JEWISH AMERICAN FICTION HOLDS A CURIOUS place in contemporary literary studies. During the 1950s and 1960s it established a dominant position not only within ethnic literary studies, but within postwar American literature as a whole. Much as Americans in the postwar period were migrating from the cities to the suburbs, many Jewish American writers were shifting their focus from the confines of their ethnic communities to the larger realms of the national culture. Unlike earlier writers such as Abraham Cahan, Henry Roth, Anzia Yezierska, Michael Gold, and Sholem Asch, these second- and third-generation Jewish writers concerned themselves not so much with the Eastern European flavors of the Lower East Side as with the uptown savvy of Manhattan, the quiet suburbs of New York and New Jersey, the midwestern sprawl of Chicago, and even the pop culture capitals of Hollywood and Disney World. Their literary reputations migrated in a similar fashion. In the 1970s both Saul Bellow and Isaac Bashevis Singer received the Nobel Prize for literature. And according to Raymond Mazurek, in his survey during the late 1980s of contemporary literature courses taught throughout the country, Bellow, Joseph Heller, Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, and Bernard Malamud all ranked within the top fifteen of the most significant or the most taught novelists. Twentieth-century Jewish American writers had definitely established a formidable canonical presence.

At the same time, this canonical status may have helped to stifle Jewish American literary studies in certain ways. As with any other literature, Jewish American writing has undergone a series of shifts and realignments that reflect not only the place of Jewish culture in particular but also the larger intellectual climates in which it is written. The modernist or largely humanistic emphases of Bellow, Malamud, and Singer are different from those of more contemporary authors who have directly engaged postmodernist issues of language, identity, and authority. Yet despite the notable work of such contemporary writers as Stanley Elkin, Max Apple, Steve Stern, Cynthia Ozick, Thane Rosenbaum, Allegra Goodman, and Philip Roth (especially in his later writings), the critics of Jewish American literature have neglected to focus on the postmodern aspects of their subject matter. This is not to say that certain Jewish writers have never been critically considered within the rubrics of postmodernity (however one chooses to define "postmodern"). Stanley Elkin, Philip Roth, and Joseph Heller have all been read as self-reflexive writers concerned with the deconstruction of reality, texts, and the self. However, while there are a number of journal- and chapter-length studies devoted to various postmodern concerns in individual works or of individual authors (see, for instance, Elizabeth Rose's and Michael Greenstein's essays on Ozick, Alan Wilde's work on Elkin, Michael Dunn's essay on Woody Allen, John Williams's book on E. L. Doctorow, or the substantial body of criticism on Roth's Zuckerman novels), there has been no effort to contextualize the various postmodern strategies among contemporary Jewish American writers as a whole. Indeed, most of the extended studies of Jewish American fiction have tended to center on what could be considered the "old guard" of Jewish writers, those following primarily modernist models and/or whose reputations were established soon after the Second World War. All of these works concentrate on authors such as Bellow, Malamud, early Roth, and Singer, while more or less neglecting to highlight the experimental or less conventional side of this literature. This is not to suggest that writers such as Bellow, Singer, Mailer, and Malamud are not significant within the scope of Jewish American literary studies. On the contrary, these writers have helped to lay
the foundations of the postwar literary experience, ethnic or otherwise. But certain texts, such as those of Elkin, Ozick, and Roth, have attempted to explore issues of identity within certain postmodernist assumptions. The notion of a core or a center to the ethnic self has been justly questioned by several Jewish writers. Despite the notable interest in the area of Jewish ethnicity and the construction of self, to date there has not been one extended study on the postmodern elements that make up much of contemporary Jewish American writing.

This lack of critical attention to the postmodern elements of this fiction within an American ethnic studies context is unfortunate, and the issue of formulating an understanding of postmodern Jewish ethnicity needs to be addressed. Instead of approaching these primary texts as developing a series of ethnic-specific themes, more emphasis should be placed on the diverse ways many Jewish American writers employ ethnicity to engage issues of identity, community, and textual interpretation. In light of this revealing context, a study of this kind will necessarily foreground two interconnected strategies of interpretation: (1) approaching contemporary Jewish American fiction as an ethnic literature and (2) developing the reading of this literature in terms of postmodern ethnicity. On the surface, the first of these strategies may seem superfluous, if not outright redundant, given the critical history of Jewish American literature. Malamud, Bruce Jay Friedman, Hugh Nissenson, Roth, and Ozick are nothing if not writers highly conscious of their ethnic backgrounds, and critics of American Jewish literature (that is, those who particularize the American Jewish experience) have obviously highlighted this as a major component of their subject's fiction. Yet contemporary critics of ethnic literature in general (especially those involved in defining an ethnic canon) have tended to neglect or at least minimize the importance of American Jewish literature as an ethnic literature. A survey of works on literary ethnicity published in the last ten to fifteen years is highly revealing. Considerations of American Jewish writing as an ethnic representation are conspicuously absent from The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse (1990), Redefining American Literary History (1990), All My Relatives: Community in Contemporary Ethnic American Literatures (1993), Supernatural Forces: Belief, Difference, and Power in Contemporary Works by Ethnic Women (1993), An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands (1994), and The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions (1995), all of which are concerned with ethnic discourse within larger, and at times hostile, cultural frames. (Many of these studies, such as Bonnie TuSmith's All My Relatives: Community in Contemporary Ethnic American Literatures (1993), employ the general words “ethnic” and “ethnicity” in their titles, but nonetheless within the text focus only on writers of color. The scope may be rich and necessary, but such a discrepancy between general intentions and specific examination can be misleading to students of ethnic studies.)

These critical works, although needfully opening up (or widening) a space for the study of African American, Native American, Asian American, and Chicano/a literature, all fail to recognize (or at least fail to mention) the similarities between these literatures and Jewish American writing. Perhaps this is because more of an emphasis has been placed on literatures of color than on ethnic literature in general, as is the case in TuSmith's study; or because, in the words of anthropologist Karen Brodkin, Jews have become “white folks” and their ethnic subject positions are not “oppositional” enough; or because some feel that Jewish American writing has already had its time in the critical spotlight; or because many Jewish writers (such as Bellow and Malamud) have become canonized and are in no need of championing; or because their canonical status suggests (perhaps in the eyes of some) a dilution of their ethnic import within the larger scope of “unhyphenated” American literature. Certainly there are differences between literatures of color and Jewish ethnic writing (just as there are differences among the various literatures of color), but there are also a number of similarities (such as the prejudicial assumptions placed on a people from both outside and within an ethnic community) that help to highlight the dynamics of this kind of critical analysis. Whatever the reason(s) for neglecting Jewish American writing, literary critics interested in ethnic studies who fail to take into account the undeniable presence of Jewish American literature as ethnic literature are not only being remiss, but they are also denying a vibrant and highly relevant community of writers whose work could only benefit their critical projects.

A brief look at some of the issues involved may help to illuminate the politics of constructing a theory of ethnic literature. Werner Sollors, one of the most central, and controversial, theorists of ethnicity, argues that American ethnic identity is caught between an emphasis on old-
world hierarchies and a vision of new and self-defining possibility. These conflicting impulses constitute what he calls “the central drama in American culture,” and he defines them in terms of “descent” and “consent” relations (6). Descent relations are those that emphasize “our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements.” Consent relations, on the other hand, “stressed our abilities as mature free agents and ‘architects of our fates’ to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems” (6). Ethnic literature, then, is largely a dialogue or a negotiation between these two forces, the tension of which reveals to the reader the particular rites and rituals of American newcomers, or as Sollors puts it, “the central codes of Americanness” (8).

Thomas J. Ferraro, while articulating an ethnic model similar to that of Sollors, nonetheless sees the limits of Sollors’s arguments. Narrowing his scope from the broad category of ethnicity to the more specific experience of immigration, Ferraro argues that immigrant writers contextualize their lives through a series of “passages” in which they move from confines of the ethnic space to the larger world of letters. Ferraro argues that by choosing to write within the American marketplace, immigrant writers necessarily engage in a dialogue of cultural assimilation:

The turn to ethnic narrative is an attempt on the part of the writer to negotiate the terms in which the greater freedoms of the United States are to be accepted: on the one hand, to dispel the charge by the clan of having undergone an essential and traitorous assimilation; on the other, to dispel the charge by the culture at large of possessing predispositions of mind and heart inappropriate if not antithetical to the developing concerns of a national literature and culture. (10)

For an ethnic writer, especially one who is an immigrant or an immigrant-offspring, writing becomes a tug of war or a constant negotiation between the world of ancestral definition and the world of possibility.

In contrast to the form of ethnic study espoused by Sollors and Ferraro, Alan Wald argues that these ethnic conceptions fail to account for every discourse at work within all minority fictions. He differentiates between what he calls the “ethnicity school” of Sollors (as well as Mary V. Dearborn and William Boelhower), on the one hand, and the proponents of a class, gender, and race methodology (e.g., Henry Louis Gates Jr., Barbara Christian, and Barbara Foley), on the other. What critically limits Sollors’s theory, Wald argues, is that he privileges the category “ethnicity” while relegating that of “race” to a mere aspect of certain ethnicities (27–28). For ethnicity theorists, the dynamics at work in the literature of Jewish and Italian Americans are similar in kind to those in African American, Chinese American, Native American, and Chicano writings—regardless of the oppressive and quasi-colonial experiences of people of color. “Class-gender-race” theorists, by contrast, work from the assumption of a “profound distinction—never to be forgotten—between the experience of people of color and the European ethnic immigrants in the mode and consequences of their incorporation into the social formation, and their subsequent treatment” (23). In other words, it makes all the difference that one group was coerced into a cultural economy through violent means, while another was more or less assimilated through choice. To people of color, “race” (as socially constructed from without an ethnic group), not “ethnicity” (usually defined from within), is by far the more central category in their American culture.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in many ways the most representative of Wald’s “race” critics, rightly sees a potential danger in the universalism inherent in Sollor’s ethnic model. To approach black literature only in terms of European or American theoretical models is to engage in an act of critical neocolonialism. No matter how well-intentioned these egalitarian theories may be, they “somehow always end up lopping off our [black] arms, legs, and pug noses, muffling the peculiar timbres of our voices, and trying to straighten our always already kinky hair” (“Talkin’” 408). Gates’s critical distinction between the literature of European ancestry and that of African American descent rests on an internal colonization thesis that highlights the unique linguistic and material obstacles facing people of color. He argues that the distinctiveness of the black text can be found in its language, a dynamic series of codes that function beneath the surface of a work and are recognized by its practitioners as a strategy of community within a culture of oppression. Such a critical emphasis, he concludes, locates the “signifying black difference[es]” (“Talkin’” 407) at work in these texts in ways that a “white”-based criticism cannot.

Both brands of ethnic theory—the “ethnicity school” and the “class-gender-race” approach—taken strictly on their own terms, are not with-
out their limitations. Sollors, for instance, does at times seem too eager to create a universal theory of ethnicity and in the process conflates the historical differences that define a specific group experience. In terms of American Jewish writers, such an emphasis could overlook the fact that “Jewishness” is not only the product of a subject’s volition, but also a label placed upon subjects as a means of distancing them from a dominant culture. On the other hand, by focusing exclusively on race-specific codes, one could drastically underemphasize similarities American Jewish writing shares not only with Euro-American traditions, but also with literatures of color (specifically, Hispanic, African, and Asian American)—non-reductive similarities that highlight a text’s richness by placing it within a larger ethnic context. What is more, Wald’s bifurcated schema of ethnic studies is too Manichean in its categorization and leaves little space for investigations into European ethnicity. In defining the difference between “ethnicity” and “race” as a matter of choice or coercion within an economy, he avoids the danger of universalizing all ethnic groups but falls prey to the tendency to essentialize a particular ethnic group. Not all individuals of European origin came to the United States out of free personal choice; many did so out of economic or political necessity. A Jew who has to flee his or her native soil because of an all-too-real physical threat (whether it be from Nazis, Cossacks, Christians, or Muslims) or from economic strangulation may certainly not share the same history as an African American forced into slavery, but the two do nonetheless share a variety of political, economic, and psychological commonalities that, taken within the context of serious critical comparison, would greatly add to an appreciation of both varieties of ethnic writing. What I would like to suggest is that by approaching American Jewish literature from a larger ethnic perspective, while at the same time acknowledging the limitations to that approach, one need not fall back on an oppressive essentialism that, in Gates’s words, “lops off” the vital ethnic- and individual-specific components of that literature.

Such an emphasis on the construction of contemporary ethnic theory would naturally lead to a discussion of the postmodern assumptions of ethnicity. Many who have approached Jewish American literature as ethnic literature in the past usually have done so by looking at the “Jewishness” of the writing. A text may be considered “ethnic” to the extent that it articulates the negotiation of Jewish experience within a largely assimilative American culture. These studies attempt to articulate the various cultural and religious signifiers that normally define Jewishness in America. However, such an approach usually posits an authentic or prototypical understanding of American Jewishness without taking into consideration the constructedness of that understanding. A postmodern understanding of Jewishness, on the other hand, would foreground the conditions under which that ethnic identity is conceived. The makeup of ethnic subjectivity, then, could include both an acknowledgment of its engagement with a historical community and a provisional, self-ironizing critique of that engagement. Ozick’s The Messiah of Stockholm stands as one such example of this postmodern impulse. Lars Andemening, the novel’s orphaned protagonist, convinces himself that he is the one and only child of Bruno Schultz, the Polish writer shot dead by the Nazis in 1942, and constructs elaborate scenarios to help explain his unlikely lineage. Ozick uses him both to highlight the arbitrary side of identity formation and to illustrate the high stakes involved in ethnic identification.

However, the postmodern quality of much contemporary Jewish American writing is almost never considered within the contexts of its ethnicity. Authors such as Ozick and Roth are at times read as ethnic writers and at other times as postmodern writers, but almost never as postmodern ethnic writers. And while there have been a few attempts at highlighting the common ground between Jewish American ethnicity and postmodernism, such studies are nonetheless limited, usually to one particular work by one individual author. Taking this into account, scholars of ethnic literature should recognize that there is a need to reconceptualize Jewish American literary studies within the larger contexts of contemporary critical thought.

On the surface, at least, the assumptions of postmodernism and of ethnic studies seem antithetical: postmodernism discounts the legitimacy of cultural authenticity, while ethnic literatures usually establish some form of cultural “authenticity,” or set of shared assumptions as a means to ensure communal and individual self-assertion. There have been, however, a few critics who have attempted to define a postmodern ethnicity, either by contextualizing one particular ethnic group (usually African Americans) or configuring an abstracted model of what
a postmodern reading of ethnicity might look like. Approaching issues of race from a postmodern perspective, bell hooks, for example, has expressed concern over some of the assumptions inherent in certain theories of race or ethnicity. She argues that notions of racial identity may become essentialized, thereby turning repressive, if they are rooted in those master narratives from which marginal subjects have attempted to free themselves. This she sees as a dangerous “modernist” emphasis on points of origin, the search for some “authentic” racial identity that denies difference and stifles alternative voices within that racial or ethnic community. Looking at the possibilities for a black subjectivity, hooks puts it this way:

The unwillingness to critique essentialism on the part of many African-Americans is rooted in the fear that it will cause folks to lose sight of the specific history and experience of African-Americans and the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience. An adequate response to this concern is to critique essentialism while emphasizing the significance of “the authority of experience.” There is a radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black “essence” and the recognition of the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle. (29)

There are strong political implications here in hooks’s critique, ones that extend beyond the African American community. Instead of privileging racial homogeneity, she emphasizes certain psychological conditions shared by a variety of marginalized individuals. This she calls a “radical postmodernism,” one that would focus on those “shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy—ties that would promote recognition of common commitment, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition” (27). Hooks’s critical position is more overtly political than the strict ethnic theories of Solórzano. He at times tends to reduce or abstract ethnic dynamics for the sake of a single and more formal literary model, whereas hooks, in her emphasis on shared experiences, attempts to locate cohesive differences among rather than solely within individual communities.

Similarly, critics such as R. Radhakrishnan and Ramón Saldívar have theorized ethnic studies as a space where differences are foregrounded and “otherness” is historized. Saldívar discusses the Chicano novel in terms of its “differential structure,” that is, the dialectical manner in which it translates the negotiation between two distinct cultures (86). Its subject matter is neither purely Mexican nor purely American, but something else entirely. “This something else,” he goes on, “is the difference of contemporary Chicano literature, which allows it to retain its special relation to both its Mexican and American contexts, while also letting it be marked by its relation to its own still unconditioned future” (88).

In a more extended, yet somewhat more convoluted, analysis, Radhakrishnan similarly establishes difference/difference as the centerpiece to a postmodern understanding of ethnicity. He differentiates between universalizing theories of ethnicity—those that lump together all forms of ethnic otherness and in the process erase those differences that distinguish one ethnic experience, or brand of ethnic experience, from another—and theories that are built upon what he calls a common ground. Privileging the latter, he takes to task certain forms of poststructuralist criticism, particularly deconstruction, that dehistoricize and reify otherness into a “mystique” (“Common Ground” 12). Instead, he conceives of postmodern ethnicity as a strategy that both particularizes a subject position (defines it in its own right) and finds similarities between that position and other subject positions. Radhakrishnan concludes that such a theory is appropriate within the context of ethnicity “which on the one hand is universal, i.e., insofar as there is no cultural reality that is not subtended by ethnicity (there is nothing called the ‘non-ethnic’), and is, on the other hand, the phenomenological and historical expression of a particular group experience from within its locus” (“Common Ground” 17). Elsewhere he describes a poststructuralist understanding of ethnicity as one that valorizes the “post” aspect of identity, or what is left for the subject after it “breaks” from the strictures of representation. An individual ethnic subject stands poised between two potentially constricting language systems: that of an oppressor who uses discourse to disenfranchise the subject, and that of the subject’s own community that chooses to define itself strictly on its own terms. In either case there is a fixed and authorized sense of what it means to be ethnic (“Ethnic Identity” 62). The “post-ethnic” subject, by contrast, reflects a sense of Derridean difference: ethnic “meaning,” or in other words, iden-
tity, is defined in terms of its differences from other communities. Yet these distinctions can never be truly essentialized, and ethnic identity as such (what it means to be Italian, what it means to be black, what it means to be a Jew) is always deferred, something that is always already in the making. Such a strategy, according to Radhakrishnan, "conjoins in a relationship of complementarity the twin tasks of semanticizing the indeterminacy of the temporality of the 'post-' and radicalizing the ethnic momentum beyond authoritarian closure" ("Ethnic Identity" 69).

Critics of literatures of color have been particularly insightful in their exploration of the common ground between theories of ethnicity and postmodernism. One illustrative example is David Mikics. He reads Ishmael Reed as a writer who uses ethnicity as an alternative means to resist the destabilizing nature of postmodern culture. Unlike some earlier African American writers, Reed does not assume there to be one authentic "black" experience counterpoised to a fragmented and largely consumerist late capitalist society. Instead, Mikics argues, Reed turns to certain African myths and folk tales that are both subversive and critical of themselves as subversive acts, and uses them as guides to reading and participating in contemporary mass culture (305). This strategy is postmodern in that it denies any monolithic cultural identity and assumes the context of a fragmented and decentered cultural system; yet at the same time it is particularly "ethnic" in that it uses communal experiences and narratives to resist or critique the highly centrifugal nature of postmodern culture.

In light of all of this, the question remains: what might postmodern readings of Jewish American ethnicity look like? Such tendencies are already becoming apparent and can be found in a few small but generalizing studies. Vivian Sobchack, for instance, attempts to define a postmodern ethnicity within the context of contemporary American cinema. She uses the critical frameworks of Linda Hutcheon in postmodern theory and of Werner Sollors in ethnicity to explore three filmmakers, including Woody Allen and Paul Mazursky, who foreground the construction of ethnic consciousness. Her conception of ethnic identity is similar to that of Radhakrishnan in that the differences articulated (as in the case with Leonard "the Human Chameleon" in Zelig) are never static, but are always in a constant and unconditional state of flux. What makes these filmmakers' handling of ethnicity so postmodern, Sobchack argues, is that while they acknowledge the cultural power behind the concept of the melting pot, they nonetheless parody and ironize that myth by reconontextualizing it in the present and exaggerating its implications. Such a strategy, therefore, highlights the construction of ethnicity as a contradictory and multivalent experience (343). Victoria Aarons presents a more recent and highly impressive example. She emphasizes the long tradition in Jewish literature of bearing witness to the community through the telling of stories. Through her readings of Spiegelman's Maus, Gilbert Rogen's "What Happens Next?: An Uncompleted Investigation," and (to a lesser degree) Roth's The Counterlife, Aaron asserts that contemporary Jewish American writers—writers who feel cut off from the histories of their parents and grandparents—employ the artifice of the storyteller in order to recreate history, and in doing so, reinvent their fictional selves in terms of their familial pasts (82). Again, the emphasis here is on the fluidity or mutability of identity, but also on identity's grounding in history and communal experience.

All of these considerations—the postmodern aspect of Jewish American writing, the placing of Jewish writers within the larger context of American ethnic writing, and the defining of a postmodern ethnicity—should challenge contemporary critics of Jewish American literature. Given this need to contextualize Jewish American writing within postmodern rubrics, it would perhaps be beneficial to focus on at least one Jewish American writer who foregrounds these theoretical parameters. One such representative of contemporary Jewish American writing, Philip Roth, arguably provides the most illustrative example. This writer, although central within the canon of contemporary Jewish literature, is by no means representative of Jewish American writing as a whole. If, as critics of postmodern ethnicity will argue, authoritative representations of a particular ethnic group are both false and confining, then any attempt to showcase Roth as a "typical" or even "superlative" example of Jewish American writing is not only misleading in the broadest sense, but antithetical to the very goals of this study. What makes Roth so important are the different ways in which he highlights many of the theoretical and cultural issues that define ethnic studies. For instance, in his first series of Zuckerman novels—The Ghost Writer (1979), Zuckerman Unbound (1981), The Anatomy Lesson (1983), and The Prague Orgy (1985)—and in his "autobiographical" tetralogy—The Facts
(1988), Deception (1990), Patrimony (1991), and Operation Shylock (1993)—Roth focuses explicitly on the negotiation of a secularized Jewish identity. In this regard, he differs from Cynthia Ozick, who is highly cognizant of the religious issues involved and explores the place of Jewish faith and the place of the Jewish woman within an assimilated community, as well as from other Jewish American writers—such as Stanley Elkin and Norman Mailer—who strongly distance themselves from their Jewish ethnic heritage.

Furthermore, in his American trilogy—American Pastoral (1997), I Married a Communist (1998), and The Human Stain (2000)—Roth not only explores the construction of subjectivity but also, and more significantly here, the ways in which the individual subject constructs communal history through memory and narrative. Indeed, the third novel in the trilogy, The Human Stain, could serve as a narrative example of Radhakrishnan’s emphasis on “post-ethnic” identity, a subject position situated between the discourse of the oppressor and that of its own ethnic community. Coleman Silk, the novel’s protagonist, is a light-skinned African American passing as Jewish white, refuses to let either oppressive system define who he is. In a highly illustrative passage, Silk gives voice to the kind of arguments found in Radhakrishnan’s writings:

You can’t let the big they [the white power structure] impose its bigotry on you any more than you can let the little they [the black community] become a we and impose its ethics on you. Not the tyranny of the we and its we-talk and everything that the we wants to pile on your head. . . . Instead the raw I with all its agility. Self-discovery—that was the punch to the labonz. Singularity. The passionate struggle for singularity. The singular animal. The sliding relationship with everything. Not static but sliding. Self-knowledge but concealed. What is as powerful as that? (108)

But perhaps one of Roth’s most revealing texts, especially in its emphasis on postmodern Jewish ethnicity, is The Counterlife (1986). More than any other of his works, this novel vividly illustrates the dynamics involved in a postmodern articulation of ethnicity. In ways that resemble the fictive play of John Barth, The Counterlife is like a Möbius strip that constantly turns back on itself with no fixed center. Yet Roth’s novel never gets lost in narrative play for its own sake. Its high postmodern aesthetics is always “anchored” to issues of Jewish ethnicity. The entire novel revolves around questions of Jewishness in a variety of contexts: in America, Israel, and England; for secular, practicing, and militantly orthodox Jews; and through the eyes of both Jew and non-Jew alike. Given its emphasis on the cultural issues surrounding Jewish ethnicity, one could rightly approach the fiction of Roth as demonstrating just one, but one highly illustrative, facet of the varied Jewish experience in America.

Another representative of the Jewish American experience, Stanley Elkin, occupies a curious position in Jewish American letters. Although many of his protagonists are Jewish in character or in name, his focus has rarely been overtly ethnic in nature. His fiction is not so much concerned with Jewishness, per se, as it is with the labyrinthine twists and interconnected accidents found in contemporary American society. He is almost never contextualized by critics within the broader scope of Jewish fiction, and whenever he is mentioned in those contexts, he rarely receives more than a passing reference. Only one essay on Elkin has appeared in Studies in American Jewish Literature, certainly the most immediate outlet for criticism in Jewish studies, and none have been published in MELOS. Indeed, when Elkin is considered at all in the literature it is usually as a representative of postmodern fiction or black comedy. Elkin himself has helped to encourage this critical inclination in interview after interview by refusing the classification of “Jewish writer.” But such a refusal, although important in its context, is not grounds for dismissal from the Jewish American canon. In fact, Elkin’s apparent lack of interest in Jewish subject matter makes him a particularly appropriate foil to Roth, considered by many to have “Jews on the brain.”

For Elkin, the very act of writing itself has become an example of ethnic negotiation within in a broader multicultural society. In The Franchiser (1976), for instance, the words and images of mass consumerism help to hide the “core” of Ben Flesh, who zooms across the interconnected artery-like highways of the country to check up on his franchises, establishments devoted to replicating and standardizing experience. It could be argued that Elkin’s decision to write in an “assimilative” mode enhances his position, and his importance, as a postmodern ethnic writer.
Regardless of the fact that his fiction reflects many of the central issues in postmodern culture (which it does) he stands as an example of postmodern Jewish writing because of his avoidance of ethnic labels, a narrative impulse reminiscent of bell hooks's arguments against ethnic or racial essentialism. Works such as "The Bailbondsmen" (1973), The Franchiser (1976), The Living End (1979), The Magic Kingdom (1985), The MacGuffin (1991), and Mrs. Ted Bliss (1995) all highlight the place of individual identity within a consumer-ridden postindustrial age, but, perhaps just as important, they all provide a unique glimpse at an ethnic author-subject consciously constructing highly assimilated and hybridized subjectivities.

On the other hand, the fiction of Cynthia Ozick stands as one of the most illustrative examples of postmodernism and its relation to Judic faith. Her narrative structures betray a conflicting series of postulates that refuse any final synthesis. Embedded in such works as "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" (1969), "Usurpation (Other People's Stories)" (1987), The Cannibal Galaxy (1983), The Messiah of Stockholm (1987), The Shawl (1989), and The Patternesser Papers (1997) are both a text and a counteretext that vie for dominance but that are ultimately suspended in an uneasy—yet highly revealing—state of irresolution. She takes to heart the Mosaic law against idolatry—one of the most dangerous idols being art—yet is torn between by her place as a Jew and as a writer constantly in the act of creating literary "idols" that approximate existence. This strategy of literary negotiation is particularly significant in that Ozick not only problematizes the postmodern question of the replications of texts, but also places her ethnic subject position in the very center of this controversy. Many of her novels use a series of ironic counteretexts to explore the place and function of literature in relation not only to the world at large, but, more precisely, to the world as defined by her Jewish faith.

Finally, the cinema of Woody Allen could stand as one more instance of postmodern ethnic narrative. In addition to the transformations of Leonard Zelig, as discussed by Vivian Sobchack, there are other films that highlight the construction of the self. One of his most notable projects, especially within the scope of this study, is Deconstructing Harry (1997). Harry Block, a Philip Roth-like writer who is notorious for using his life and the lives of those around him as grist for his fiction, experiences writer's block (thus the name), and undergoes a process of reimag-

ining himself through his various characters for the purpose of putting his life back into order. By the end of the film, and after experiencing a series of crises, he comes to the realization that his fiction, the multiple recreations of the self, is what actually sustains him. Although here issues of Jewishness are not of central concern, in Allen's works his ethnic position is always an issue, whether remaining in the background or taking center stage. Read within the heretofore mentioned arguments of Radhakrishnan, Saldívar, and hooks, the films of Allen, as well as the fictions of Ozick, stand out as texts exploring the constantly deferred nature of postmodern ethnic identity.

These are just a few illustrative examples of writers who take on their Jewish ethnicity within the various contexts of postmodern thought. A survey of other contemporary Jewish American authors would prove similarly fruitful. There is no shortage of readings on contemporary Jewish American authors, even ones that highlight the postmodern quality of one particular writer or text. However, there has been a short supply of critical attention given to this literature within the more general, and purportedly more inclusive, studies of ethnic texts. Such an absence suggests that critics of Jewish American literature, and of ethnic literature in general, could only benefit by reconceptualizing their subjects in terms of various postmodern constructs, in whatever forms that might take. What is more, an emphasis on the postmodern aspects of ethnic identity would help to foreground what is arguably one of the best defining features of contemporary Jewish American writing: its engagement with the fragmented and commodified state of American culture and the ways in which these secular influences compete with, deny, or give new life to Jewish religious expression. For contemporary Jewish American authors, assimilation is not only a foregone conclusion; its significance as a thematic privileging is by and large outdated. One witnesses in the protagonists of such younger writers as Goodman, Stern, Buket, Nathan Englander, Dara Horn, and Aryeh Lev Stollman the need to reevaluate the assimilative impulse, an attitude quite different from that of Bellow's Augie March, Malamud's Morris Bober, or Heller's Yossa-

rian. An emphasis on postmodern Jewish subjectivity would also help to highlight the multifaceted nature—or what one might even call the "nonessentializability"—of recent Jewish American fiction as a whole. Unlike much earlier Jewish American writing, its current form is highly
influenced by, among other things, the aftermath of the Holocaust, engagements with Zionism, the growing influence of feminism, the rise in identity politics, and a new emphasis on multicultural or hybridized identity, making it highly difficult to "pin down." Finally, by reading Jewish American literature more within the rubrics of postmodern thought and, at the same time, emphasizing its shared qualities with other American ethnic writing, we would not only be opening up a new space for the study of Jewish texts, but also helping to reinvigorate the already exciting field of American ethnic literary studies.

Notes


2. The one possible exception to this is Andrew Furman’s invaluable...