

American Jewish Writing in the Twenty-First Century: New Global Directions

Victoria Aarons
Trinity University

Contemporary American Jewish literature is experiencing something of a second literary renaissance.¹ The decades surrounding the turn of the new millennium have introduced a wide array of writers and genres, marked, as Morris Dickstein has recently characterized it, by “new ways of being Jewish and of writing about it” (5). The literary production by a generation of American Jewish writers “coming of literary age” in the twenty-first century challenges some of the longstanding assumptions about the expression of American Jewish identity and the defining characteristics and recognizable disposition of an American Jewish literary voice. As the editors of the recent anthology *The New Diaspora: The Changing*

¹The first, of course, is the literature that emerged in the decade following the Second World War. Described by Andrew Furman as a “golden age of Jewish American fiction,” the postwar period is generally thought of as the defining moment in American Jewish literature, a renaissance that saw the development and rise of an identifiable American Jewish voice and presence in American letters (see Furman 2). The writers of this period were enormously influential—and continue to be—on generations of American Jewish writers.

Landscape of American Jewish Fiction (2015) propose, rather than familiar and, in many ways, “familial” preoccupations and conceits, contemporary American Jewish literature is perhaps best characterized by a rich and fluid “diversity of Jewish expression in America,” distinguished by “its attitude and reach” (1–2). Twenty-first century American Jewish literature is in the process of redefining what it means to be Jewish at this particular moment in history and of locating the expansive possibilities for a range of Jewish literary expression.

As Josh Lambert has recently put it, “Everything changed in the field of American Jewish literature around the turn of the millennium” (622). And the changing disposition of this body of literature is only gathering momentum in the years following the turn of the century. The opening decades of the twenty-first century have produced a new wave of Jewish writers in America, writers who have come from elsewhere and staged and, to a significant extent, grafted the cultures, languages, and comportments of other countries onto a mutating American landscape. The very definition of the American Jewish writer and, by extension, American Jewish literature has changed. As the editors of *The New Diaspora* explain,

Significantly, since the turn of the twenty-first century, an increasing number of Jewish writers who reside in North America are not Americans by birth. The United States and Canada are the ports at which they have dropped anchor and established their careers, though they come from elsewhere and sometimes from other languages. . . . Emigrant writing in America is scarcely remarkable in itself, but the vast contribution at present by Jews surely can’t escape notice, and speaks to the intersection of cultures, histories, and identities that marks our time . . . a uniquely contemporary demographic . . . part of a larger global movement. (2–3)

As a result of this fusion of demographic factors and factions, the work of Jewish writers from outside of North America merges with the work of those Jewish writers born in America. Thus, our conception of the makeup of American Jewish literature has expanded

to include writers from a multiplicity of cultures and languages, Jews from elsewhere. “Jewish,” in this context, is best defined broadly for the purposes of talking about the body of literature that has emerged in recent years. What seems important here is less whether individual writers identify themselves as religious or secular Jews, or even draw upon a recognizably Jewish history or background. Rather, what strikes me as fruitful in these discussions is the openness that expands the performance of a Jewish cultural, religious, ethnic, or secular ethos as it both informs and is informed by the mutating shape of America. To pose this group of writers as Jewish writers in America does not create a closed condition; instead, it provides a useful means by which to engage readers and writers in a mutual project of “reading” history and thinking together about issues of identity and place. “Jewish” in this new context is not singularly defining. Furthermore, rather than a place of origin, “America” becomes the stage for performing a fluid interplay of histories and identities. Here the return to history—Jewish history both proximate and distant—becomes both a measure of and a ground for individual stories of families and generations. There is no longer the need to choose between the often-competing terms of *Jewish* and *American*, for the terms and shape of identity have widened.

American Jewish writers no longer write from the same position of postwar anxiety that preoccupied their literary predecessors, nor from the need to establish a Jewish voice in American letters, a legacy that would arguably shadow them for the four decades following the Second World War. Instead, as Dickstein puts it, the literature of a contemporary generation of American Jewish writers exposes “an embarrassment of choice, not the burden of necessity” (5). No longer burdened by the felt necessity to lay claim to a literary inheritance and preemptively to dodge the ambushes of the restricting duality of the hyphenated, if fluctuating, condition of “Jewish-American / American-Jewish,” a new generation engages the project of redefining the possibilities for Jewish expression. The current generation of American Jewish writers preoccupies itself far less with setting the terms of their geographical and literary capital or with announcing, as does Saul Bellow’s protagonist in the opening lines of *The Adventures*

of *Augie March* (1953), his arrival on the scene: "I am an American, Chicago born . . . and I will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted" (1). Rather, for the wave of contemporary Jewish writers in America, having a voice in the cultural conversation is assumed.

The need to insist, as does the generation of Bellow and Philip Roth, on being American, that is, *essentially* American, is no longer the arbitrating factor in the literature of contemporary American Jewish writers. The postwar generation was in large part characterized by its preoccupation with both America and being American, a situation in which, as Roth insists, "one's American connection overrode everything" (47). As Roth puts it, "An American Jew? A Jewish American? For my generation of native-born . . . no such self-limiting label could ever seem commensurate with our experience of growing up altogether consciously as Americans, with all that that means, for good and for ill" (47). The postwar generation, in a move away from their earlier immigrant literary forebears and invested in establishing their newly minted place and voice in American letters, self-consciously entertained issues of authority and the legitimizing ethos of writing as an American, not as a "Jewish-American" but rather from an "unhyphenated" position, as Roth unequivocally reiterates,

in no need of an adjective, suspicious of any adjective that would narrow the implications of the imposingly all-inclusive noun that was—if only because of the galvanizing magnum opus called the Second World War—our birthright . . . irrefutably American, fastened . . . to the American moment, under the spell of the country's past, partaking of its drama and destiny, and writing in the rich native tongue by which I am possessed. (47)

The literature of this influential generation was, understandably, self-referentially and at times defensively invested in assertions of their position as American "insiders," despite, or perhaps made explicit by, Cynthia Ozick's paradoxical description of her position as "a third-generation American Jew (though the first to have been

native-born) perfectly at home and yet perfectly insecure, perfectly acculturated and yet perfectly marginal" (152). Still closed in by the defining borders of "otherness," the writers of the postwar generation were engaged in the project of defining a Jewish voice in their own terms. In doing so, they began the process of expanding the possibilities for being Jewish and American that we appreciate today, of setting the terms for an appreciation of the signifier "Jewish" in its ranging resonance and multidirectional perspectives, an identity not rooted in any one thing but rather drawing upon a rich inheritance of histories and identities.

No longer shaped by the "innate provincialism" to which Roth refers, contemporary American Jewish writers engage with an array of cultures and geographies, moving fluidly among the languages and histories of other backgrounds as they intersect with American life and thought (47). This is not to say that the contemporary literature does not return to issues of belonging and identity but rather that the expression of these concerns looks different now. As the editors of *The New Diaspora* suggest,

[F]ormerly vital questions about identity have lost their traction, as an entire conceptual framework that once sustained them has become to seem transient and inessential. Identity remains an issue, but often it metamorphoses into something else, ironized, detached from the traditional anxieties about acceptance and exposure. . . . The "self," the grandly declared and anxiously defended "self" that once reigned as the dominant subject of earlier generations of Jewish writers in America, has all but disappeared. (3-4)

Contemporary American Jewish writers are no longer primarily preoccupied with issues of "self-validation" or of America as the place of their own making. Instead, "[i]n much of the best newer fiction, the arias of 'me, me, me' have faded into choruses of 'us, us, us,' the Jews as a collective body embedded in history, culture, and a collective memory," even as those histories and memories erupt from diverse geographical and cultural backdrops (Aarons *et al.* 5). The current colloquy of writers, in a dialectical exchange, find their way

both in America and among the histories of the past, both contenders for the immediacy and urgency, the extraordinary range of expression that constitutes American Jewish writing today.

In concert with those who originate in North America, the current generation of émigré writers reflects a diverse geographical scope. In order to give a sense of the range of Jewish writers of the “new diaspora,” I would point to the following, by no means an exhaustive list: Russian / Soviet writers David Bezmozgis, Nadia Kalman, Maxim Shrayer, Gary Shteyngart, and Lara Vapnyar; the Hungarian-Canadian writer Joseph Kertes; South African writers Tony Eprile, Shira Nayman, and Kenneth Bonert; the Egyptian-born André Aciman; French writer Anouk Markovits; the Mexican-American writer Ilan Stavans; and Iranian writers Dalia Sofer, Gina Nahai, Farideh Goldin, and Roya Hakakian. In what follows, I would like to consider two Jewish writers in North America whose work draws upon the complexities and intersections of cultures, communities, and histories: the Guatemalan Jewish novelist Eduardo Halfon, who lives in the United States and writes in his native Spanish; and Ayelet Tsabari, a Canadian writer of Yemeni descent who grew up a Mizrahi Jew in Israel. These two writers reflect the preoccupations, the narrative tropes, and tensions that characterize twenty-first century American Jewish writing, though each comes at these recurring figures and patterns from different points of departure. Each writes against the backdrop of Jewish history: Halfon, whose semi-autobiographical fiction returns to the events of the Holocaust by way of his grandfather’s experiences; and Tsabari, whose fiction moves back and forth between Canada and Israel, the one always poised comparatively to the other. We see each perspective more clearly because of the other. Both Halfon and Tsabari are travelers, diasporic writers juxtaposing and overlaying the countries from which they originated with the ones they now occupy. As Tsabari explains, she has inherited the impermanence of place: “I am . . . an immigrant, and a granddaughter of immigrants. I call two countries home and seem to always be pining for somewhere” (“Interview with 2015”). Both Tsabari and Halfon live and write between and among worlds, Tsabari navigating Israel and Canada, Halfon, the United States and Guatemala. Their

fiction reveals the diasporic displacement of their own backgrounds. As Halfon puts it,

I feel as if I've been traveling my entire life. We left Guatemala when I was ten, and I've been shuffling along ever since. But I've never felt at home anywhere. Never felt rooted to any city or country. I suppose I was educated that way, brought up in the permanent diaspora that was my childhood. . . . I find myself yearning for a piece of land somewhere, or at least for the nostalgia of land somewhere. But I've never found it. Never felt it. Perhaps that's why I travel so much, both in life and in fiction. Since I don't have a city of my own, I write as if the entire world was my back yard. ("We Become the Mask")

The fiction of these two contemporary North American Jewish writers becomes a performance of the complexities in the inheritance of diasporic reinvention. This is a generation of travelers, traveling among contrastive geographies and languages and the spaces of the imagination, "the entire world [their] back yard."

Eduardo Halfon, named by the Hay Festival of Bogota, Colombia, as one of the best young Latin American writers of 2007, is the author of eleven works of fiction, only two available to date in English. (Several short stories have been translated into English and a third book, *Mourning*, is forthcoming in 2018.) Although Halfon, along with his family, left Guatemala for the United States, he has continued to spend time in both places. Halfon's fiction reflects the exchanges and the hybridity of languages, cultures, backgrounds, and heritages from which he draws: Guatemalan, American, Lebanese, Polish, Jewish. Halfon is part of two directions in contemporary American Jewish literature. His fiction is a reflection of the "new diaspora," as I have discussed previously, the body of literature written by Jewish émigrés in North America. His writing is also part of a newly emerging direction in Holocaust writing, the literature of the third-generation, that is, literature written by and about the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. These are writers who constitute a generation that will witness the end of direct survivor testimony.

Thus, they turn to the events of the Shoah in an attempt to reanimate that which was so irretrievably lost and to navigate the continuing legacy of the Holocaust for generations increasingly removed from the Holocaust.

There are now, as Geoffrey Hartman has proposed, “three generations . . . preoccupied with Holocaust memory. They are the eyewitnesses; their children, the second generation, who have subdued some of their ambivalence and are eager to know their parents better; and the third generation, grand-children who treasure the personal stories of relatives now slipping away” (1). Third-generation Holocaust representation transcends geographical and experiential borders. The twenty-first century has seen an outpouring of writing by the third generation, by those writers who are the direct descendants of Holocaust survivors and also those of a generation twice removed from the survivors, those coming-of-age at a particular time in history. This period will be marked by a diminishing of the living memories of survivors as well as by the extension of those narratives of memory for a generation that did not emerge in the direct aftermath of the war. Third-generation Holocaust writers find themselves in an uncertain position. They did not grow up with survivors in the post war era, as did their parents, the second generation. However, they did grow up with a plethora of available information relating to the Shoah: archives, documents, memorials, school curricula, popular culture, films, and televised accounts—a mountain of material. The “big picture” has been laid before this generation. What is missing are the more idiosyncratic accounts of family histories, the individualized shape of trauma and the way in which the traumatic memory of the past extends intergenerationally. As third-generation memoirist Daniel Mendelsohn, author of *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (2006), the narrative account of those members of his extended family who were killed in the Holocaust, in what has become a refrain for his generation of writers, explains,

I am a fervent believer in the necessity of carrying over the testimony to future generations. . . . How do you become responsible for other people’s narratives? . . . [M]y generation—the

“generation of the grandchildren” . . . the grandchildren of those who were adults during the Holocaust—is the last on earth who will have had the opportunity to know people who were survivors. . . . [W]e are the last ones who’ll have been living receptacles for the stories of those who were in the event itself; and I’m acutely conscious, obviously, of what it means to be someone who becomes the “transmitter” of another’s stories, another’s past. (qtd. in Birnbaum)

With the end of direct survivor testimony, memory becomes narrative, and narrative takes the place of direct testimony.

As the late Israeli psychologist Daniel Bar-On has suggested, “[T]he more temporally distanced from the events of the Holocaust, the more tenuous the stories become—stories of stories told, second and third-hand versions of names, places, and the unfolding of events” (10). In such instances, there are, Bar-On argues, “historical” truths—“what happened”—but there are also “narrative truths”—“how someone tells what happened” (10). It is through such “inter-generational transmission” that “one generation’s story can influence and shape the stories of the next generations” (335–36). Thus, the writing of the third generation often takes the form of metafictional accounts, a layering of stories, individual histories, and memories. These metafictional accounts are, characteristically, self-referential narratives, stories shaped and emboldened by a sense of a knowable, if imagined, past. These narrative opportunities for the uncovering and extension of memory extend the opportunity to recount personal and collective histories. Thus, third-generation Holocaust writing consists of return narratives, stories that travel back to the past both physically and imaginatively as a means of mediating historical absence and creating the conditions for the contiguity of past and present, absence and presence. Ever since the onset of the new millennium, as Alan Berger and Gloria Cronin point out, the entwined genres of American Jewish and Holocaust literature have been “experiencing a renewal” (3). While they each, as Berger and Cronin suggest, have, in significant ways, come to “form their own distinctive subgenre,” as we move farther into the twenty-first century,

these two genres increasingly overlap (3). As Emily Budick Miller has suggested, “By and large, American Holocaust fiction is American fiction,” and thus it “incorporates the Holocaust experience into the legacy of Jewish American identity” (360). Furthermore, as I have suggested here, both American Jewish and Holocaust literatures have seen a literary revival in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

The grandson of a survivor of Auschwitz, Halfon draws upon his grandfather’s past and his own “place” in that history. For, as Halfon’s eponymous narrator in the short story “Monastery,” says, “In the end, our history is our only patrimony” (145). Here memory becomes a process of reconstruction. Halfon’s recurring narrator will return, in story after story, to his grandfather’s experience in Auschwitz and to his pre-Holocaust life in the Poland of his birth, but also the land of his betrayal. Amid moments of dislocation and disorientation, Halfon’s narrator will attempt to bridge the gap between absence and presence, between the lacunae in knowing and being able to imagine his grandfather’s life. Thus Halfon creates a labyrinthine narrative through the past but also through grief. In doing so, he links present and past, mediating and measuring his own life in the present against that of his grandfather’s history. Such arbitration becomes a measure of locating his own identity in the inheritance of the past. Halfon, through the semi-autobiographical voice of his recurring narrator, returns again and again throughout his writing to the story of his grandfather’s experience of captivity and fortuitous survival. As Halfon explains in an interview with Joshua Barnes, “I lugged this story around for a long time, afraid to tell it, unwilling to tell it, not knowing how to tell it. Still, it would come out everywhere because it was an intimate part of my family and my life” (“No Borders”). The telling and retelling of his grandfather’s story—a story revealed to him only at the end of his grandfather’s life—becomes a way of reckoning the events of those traumatic moments and also an effort to reclaim and reanimate his grandfather’s pre-Holocaust life.

In “Monastery” and its companion piece, “The Polish Boxer,” as well as several other interrelated stories in his oeuvre, Halfon imaginatively returns to the events of the Shoah and to the story of trauma

and chance survival told to him by his grandfather. Having been held prisoner in various concentration camps, including Sachsenhausen, Neuengamme, and Buna Werke, it is in Auschwitz's Cellblock Eleven, in 1942, that Halfon's grandfather is imprisoned with the man who will inexplicably save his life. Held captive in the darkness with those reciting the Kaddish in anticipation of their impending deaths, Halfon's grandfather comes upon a landsman, a Jewish boxer kept provisionally alive because the Germans "liked to watch him box" ("Polish Boxer" 90). It is this fellow prisoner, the Jewish, Polish-speaking boxer from Łódź, who schools Halfon's grandfather in what he should and should not say during his impending interrogation the next day. And thus his life is fortuitously spared as enigmatically as the chance encounter with the man he would never see again and whose name he never knew but whose "words saved [his] life" ("Polish Boxer" 90). The story, finally told by grandfather to grandson "after almost sixty years of silence," remains regrettably incomplete, for Halfon is never to learn the boxer's saving words, for his grandfather "refused to speak Polish," the language of "those who, in November of '39, he always said, had betrayed him" ("Polish Boxer" 80, 90). Left only to "imagine the face of the Polish boxer, imagine his fists, imagine the possible white pockmark the bullet had made after going through his neck, imagine his words in Polish that managed to save my grandfather's life," Halfon's self-appointed transgenerational courier of memory must midrashically fill in the gaps of the fragmented narrative of the Holocaust ("Polish Boxer" 91). He must reconfigure and interpretively link the events of his grandfather's history despite his own ambivalence about his motives and his project. As the narrator in one of Halfon's interlocking stories, "Oh Ghetto My Love," self-reflectively, self-critically, and uneasily asks himself, "Why had I come to Poland? Why this insistence on tracing my grandfather's footsteps? What did I think I was going to learn . . . ? What was I really hoping to accomplish? Was I trying to get close to my grandfather, to a tradition? To rummage through the last remaining bones and fossils of a truncated family history?" Despite such uncertainties, the incomplete ending of his grandfather's story sets Halfon on a journey to Łódź in an attempt to locate the "coordinates"

of his grandfather's life before the betrayal of his "countrymen . . . his native land, and his native tongue" and to Auschwitz, despite his intangible fears: "Fear of Auschwitz? Fear of the word Auschwitz? . . . [F]ear of something" ("Monastery" 144, 143). Halfon measures the fear of knowing against the fear of not knowing, of being mortgaged to the abyss of traumatic history.

Thus, driven by the felt obligation to bear witness to the past, to give meaning to the events of his grandfather's experience, and to identify his own place in that history, Halfon's narrator, characteristic of the return narratives of the third generation,² will revisit the geography of his grandfather's past in an attempt to retrieve and enliven those memories. Armed only with the barest artifacts of memory, the "wrinkled sheet of yellow paper" bearing his grandfather's prewar address in Poland, and the "old black-and-white photo" of his grandfather taken "at the end of '45, shortly after being freed from Sachsenhausen concentration camp" ("Monastery" 145), Halfon's narrator, as he puts it, "might, just might, be able to . . . find what [he] was looking for" ("Oh Ghetto My Love"). Despite the incompleteness of the narrative of the past, the story, provisionally reclaimed, reveals a calculation of all that was irretrievably lost. Such narratives take on history; they arbitrate, reckon with, and pass judgment on that history, all the while holding on to what is valuable and cautionary in its memory. Giving voice to such loss, as if, as Halfon's autobiographical narrator says, "you could speak the unspeakable," provides a preamble

²Other third-generation return narratives include Jonathan Safran Foer (*Everything Is Illuminated*), Daniel Mendelsohn (*The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*), Andrea Simon (*Bashert: A Granddaughter's Holocaust Quest*), and Sarah Wildman (*Paper Love: Searching for the Girl My Grandfather Left Behind*). For a fuller analysis of third-generation return narratives, see Victoria Aarons' and Alan L. Berger's *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory*, especially chapters 1, "On the Periphery: The 'Tangled Roots' of Holocaust Remembrance for the Third Generation," and 3, "Third-Generation Memoirs: Metonymy and Representation in Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost*." See also Alan L. Berger's "Life After Death: A Third-Generation Journey in Jérémie Dres's *We Won't See Auschwitz*."

to the recovery of historical memory (“Polish Boxer” 84). As Halfon’s grandfather learns, there is a saving power in words, one that transcends and connects generations. Thus the narrator in the short story “Oh Ghetto My Love” returns, once again, to his grandfather’s birthplace of Łódź in order to reconstruct the past, to recall his grandfather to life, if not to mitigate loss, then to transmit the story, because, as the narrator makes clear at the story’s close, what matters is “that we write it. Narrate it. Leave testimony. Put our whole lives into words . . . until we’re sure we can leave our story in the world, here in the world, buried deep in the world, before we turn to ash,” once again an expression of the saving power of words that extends and links one generation’s story to the next. Thus Halfon’s stories express in a kind of distillation of ancient forms of lamentation and midrash the necessity, the urgency, the obligation, and the immediacy of transmitting the events of the Holocaust, all the while acknowledging the limits of such representation, the limits of turning absence into presence.

In the collection of stories *The Best Place on Earth* (2013), Ayelet Tsabari sets up the conditions for the clash of cultures, histories, and generations as they bend, mutate, and reinvent themselves elsewhere in different temporalities and spaces. The stories in this debut collection are informed by and draw upon Tsabari’s Yemenite ancestry and her Mizrahi upbringing in Israel set against the contrastive strains of a life reinvented in Canada. In an interview with Andrea Bennett, Tsabari situates her writing in the context of the intersections and juxtapositions of histories and geographies when she explains,

Cultural clashes abound in my life. . . . Growing up in Israel, I was fascinated by my grandmother who, despite living in Israel for decades, remained very traditionally Yemeni. Now I have my own family, with a man who’s Canadian and a daughter who was born in the heart of Toronto. I can’t even fathom how different her upbringing is going to be and how hard it would be to reconcile it with my own. (“Interview with Ayelet Tsabari”)

At the heart of these stories are defining and arbitrating notions of place. As Tsabari acknowledges,

I've always been interested in place and belonging, maybe because I've always felt like an outsider, or because I've been fascinated by the idea of reinventing oneself and seeking myself in other places. For me, these issues of place and identity also tie in with language. I am writing from a strange place about a faraway homeland, in an adopted language that is a stranger to that place I write about. . . . There's displacement in every step of the process. ("Interview with Ayelet Tsabari")

The Best Place on Earth, in moving back and forth between Canada and Israel, stages these kinds of reinventions against the changing shape of place. These are stories of contrasts, contrastive voices and perspectives, set against the central contrast of the land. "Place" becomes almost a character in Tsabari's fiction, a "mirror of emotion" ("Interview with Ayelet Tsabari").

In the title story, two Israeli sisters embody both the material and the imagined extension of the lands they occupy. Tamar, who "had inherited [their] father's temper, his intensity and his charm," abandons Israel for a small island off the coast of Vancouver, British Columbia, where she reverses the course and temper of her life (233). No longer living, as her sister Naomi continues to do, in Jerusalem, a city "in a constant state of urgency, verging on emergency . . . a city that would forever be contested, forever divided, never at peace," Tamar, by nature the immoderate, impassioned sister, remakes herself in Canada, abandoning, as far as her sister Naomi can see, everything Jewish (242). Visiting her sister's home on the island, "Naomi noticed that there was nothing Israeli or Jewish about it, no mezuzahs on the door frames, no hamsas like the ones their mother had hung all over their home for good luck, no dangling strings with blue beads to repel the evil eye, no calendar with Jewish holidays marked upon it" (234). In a kind of doubling that juxtaposes lives and continents, the one sister, the risk-taker, wild and unconstrained, and the other sister, staid and timid, will reverse places. The sisters by nature

and temperament are “doubled,” that is, they are set in contrastive opposition, a measure of the geographical and cultural differences in the places they live. The tenor of the landscape to which, in some essential, defining way, each sister is drawn exposes the doubling of identities and the possibility of change. The two sisters come to reflect the two lands they inhabit by choice: the one rooted in history, the other remade, willfully unencumbered by the past.

Tsabari’s stories recreate the sensations and textures of both the Israeli and the Canadian landscape, as if offering a choice. There would seem to be no middle ground here. The starkly contrastive portraits of the land—the one calm, restrained, “peaceful, serene,” the other “beautiful . . . not in the way BC was, but in a hard, raw and broken way . . . alive, a kind of beast pulsating, breathing, vibrating” (241, 243)—make emphatic the dualities of diasporic reinvention, of constantly being “torn between two places” (247). Tsabari stages the generational, familial, and geographical tensions as tropes of exchange. The one sister’s reinvention becomes the motive for the other sister’s re-entrenchment, an invitation for re-allegiance to the land that in some fundamental way is intrinsic to her. Each sister defines herself in contrast to the other, that is, by what she is not, a position that defines in many ways Tsabari’s portrait of Israel itself, a land divided. Just as the two competing lands—Canada and Israel—juxtaposed to each other come to embody the divided self, so too Israel is itself a land of contrasts, divided, on edge, quarrelsome with itself. And, as Tsabari proposes, the defining distinction between “us” and “them” is not always clear. Inasmuch as the contrast of geographies reflects the push and pull of diasporic transference, Tsabari exposes the trade-offs, the ways in which an embrace of the new evokes the loss of the other. Tsabari in this way also draws upon tropes of omission, suggesting that, in embracing one place, we elide fundamental and character-forming aspects of the other one. Tamar, on a return trip to Israel, recognizes that “something had shifted”:

She had missed Jerusalem so much when she was in Canada, but having finally made it there, she couldn’t wait to go back to BC. For the first time, she saw the city through a foreigner’s eyes; the

chaos, the traffic, the aggression, what Israelis loved calling “passion.” It was as if the city was stuffing itself into your throat. She no longer belonged. (238–39)

She no longer “belongs” in Israel because she identifies elsewhere, an exchange of existences and of allegiances that allows her to assume the perspective of *the other*, viewing the internalized structure of her previous life from the outside.

In part, these anxieties are generational. Tamar, having by choice defected from land and heritage, “[d]idn’t want to end up like their mother, who had never let go of Tunisia, had never stopped talking about their family home on the little island of Djerba, pining for it,” so much so that “[e]ven after thirty years in Israel, their mother remained removed from Israeli culture” (247). In some essential way, of course, as her sister wants to tell her, Tamar “was, and always would be, an Israeli” despite the fact that, like her mother, she now “feels like a stranger, a tourist” there (230, 228). There is, for Tamar, a seductiveness to the Canadian landscape as there is in the promise of reinvention. Rather than simply “one more stop” in the diasporic wandering, Tamar finds herself in British Columbia, “slowing down, unwinding, as if she’d been holding her breath for twenty-four years and could finally let it out” (234). What Tsabari seems to be advocating in these stories is that one can maintain the place of insider and outsider simultaneously and with some measure of equanimity. Naomi, adrift in British Columbia, listening to news from home—reports of an attack, “a pigua in Jerusalem”—shifts from the subjective interiority of her own familiar, “inside” position, momentarily picturing her home and the land that encompasses from juxtaposed perspective: “For a moment, she could see how her country might look to a Canadian. How Jerusalem could be perceived as the worst place to live, raise a family, a dangerous, troubled city, torn between faiths, a hotbed for fanatics and fundamentalists” (241–42). Here the texture—the “feel”—of the country reflects the divisiveness inherent in the geopolitical history of the land, as the corresponding response to such schisms: Naomi “loved and hated Jerusalem” (242). These internal textual dialogues—both within and among characters—as we

find here and elsewhere, expose the ambivalences and contradictions of a diasporic consciousness mapped on the body of literature it produces. “Place” itself becomes the central mode of transference.

While earlier generations of Jewish writers in North America might be thought to have mapped “America” onto their emerging identities, this new diasporic generation seems to transfer identity onto newly found places. These kinds of narrative transferences result in an emerging body of literature by younger Jewish writers whose representation of identity brims with the complexities of juxtaposed, contrastive versions of both recovered history, as in the case of Halfon, and reinvented place, as Tsabari’s fiction suggests. Both Halfon and Tsabari, as I have suggested here, are part of a larger movement that includes Jewish writers from North America and those who have arrived from elsewhere. This is a literature that can, as the title of one of Tsabari’s stories would have it, synchronously “Say It Again, Say Something Else,” a gesture that returns to the past but, in doing so, transforms it, a matter of *being there* again and being somewhere—someone—else. This is a movement that expands and widens the possibilities for Jewish identity and expression as it returns to the past, writers who are all travelers, moving among the geographies and cartographies of lived and imagined worlds.

WORKS CITED

- Aarons, Victoria, and Alan L. Berger. *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory*. Northwestern UP, 2017.
- Aarons, Victoria, et al., editors. *The New Diaspora: The Changing Landscape of American Jewish Fiction*. Wayne State UP, 2015.
- Bar-On, Daniel. *Fear and Hope: Three Generations of the Holocaust*. Harvard UP, 1995.
- Bellow, Saul. *The Adventures of Augie March*. Viking P, 1953.
- Berger, Alan L. “Life After Death: A Third-Generation Journey in Jérémie Dres’s *We Won’t See Auschwitz*.” *Third-Generation Holocaust Narratives: Memory in Memoir and Fiction*, edited by Victoria Aarons, Lexington Books, 2016, pp. 73–87.

- Berger, Alan L, and Gloria L. Cronin, editors. *Holocaust Literature: Representation in the Postmodern World*. SUNY P, 2004.
- Birnbaum, Robert. "How Daniel Mendelsohn Remembers the Holocaust." *Tablet Magazine*, 11 Jan. 2017, jewcy.com/post/how_daniel_mendelsohn_remembers_the_holocaust.
- Budick, Emily Miller. "The Ghost of the Holocaust in the Construction of Jewish American Literature." *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, edited by Hana Wirth-Nesher, Cambridge UP, 2016), pp. 343–61.
- Dickstein, Morris. "Promised Lands: The Boldness of Jewish-American Writing in the Post-War Years—and Its Vigorous Renewal Today." *TLS*, no. 5898, 15 Apr. 2016, pp. 3–5.
- Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Everything Is Illuminated*. Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- Furman, Andrew. *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multi-cultural Dilemma: The Return of the Exiled*. Syracuse UP, 2000.
- Halfon, Eduardo. "Monastery." *Monastery*, translated by Lisa Dillman and Daniel Hahn, Bellevue Literary P, 2014, pp. 128–58.
- . "No Borders: An Interview with Eduardo Halfon." Interviewed by Joshua Barnes, 10 Dec. 2012, sampsoniaway.org/literary-voices/2012/12/10/no-borders-an-interview-with-eduardo-halfon.
- . "Oh Ghetto My Love." *Electronic Literature*, no. 181, 4 Nov. 2015, electricliterature.com/oh-ghetto-my-love-by-eduardo-halfon-recommended-by-electric-literature-23531bcd3efd.
- . "The Polish Boxer." *The Polish Boxer*, translated by Daniel Hahn et al., Bellevue Literary P, 2012, pp. 78–91.
- . "We Become the Mask That We Wear: An Interview with Eduardo Halfon." *Electric Lit*, interviewed by Julia Johanne Tolo, 10 Nov. 2015, electricliterature.com/we-become-the-mask-that-we-wear-an-interview-with-eduardo-halfon-e5b030e04afa.
- Hartman, Geoffrey. "Shoah and Intellectual Witness," *Partisan Review*, vol. 65, no. 1, 1998, pp. 37–48. readingon.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/issue1/articles/Hartman/RO%20-%202006%20-%20Hartman.pdf. [vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 1–8].
- Lambert, Josh. "Since 2000." *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, edited by Hana Wirth-Nesher, Cambridge UP, 2016, pp. 622–41.

- Mendelsohn, Daniel. *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*. Harper Collins, 2006.
- Ozick, Cynthia. "Toward a New Yiddish." *Art & Ardor*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1984, pp. 151–53.
- Roth, Philip. "I Have Fallen in Love with American Names." *The New Yorker*, 5 and 12 June 2017, pp. 46–47.
- Simon, Andrea. *Bashert: A Granddaughter's Holocaust Quest*. UP of Mississippi, 2002.
- Tsabari, Ayelet. "The Best Place on Earth." *The Best Place on Earth: Stories*, Random House, 2013, pp. 227–53.
- . "An Interview with Ayelet Tsabari." *Canadian Women in the Literary Arts*, interviewed by Andrea Bennett, 24 Feb. 2014, cwila.com/an-interview-with-ayelet-tsabari/.
- . "Interview with 2015 CNF Contest Judge Ayelet Tsabari." *Room Magazine*, interviewed by Samantha Rousseau, 2015, roommagazine.com/interview/interview-2015-cnf-contest-judge-ayelet-tsabari.
- Wildman, Sarah. *Paper Love: Searching for the Girl My Grandfather Left Behind*. Riverhead / Penguin, 2014.