spaces of the West. Refuting the notion that *literatura gauchesca* (gauchesque literature) stands as the only example of genuine Argentine culture, Borges points out that the use of local color does not determine the authenticity of the cultural product. On the contrary, he insists, the presence of consciously sought out native terms and references in *poesía gauchesca* exposes the inauthenticity of the genre. In order to support this theory, he includes an apocryphal reference to the English historian Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which, Borges says, argues that the Koran does not contain a single reference to camels, and that this absence confirms that it was written by an Arab.

Fue escrito por Mahoma, y Mahoma, como árabe no tenía por qué saber que los camellos eran especialmente árabes; eran para él parte de la realidad, no tenía por qué distinguirlos; en cambio, un falsario, un turista, un nacionalista árabe, lo primero que hubiera hecho es prodigar camellos, caravanas de camellos en cada página; pero Mahoma, como árabe, estaba tranquilo: sabía que podía ser árabe sin camellos. (Borges 1957, 132–33)



It was written by Mohammed, and Mohammed, as an Arab, had no way of knowing that camels were particularly Arab; they were for him a part of reality, he had no reason to draw attention to them; in contrast, a forger, a tourist, an Arab nationalist, the first thing he would have done would be to supply an abundance of camels, caravans of camels on every page; but Mohammed, as an Arab, remained calm: he knew that he could be Arab without camels.²⁰

Instead of mimicking the gaucho, Borges suggests, the Argentine writer should concentrate on the whole of Western culture, which, while it may appear identical to the work of a non-Argentine, is approached from a distinctly Argentine position. This inversion of logic, typical of Borges, is used to support his contention that the Argentine, as a marginal citizen of the West, is actually more capable of innovation because of his simultaneous status as insider and outsider.

In order to substantiate his argument further, Borges turns to the figure of the "Jew" in Western culture.

Recuerdo aquí un ensayo de Thorstein Veblen, sociólogo norteamericano, sobre la preeminencia de los judíos en la cultura occidental. Se pregunta si esta preeminencia permite conjeturar una superioridad innata de los judíos, y

contesta que no; dice que sobresalen en la cultura occidental, porque actúan dentro de esa cultura y al mismo tiempo no se sienten atados a ella por una devoción especial; “por eso”—dice—“a un judío siempre le será más fácil que a un occidental no judío innovar en la cultura occidental.” (Borges 1957, 135–36)



I recall here an essay by Thorstein Veblen, a North American sociologist, on the preeminence of Jews in Western culture. He wonders if this preeminence allows us to assume an innate superiority of Jews, and answers that it does not; he says that they stand out in Western culture because they act within that culture without feeling tied to it by a special devotion; “for that reason,” he says, “it will always be easier for a Jew than a non-Jew to innovate within Western culture.”

The Irish, Borges adds, have proven equally exceptional within English culture, and so, he suggests, can the Argentine—and the South American in general—handle European themes without superstitions but with a degree of irreverence that promises “consecuencias afortunadas” (fortunate consequences).

This essay—hardly the only reference to “Jews” in Borges’s work—highlights the usefulness of the “Jew” within broader projects of subject formation, here, as part of an attempt to articulate the position of the Latin American intellectual within Occidental culture. The dynamic set up by Borges in “El escritor argentino y la tradición” suggests one of many possible explanations for the proliferation of Jewish figures in Latin American letters: if the “Jew” serves as a placeholder for Latin America’s many controversial “others,” so too does it codify the position of the Latin American intellectual himself or herself (and of the Latin American subject in general) within the unequal cultural terrain of the West.

While a substantial research corpus exists on representations of “Jewishness” in North American and European literature and culture, few studies have analyzed the symbolic “Jew” within the context of Latin America, despite the fact that texts such as Borges’s are so widely read and analyzed. How can this gap be explained? Is it possible to theorize the problem of “Jewishness” from Latin America, taking into account the critical work realized by European and North American scholars without arbitrarily imposing its epistemological categories onto a radically distinct political, cultural, and racial context? Can an analysis of “Jewishness” in the Latin American imagi-

nary take historical difference into account while highlighting the relationship between currents of thought on both sides of the Atlantic?

Although there have been a number of attempts to study Jews in Latin America, most research in the newly emergent field of Latin American Jewish studies has remained focused on isolating and clarifying Latin American Jewish identity.²¹ To be sure, there are a small number of studies that detail the ways in which the idea of the "Jew" has been imagined. In her widely read treatise on Latin American foundational fictions, the literary and cultural critic Doris Sommer examines the way that inassimilable "Jewishness" stands for racial ambivalence in post-abolition Colombia in Jorge Isaacs's *María*, while the Argentine literature scholar Josefina Ludmer undertakes a broader analysis of "Jewish stories" in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Argentine literature in a chapter of her recent book, *The Corpus Delicti*. The Borges scholars Evelyn Fishburn, Edna Aizenberg, Saúl Sosnowski, and Jaime Alazraki have investigated the presence of Judaic and kabbalistic themes in the fiction of Argentina's preeminent writer, and the historian Jeffrey Lesser has discussed the construction of Brazilian-Jewish ethnic identity, both by Brazilian Jews and by their non-Jewish compatriots. Yet the majority of research in the area of Latin American Jewish studies has as its goal the delineation of a Latin American Jewish identity and tends to overlook the imagined or constructed nature of "Jewishness," even when allowing for the possibility of a hybrid or multivalent identity.

Sosnowski, for example, opens a recent essay on Jewish identity in Argentina with the commonly overheard question from Jewish schools in Argentina in the 1950s: "If there were a war between Argentina and Israel, for which side would you fight?" (2000: 263). Despite the fact that Sosnowski criticizes this question for ignoring the possibility that Jewish Argentines might have double loyalties—he rightly argues for a defense of the "hyphen" (1987, 297)—his retention of the military metaphor for identity is significant. It reveals not only a dependence on nationalistic definitions of identity even when one would like to subvert them, but also that the very attempt to define a Latin American Jewish identity is riddled with problems. Sosnowski continues his discussion by citing Alberto Gerchunoff's Jewish gaucho as an example of a hybrid identity that synthesizes Jewish and Argentine qualities, but he does so without problematizing the equally essentialist idea of hybridity, disregarding that any Jewish figure in literature is just that: a figurative "Jew." While Sosnowski's pioneering work has made a significant contribution

to the understanding of Jewish culture in Argentina, I move in a different direction by posing new questions about how “Jewishness” is imagined and represented in Latin American culture.

Given the lack of attention paid to symbolic “Jewishness” (in the minds of Jews and non-Jews alike), the relationship between real and imaginary “Jews” has yet to be explored in great detail within a Latin American context. It is my intention to highlight and explore this tension and to inquire into the usefulness or *functionality* of the rhetorical “Jew,” even in instances in which the author herself identifies as Jewish. Of course, in order to address the symbolic presence of “Jewishness” in Latin American literature, it is necessary to consider the sociological and historical presence of Jews in the region. Maintaining an awareness of the historical and contemporary Jewish presence in Latin America highlights both the connection and the chasm between “figurative” and “real.”

A number of the texts that I analyze come from Argentina and Brazil, which reflects the large number of Jews in these countries relative to the rest of Latin America. Yet I have also included texts from Mexico, Peru, and Colombia, countries that do not boast a significant Jewish population. Thus, to Cohn’s contention that anti-Semitism can exist among people who have had no contact with Jews, I would add that the symbolic “Jew” can exist in countries whose Jewish population is negligible. The Jewish influence on a society or its cultural imaginary, moreover, is not directly related to the size of the population, as demonstrated in the Latin American Jewish historian Judith Laikin Elkin’s argument that Jews disproportionately affect the cultural life of their countries.²²

While the majority of contemporary Latin American Jews are descendants of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century immigrants, the Jewish presence in Latin America dates back to the earliest explorers, following the expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal in 1492 and 1496, respectively. Though Jews were prohibited from traveling to the New World, many settled in the Caribbean and Brazil, particularly Portuguese *cristsãos novos* (New Christians). These New Christians were Jews that had either forcibly or voluntarily converted to Christianity during the Inquisition, and while they outwardly professed Catholic faith, some continued to follow religious customs clandestinely. Temporary exceptions to this phenomenon include the brief Dutch occupation of Northeastern Brazil, during which time some *cristsãos novos* began to openly practice Jewish religious traditions. When the Portuguese reconquered this region in 1654, these Jews either went back into hiding or

left Brazil for Curaçao, New Amsterdam, and Holland (Elkin 1998, 15–16). Thus, early Jewish life in the Americas could be characterized as invisible, largely relegated to private rather than public spaces. Yet while ritual Judaism was largely hidden, the figurative "Jew" already occupied a significant place in the early colonial imaginary, due to the legacy of Sefarad, as well as the presence of New Christians in the Americas.

While small numbers of descendants of New Christian settlers from the colonial period remain in some Latin American countries (like Brazil), these have survived principally as Catholics. Elkin addresses this controversial issue in her discussion of modern Jewish communities in Latin America: "Folklore has it that Marranos who survived the colonial period were the progenitors of contemporary Jewish communities. This is not in fact the case. Descendants of those who were not killed may well have survived physically, some even with memories of Jewish tradition, however distorted by the secrecy imposed upon them. But they survived as Catholics" (1998, 21). Given this lack of openly Jewish continuity, the steady presence of "Jewishness" in Latin American culture occurs more dramatically on a symbolic level. Therefore, nineteenth-century texts such as the Mexican writer Justo Sierra O'Reilly's *La hija del judío* or the Brazilian poets Castro Alves's "Hebraia" and Machado de Assis's "A cristã nova," as well as the Colombian Jorge Isaacs's *María*, predate the existence of established Jewish communities in these countries. Instead, these texts draw heavily on biblical or Orientalist images, rather than on modern representations of "Jews" seen in European culture at the time, because Jews were not yet a significant part of a modernizing Latin America.

Several hundred years passed before Latin America saw the first significant wave of Jewish immigration, whose descendants comprise much of Latin America's Jewish communities today. These immigrants were met with varying degrees of acceptance and hostility, depending on the political moment and the country in question. This is at least partially attributable to the fact that the ideological and political conditions that allowed for the entrance of Jews and other immigrants beginning in the late nineteenth century were fraught with tension and contradiction. While the dominance of positivist social theory justified projects to bring Europeans to Latin America in order to whiten the population, these same ideas constituted the Jewish other as degenerate, creating a double bind for Jewish immigrants.²³ These Jews entered into a political, philosophical, and racial dynamic already in existence before their arrival. Ideology and discourse surrounding "Jewishness" did not originate with the presence of these immigrant groups; rather, theories

of religious and racial alterity were constantly being proposed and negotiated throughout colonial and modern Latin American societies, interacting periodically with real and symbolic “Jews.”

In addition to the historical Jewish communities to which some texts refer, there are a number of individual “real” Jews and conversos that enter this study, either as authors or as fictionalized or “translated” versions of historical figures.²⁴ The Colombian novelist Jorge Isaacs’s *María* represents an interesting case of rewriting “Jewishness,” given Isaacs’s own complicated affiliation with his Jewish roots. The son of a Jewish convert to Christianity, Isaacs oscillated between seemingly incongruous identities, exhibiting political and religious ambivalence and entertaining loyalties as contradictory as conservatism, liberalism, Catholicism, and Freemasonry (Sommer 1991, 178–80).²⁵ These tensions are played out in his novel *María*, in which *María*, Efraín, and his father occupy distinct points on a continuum between “Jewish” and “Christian” identities. The Hungarian-Jewish psychiatrist Max Nordau also exhibits a problematic relationship with his own Jewish background. As author of the idea of the “muscle Jew,” a modern Jewish subject that both appropriates and resists images of the degenerate Jew in fin de siècle European thought, Nordau was simultaneously a “Zionist” and an “anti-Semite.” Nordau enters the work of the Nicaraguan *modernista* Rubén Darío, the Italian-Argentine positivist José Ingenieros, and the Colombian poet and novelist José Asunción Silva, who engage with Nordau’s ambivalent attitude toward his own “Jewishness,” translating him in much the same way that he reinvented himself. Luisa Futoransky, a Paris-based Argentine poet, novelist, and journalist, and Margo Glantz, a Mexican fiction writer and literary scholar, exemplify the phenomenon of Jewish authors who utilize metaphors of “Jewishness” in their writing in much the same way as do their non-Jewish counterparts: in order to articulate preoccupations with secondary issues. While Futoransky engages rhetoric surrounding “Jewishness” and disease in order to construct a writing subject in exile, Glantz utilizes the deformed Jewish body in order to talk about her semiautobiographical protagonist’s condition as an outsider. Finally, the leftist playwright Alfredo Dias Gomes’s *O Santo Inquirido*, in which the Inquisition allegorizes the violence of the dictatorship in 1960s Brazil, is based on the life of Branca Dias, a Portuguese New Christian who lived in Northeastern Brazil and was persecuted under the Inquisition. Dias Gomes “textually converts” the historical Branca into an “authentic” Christian in order to highlight her unjust suffering, constructing Branca’s character as an ideal “militant” subject.

Despite the presence of these "real" Jews in Latin American intellectual and aesthetic traditions, Latin America's "significant others," that is, those others who have regularly needed to be dealt with in order to attempt projects of nation building and consolidation, are not generally Jewish, but rather tend to be of indigenous and African descent.²⁶ Despite momentary focuses on (and reactions against) the Jewish population—for example, the anti-immigrant backlash in early-twentieth-century Argentine nationalist rhetoric, the anti-Semitism of the Vargas era in Brazil, and conflation of "Jews" with both rightist and leftist movements in many countries—Latin America has been primarily preoccupied with how to integrate the "non-white," subaltern communities of indigenous and African descent into the nation.²⁷ The "Jew" often comes to stand for these others in literature, either as an allegorical representation of a specific ethnic group or racial concern (as in Machado de Assis and Mario Vargas Llosa) or as a marker of a more generic form of alterity or marginality (as in Julián Martel, Rubén Darío, Ricardo Piglia, Margo Glantz, Rodolfo Enrique Fogwill, and Sergio Chejfec).

When exploring the treatment of Jewish difference in literature, one must also consider the way(s) in which modern Latin American societies have dealt with alterity, whether as part of official state rhetoric or within the broader cultural imaginary: methods that differ dramatically from rhetoric across the Atlantic, and which translate into original manipulations of the signifier "Jew" in order to address social realities unique to Latin America.²⁸ Latin American attempts to establish and consolidate national identities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ranged from politics of exclusion (Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's civilization versus barbarism) to inclusion (the most crystallized version of which can be found in Brazil's "myth of racial democracy").²⁹ Yet even the most explicitly racist attitudes have had to confront the social reality that the African, indigenous, and foreign "others" they fear are here to stay. This fatalism of difference plays a significant role in determining the symbolic significance of Jewish difference in Latin American letters. Put another way, the "Jew" enters the Latin American imaginary at distinct ideological and aesthetic moments precisely in order to address what is perceived as unavoidable heterogeneity.

In the infamously anti-Semitic Argentine classic *La bolsa* (1890), the "Jew" represents the destructive and undesirable, yet inevitable force of immigration, capitalism, and globalization, so that while the text might articulate a desire for national purity, this purity is—by definition—impossible. Fin-de-siècle "whitening" projects yielded to the necessary inclusion of darker,

less-desirable others who, when bred with citizens of European descent, contributed to an overall whiter population. While these eugenic theories of racial engineering undoubtedly had as their objective the erasure of the African and indigenous influence, it was through mixing, not extermination or expulsion, that these goals were considered attainable.³⁰ Thus, nineteenth-century Brazilian abolitionist rhetoric advocates racial mixing based on the idea that “miscegenation would gradually and inexorably ‘whiten’ and thereby ‘upgrade’ the Brazilian population” (Skidmore 1990, 9). Needless to say, it was not out of love that miscegenation was advocated in these cases, but rather out of the pseudoscientific belief that whiteness could dilute blackness, that the dominant racial subject could absorb the dark other, or at the very least out of the pragmatic view that the racial “other” was an unavoidable element of the national body.

The 1920s and 1930s ushered in an era of nationalism grounded in a new affirmation of racial syncretism; here, the idea of mixing did not have as its ultimate objective the whitening of the population, but rather the postulation of a uniquely mestizo (or mestiço) culture as that which made Latin American national identities distinct from European identities and, therefore, original. During this period, the historian Thomas Skidmore argues, elite Brazilians began to take pride in what they claimed to be a lack of racism, which they contrasted with the systematic racism of the United States and Germany, and theories of racial mixing abounded across the region (1990, 27). While the philosopher José Vasconcelos’s utopian *La raza cósmica* (*The Cosmic Race*), published in 1925, promotes a vision of a universal mestizo race in Mexico, the Brazilian sociologist and anthropologist Gilberto Freyre celebrates miscegenation as a positive national trait in his 1933 *Casa-grande e senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves*). The Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz postulates the idea of transculturation, a racially inflected theory of culture that is multi-directional and interactive, in his 1940 *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (*Cuban Counterpoint*). Yet these ideas circulated predominantly on the level of rhetoric, and as the Latin American literary and cultural critic Joshua Lund has argued, the ostensible eroding of pseudoscientific classifications of race often depended on these very categories for their existence: “If hybridity is rooted in a notion of blending, these same roots are nourished by a concept that always returns to segregation. . . . An impasse arises: hybridity as the incessant process of mixing traces its condition of possibility to a discourse—race—that legitimates and institutionalizes separation” (2006, 5).

Even more recent attempts to "define" Latin American culture rely heavily on ideas of mixing and incorporation: in his 1982 book *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* (Narrative transculturation in Latin America), the Uruguayan intellectual Angel Rama reworks Ortiz's theory of transculturation and brings it to the scene of the literary, while the Peruvian literary critic Antonio Cornejo Polar attempts a critical reevaluation of these terms, proposing the notion of heterogeneity in order to underscore, rather than erase, the violent and unequal power dynamics at work in these cultural and ethnic encounters and clashes.³¹ Finally, the Mexican-based Argentine sociologist Néstor García Canclini's controversial *Culturas híbridas* (Hybrid Cultures) reframes the idea of hybridity within the context of globalization and border culture, a move that has inspired criticism among Latin American and Latin Americanist intellectuals for its romanticization of the "border" as well as its naïve emphasis on the market as a site of potential empowerment.³²

Throughout several centuries of discourse and across national boundaries, theorizations of difference in Latin America have repeatedly turned to models of hybridity and syncretism, even when the conditions of possibility of these concepts remained linked to segregation and isolation. Despite the inevitable return to a politics of racial exclusion, then, a rhetoric of inclusion persists. Though differing by country and historical moment, these racial politics of integration and segregation can perhaps be explained by what Roberto González Echevarría describes as a Latin American obsession with the "Other Within." Beginning in the nineteenth century, he asserts, "Latin American narrative will deal obsessively with that Other Within who may be the source of all; that is, the violent origin of the difference that makes Latin America, distinct, and consequently original" (1998, 97).³³ This provocative notion begins to address the specifically Latin American modes of engaging alterity and helps one to understand the ways in which "Jewishness" is articulated. While it is possible to identify an impulse to expel the "stranger within" in pre-modern and modern Europe, the inclination to convert, assimilate, transculturate, or incorporate the racialized other into the nation prevails in Latin America.³⁴ If modern European notions of "Jewishness" (and, by extension, difference in general) often focus on a foreign invader that would corrupt the purity of the national corpus, Latin American representations of the "Jew" tend to recognize a primordial other that, symbolically or historically, forms a part of the individual or collective self, traceable to the traumatic and violent encounter of the Conquest. Thus, while in

general the “Jew” appears as an anxiety-provoking figure from the perspective of the dominant subject, the construction of and reaction to this figure possesses diverse manifestations on both sides of the Atlantic.

Do Latin American representations of “Jewishness” generally reveal a broader preoccupation with ethnic or national alterity? Although I consider this question, I ultimately argue that the “Jew” does not simply represent another “other” (the immigrant, the slave, etc.), but rather functions as a powerful node onto which a fundamental anxiety toward difference can be projected and performed. Moreover, ideas of Jewish difference tend to appear embedded within other discourses of alterity, so that ideas about “Jewishness” often appear juxtaposed with complex constructions of gender—the most evident example being the *hijas de judíos* (Christian daughters of Jewish fathers)—but also surfacing in works by Jewish women themselves (Futoransky and Glantz both create semiautographical protagonists whose marginality has just as much to do with their “Jewishness” as with their “femaleness”). Representations of “Jewishness” then, must always be read within a broader constellation of social, sexual, and aesthetic disquiet. But if this book is ultimately about representation, it is equally concerned with the limits of representation: in writing the Jewish other, what is excluded from the text? What voices, ideas, or histories are suppressed in the constitution of new subjectivities vis-à-vis aesthetic creation? Is it possible to conceive of some extratextual element that could resist this totalizing effect?

THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION

In analyzing distinct figurations of “Jewishness” in the Latin American imaginary I raise the question of whether an ethical consideration of difference is a possibility when otherness is used rhetorically, when the other—here, the Jewish other—serves as a metaphor for a completely separate preoccupation. If “Jewishness” is thematized, turned into a rhetorical object, and is used as a means to an end—that of the construction of a national or aesthetic subjectivity—will this subject preclude ethics? Or will the subject simply absorb the other into itself: “Suppress[ing] alterity, subordinating it to the totality . . . reducing the absolutely other to the other of the same” (Robbins 1999, xiii)?

I focus primarily on the *how* of representation, that is, the multiple ways in which “Jewishness” is used rhetorically to articulate broader questions of difference, whether having to do with race, ideological dissidence, exile, or transculturation. At the same time, I address the broader problem of the eth-

ics of representation, which, while not always treated explicitly in the close textual readings, has to do with the larger theoretical concerns that motivate this project. In order to address this issue, I turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophical writings (relatively under-studied until very recently) detail the ethical relationship between same and Other.³⁵ His contention that the ethical subject is constituted through the face-to-face encounter with the Other seems, at first glance, to exclude the possibility of an ethics of literature, if literature is understood as a mediated relation to or an objectification of the Other. The idea of literary representation as a practice that violates the Other could certainly be supported by the majority of the texts I discuss in this book, which absorb Jewish alterity into the universe of the same. Yet I would problematize Levinas's repudiation of the written word as ontologically violent by asking the following questions: can "the face of the Other" enter the literary text, or does every attempt to characterize otherness within writing necessarily destroy or violate difference? Is an ethical treatment of the Other possible within literary discourse? Or, as Levinas would argue, does literature automatically fall into the category of rhetorical, as opposed to ethical, language? How do the mutually interdependent categories of the *saying* and the *said* help one to articulate what I will call the "double bind" of ethical representation? In codifying "Jewishness," is the Other always already thematized, or is it possible to identify the presence of something else, a remainder to the process of thematization that resists representation?

Levinas's unique contribution to the Western philosophical tradition—unprecedented at the time of his writing—has to do primarily with his focus on the demand of the Other as central in the constitution of the subject.³⁶ Rather than privileging an autonomous self (whose engagement with the Other is secondary to being), Levinas underscores the response to the Other's demand as that which makes subjectivity possible. He theorizes an Other that is prior to the self, though not in a temporal sense; the encounter between self and Other does not occur within history, but is rather "preliminary . . . prior to consciousness" (Levinas 1998, 82). The self does not exist without the Other; the Other is already present as the subject comes into being.³⁷ This Other stands before the same and demands a response: "The first word of the face is the 'Thou shalt not kill.' It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a 'first person,' I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call" (Levinas 1982, 89). The

response of this self—its responsibility toward the Other—founds the ethical relationship and, through it, establishes its own status as subject: “Responsibility [is] the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity” (ibid., 95).

One of the primary concepts that Levinas uses to articulate the encounter with the Other is that of the face, which he links to the idea of exposure: “The disclosing of a face is nudity, non-form, abandon of self, ageing, dying, more naked than nudity. It is poverty, skin with wrinkles, which are a trace of itself” (1998, 88). By exposing itself as destitute, the face of the Other demands responsibility in the same through the (figurative) commandment “Thou shalt not kill.” The “listening eye” of the subject simultaneously sees this face and hears the order (ibid., 30, 37). As a result of this meeting of self and Other, the subject is constituted through its response to the Other’s demand. Therefore, the intersubjective relationship stands at the heart of the problem of ethics; the encounter between same and Other is, by definition, an ethical one.

What are the implications of this relationship for an analysis of literary representation? It is vital to the question of literature because, as Levinas contends, language plays a constitutive role in the encounter between self and Other. Moreover, it adds a complicated dimension to the discussion, because while Levinas characterizes the intersubjective relationship as “wholly sign, signifying itself,” language remains one of the most contentious issues in his work (1998, 15). The face of the Other disrupts the “imperialism of the same” through words, as in the reference to the Biblical injunction “Thou shalt not kill.”³⁸ Though Levinas undoubtedly grounds the ethical demand in language, however, it is not clear whether this demand might be realized beyond orality. Can one think about the ethical relationship between the same and Other within the context of the *written word*? Is it possible to “hear” the face of the Other in literary discourse, particularly given Levinas’s criticism of poetry as rhetoric, which he equates with violence and injustice?

In his 1974 *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* Levinas makes a critical distinction between ethical and rhetorical language, or the *saying* and the *said*. While the former pertains to a pre-original realm of language, the latter refers to a type of language that reduces the Other to a set of characteristics; rather than being experienced as a face, the Other is seen as merely eyes, nose, ears and mouth (Levinas 1982, 85).³⁹ In the second case, the saying is subordinated to the said: “The correlation of the saying and the said, that is, the subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology, is the

price that manifestation demands. In language qua said everything is conveyed before us, be it at the price of a betrayal" (Levinas 1998, 6). The notion of betrayal implies a relationship in opposition to ethics; it signifies a refusal of relationship. Of course, there is a contradiction here if the response inherent to responsibility cannot be expressed within a linguistic system, if—as Levinas argues—the thematization of the Other will always come at the expense of the face. While Levinas does not clarify this paradox, which appears in his later work, he remains unambiguous in his treatment of aesthetic representation.

His division between rhetorical language as that which violates the Other's vulnerability, that which kills the Other, and ethical language as that which facilitates the encounter with the Other, is radical. "Thou shall not kill" instantiates ethical language, while any mode of representation that thematizes the Other, turns the Other into an object, exemplifies rhetorical language. Art—above all, literature—commits this discursive crime by making the Other a figure, an image. In his 1948 "Reality and Its Shadow," one of his earlier essays, published several years following the Nazi genocide that killed most of his family, he deems art potentially evil, like "feasting during a plague."⁴⁰ While his anti-aesthetic stance softens slightly in his 1961 *Totality and Infinity*, he nevertheless still equates art with rhetoric, which approaches the Other through "artifice."⁴¹ In contrast, ethical language—God's "Thou shall not kill" or Abraham's "hineni" (here I am)—preserves the asymmetry between same and Other, and demands responsibility in the subject.

I would like to question this radical division between ethical and rhetorical language, and suggest that these categories might overlap and contaminate one another, following Jill Robbins's warning against dualistic readings of Levinas: "Can we be sure that [ethics and its opposite] do not communicate with each other, interpenetrate and contaminate each other, according to what Derrida calls a 'necessary general contamination' in order to be thought of as two distinct and irreducible poles of experience? That would be to say that there is also the possibility of thinking the ethicity of poetry, or of thinking the ethical and aesthetics together, of thinking in a literary text . . . the transcendence of the other in 'the proffered word,' the word of the other that teaches us" (1999, 90). Derrida, too, argues for a "misreading" of Levinas, suggesting the possibility of an ethical dimension of the written word: "The limit between violence and nonviolence is perhaps not *between* speech and writing but *within* each of them" (1978, 102, emphasis added). Indeed, does not Levinas himself rely on metaphor when he alludes to the ethical

expressions “Thou shall not kill,” “hineni,” “après vous”?⁴² Perhaps Levinas is speaking figuratively when he talks about language in the first place; the notion of the speaking face, after all, is rhetorical. And even if this is not what Levinas “means”—if one can presume to know what he “means”—isn’t it one’s duty as his reader, as his student, to misread him, to be ungrateful, to misunderstand?⁴³

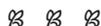
I would like to contribute to Derrida’s and Robbins’s interventions by suggesting that Levinas alludes to a relationship between ethical and rhetorical language when he acknowledges that “language permits us to utter, be it by betrayal, this *outside of being*, this *ex-ception* to being, as though being’s other were an event of being” (1998, 6). His awe with respect to language is unmistakable in quotes such as the following: “Language issued from the verbalness of a verb would then not only consist in making being understood, but also in making its essence vibrate. *Language is thus not reducible to a system of signs doubling up beings and relations; that conception would be incumbent on us if words were nouns. Language seems rather to be an excrescence of the verb. And qua verb it already bears sensible life—temporalization and being’s essence*” (1998, 35, emphasis added). Levinas attributes a redemptive potential to language through its “verbalness,” which, in contrast with the reductive powers of the noun, opens rather than closes, vibrates rather than reproduces. The subordination of the saying (verb) to the said (noun), however, does not constitute a “fall of the saying”: “Thematization, in which being’s essence is conveyed before us, and theory and thought, its contemporaries . . . are motivated by the pre-original vocation of the saying, by responsibility itself” (ibid., 6). Here, there is an inextricable link—a motivation—between saying and said, a paradoxical bond in which thematization is both inspired by the ethical demand as well as that which renders it impossible. Language must thus play a role in recognizing being’s Other, if only because it is all one has; the noun must accompany the verb.⁴⁴ Literature, as an art form that employs such linguistic performances and verbal play, adds a critical dimension to the problem of representing Otherness.

This necessary relationship between the saying and the said—the potential presence of ethical language within rhetorical discourse—leads one to the question of whether there might be an element of the literary text that resists the very signifying practices it employs. I am reminded of the English and American literary critic Elaine Scarry’s provocative work on the possibility of resisting representation (1994), and I, too, search for that which does

not enter the order of representation, as well as that which might resist it from within.⁴⁵

Of course, Scarry is not the only thinker to consider experiences that exceed the order of representation. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy posits the "surprise" as that which tests the limits of thinking: "The 'surprise' is not only an attribute . . . of the event, but the event itself. . . . What eventuates in the event is not only that which happens, but that which surprises" (1998, 91). He suggests that the surprise/event has everything to do with thinking, though thinking always runs the risk of turning the surprise/event into a category: "How is one to remain in the event? How can one hold oneself in it, if this can be said, without making an 'element' or a 'moment' out of it? Under what conditions can we keep thought in the surprise which thought has the task of thinking?" (ibid., 97).⁴⁶ Nancy sustains that the event remains excluded from the order of representation (ibid., 102), yet (paradoxically) is not "beyond the knowable and expressible" (ibid., 98–99). How is it possible to account for this aporia, this ostensible impasse between the surprise and thought, between the saying and the said, between the face of the Other and its thematization? Under what conditions might it be possible to bridge these conceptual divides? Can literary criticism, in signaling that which is absent from the text, enact a sort of presence?

It is crucial to consider these broader theoretical issues before embarking on a detailed analysis of literary texts in order to bear in mind the problem of the ethics of representation. The notion of the face of the Other described by Levinas, while not always mentioned directly hereafter, should be understood as that which has inspired this project. Just as the Other—understood as exteriority or as the Other within the same—interrupts, inspires, and transforms the subject, the ethical questions that I have elaborated should haunt the body of this study. By exploring the hysterical repetition of the signifier "Jew," in signaling the absence or presence of the Jewish other, I hope to excavate possible responses to Levinas's condemnation of literature from within the literary texts themselves.



In chapters 1–3 I approach the problem of representing Jewishness through the analysis of three critical scenes: that of the diagnosis, that of the transaction, and that of the conversion. Rather than simply investigating the figure of the "Jew," I propose the idea of a scene in order to take into account the

entire landscape within which “Jewishness” appears, so that it becomes possible to read not only figures but also context, discourse, images, desire—those potent elements that come into contact with one another to form a created object. Within these diverse scenes, I demonstrate the way in which the idea of “Jewishness” collides and interacts with other overdetermined metaphors—disease, medicine, money, prostitution, conversion—in order to produce ideological-aesthetic artifacts. Through the analysis of the three scenes, it becomes apparent that the diagnosis, the transaction (financial and sexual), and the conversion are more than mere objects of representation; they are also performative textual acts. That is, they appear not only as themes but also as literary devices through which meaning is constructed within the texts themselves. The diagnosis is thus not merely written about, but enacted as well; the financial or sexual transaction is not just narrated, but the negotiation also happens on the level of discourse; conversion not only appears as a motif, but the narrative itself realizes a textual conversion: it converts its object by assimilating it into the order of representation.

In chapter 1, I analyze texts in which the “Jew” appears as both contaminator and healer, highlighting the flexibility of the signifier “Jew.” Taking as my point of departure the Latin American literary critic Sylvia Molloy’s contention that the diagnosis is the means by which knowledge is organized, I sustain that the very *desire* to diagnose the other is symptomatic of anxiety surrounding the unknown, the uncharacterizable, the unfixable, all of which can be linked to, provoked by, and represented by “Jewishness.” I propose the idea of the diagnostic scene in order to take into account a broader context, in which characters, language, and ideology interact to produce or *perform* diagnoses. In the texts I read the “Jew” does not remain limited to one side of the dichotomy between sickness and medicine, but rather straddles and questions this very divide. For this reason, I consider various instances of “Jewishness” as a part of diagnostic scenes in which the rhetorical “Jew” appears in diverse roles, never fully free of the diagnostic gaze.

In the second chapter of this study I analyze a number of texts in which cultural hierarchies and national identities are contested through the motif of the transaction. Drawing on references to capitalism and prostitution, debates over control of the subject, city, and/or nation play out as the “Jew” occupies these anxiety-ridden sites of exchange. Like the “Jew” herself, capitalism and prostitution possess “real” referents in early-twentieth-century urban centers of Brazil and Argentina. While a number of historical and sociological studies (Fonseca, Glickman, Guy, Kushnir, Rago) have attempted

to analyze the presence of prostitution rings—some of them Jewish—in Buenos Aires, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro, the literary and cultural critic Julio Ramos has referred to the symbolic value that prostitution acquires: "In discourses about the city, the prostitute is a condensation . . . of the 'dangers' inherent in urban heterogeneity" (Ramos 2001, 136). Following Ramos, I explore the rhetorical linking of "Jewishness," money, and prostitution by focusing on discourses surrounding the "dangerous" spaces of the city and the nation. Once again, I insist on the notion of a critical scene: here, the scene of the transaction as a (nongeographical) space within which instances of "Jewishness" appear in order to negotiate the national and the foreign, gender and genre, "truth" and subjectivity.

In chapter 3, I focus on the motif of Jewish conversion as a model for racial assimilation, ideological engagement, and national consolidation. I propose the term *textual conversion* as a way to understand rhetorical acts in which difference is assimilated into the totalizing project of the text. By analyzing representations of Jewish conversion in Latin American literature, I argue that the notion of shifting identities is useful in thinking about the potential to erase difference, as well as the possibility of subverting this very erasure. On the one hand, conversion offers a vision of complete absorption of the other into the totality of the self. On the other hand, there is a particular anxiety provoked by the converso, which in some cases is stronger than toward the "Jew" himself. I argue that this is connected to the instability of this intermediate category; the question "Is the converso Jewish or not?" can ultimately never be satisfactorily answered.

While in chapters 1–3 I focus primarily on the *how* of the problem, that is, the ways in which "Jewishness" can be manipulated to talk about ideological, cultural, and aesthetic concerns, I return to the question of the ethics of representation in the final chapter. In chapter 4 I revisit the central theoretical question of this study: can the face of the Other be present within literary discourse, or is any attempt to represent the other by definition a violation of her alterity? What happens when "Jewishness" is used precisely to articulate the notion of the unsayable? What are the ethical and political implications of a poetics of unsaying? In order to address this preoccupation, I turn to Jorge Luis Borges's "Deutsches Requiem," Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial*, and Sergio Chejfec's *Los planetas*, three Argentine works in which the scene of "Jewishness" is employed as part of postmodern aesthetic projects that challenge and expose the limits of representation.