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“THE BLESSING OF  
ASSIMILATION” RECONSIDERED:  
AN INQUIRY INTO  
JEWISH CULTURAL STUDIES

David N. Myers

*I: Rivers of Culture*

**A**n eighth-century midrashic source relates that “all rivers are good and blessed and sweet and bring benefit to the world when they flow over land; but when they enter the sea, they are evil and cursed and bitter, and bring no benefit to the world.”<sup>1</sup> The point of recalling this legend is hardly to condemn the pleasures of the sea much less to commence a discussion of Jewish oceanography. Rather, it is to provide an historical backdrop to one of the most vexing statements uttered by a Jew in modern times. Consistent with the ancient sages’ charge, I have turned this statement over and over, and yet never gained more than a fleeting grasp of its meaning. And so again I submit for consideration the enigmatic words of Eduard Gans, a brilliant young German-Jewish legal historian, from 1822. Commenting on the drive of Jews in his day to break free from the shackles of insularity and particularism, Gans observed in tones strikingly reminiscent of his mentor, Hegel:

This is the consoling lesson of history properly understood: that everything passes without perishing, and yet persists, although it has long been consigned to the past. That is why neither the Jews will perish nor Judaism dissolve; in the larger movement of the whole they will seem to have disappeared, *and yet they will live on as the river lives on in the ocean.*<sup>2</sup>

Separated by a vast temporal and conceptual expanse, the eighteenth-century midrashist and the nineteenth-century legal historian are both drawn to the metaphorical relationship between the river and the sea. For the former, the entry of the river into the ocean spells not the *disappearance* of its distinct properties but their dramatic transformation, an ontological sea change, if you will—from good to evil, sweet to bitter, indeed, from a blessing to a curse. By contrast, for Gans, the entry of the river into the sea—or more explicitly, the river of Jewish culture into the sea of European civilization—is both necessary and salutary.

But in summoning up all of our combined historical and marine biological prowess, we must ask: How precisely does a “river live on in the ocean?” Or to frame the question more generally, how do Jews avoid disappearance as a discrete group while becoming an inseparable part of a larger culture and society? This question, rife with internal tensions and contradictions, has intrigued and haunted Jews for centuries. Indeed, it has hovered above their encounter with new cultural milieus, from ancient Babylon to modern Berlin.<sup>3</sup> For Eduard Gans and other German-Jewish intellectuals of his day, this question consumed their daily thoughts. To a great extent, it was the same question that their parents’ generation, the first generation of *Maskilim*, Jewish Enlightenment figures in Europe, had posed. And yet, the mood in the younger generation was more despairing and *Angst*-ridden over the prospect of Judaism’s survival.

As children of the Enlightenment, Gans and his friends had absorbed the aspirations for emancipation and social integration that excited the passions of Moses Mendelssohn and his circle of disciples in the late eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Far more than their elders, the younger generation of intellectuals had benefitted from admission to and study at German universities, a palpable sign of progress. At university they entered a new cultural world, one in which they quickly became mesmerized by the powerful force of *Wissenschaft*—a term that conveyed, in this period, both a sense of scientific rigor and of intellectual and disciplinary unity. But the expectations of this generation, bolstered by its own experience of rapid educational advance, were abruptly and rudely challenged midway through the second decade of the nineteenth century. A powerful anti-Enlightenment sentiment swept Germany after the defeat of Napoleon, accompanied by a new wave of reaction that included anti-Jewish violence. The optimistic, at times, ebullient, spirit of the previous generation began to

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fade. Gans and a select circle of German-Jewish intellectuals convened in this somber atmosphere to reflect on their fate, to meditate not only on the path of Enlightenment but on their very future as Jews. This stark moment of self-reflection gave birth to the *Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden* (Society for the Culture and Scientific Study of Jews) in Berlin in 1819.<sup>5</sup> Critical historical study, members of this group hoped, could both clarify the Jewish past and illumine the course of the Jewish future.

In outlining this mission, Eduard Gans, the group's president, offered his enigmatic prescription for Jewish survival. To survive, the river of Jewish culture would have to live on in the sea of European culture. Not surprisingly, this ambiguous charge was interpreted variously. Leopold Zunz, a founding member of the *Verein*, became one of the most important Jewish scholars of the nineteenth century. Throughout his long life, Zunz never surrendered his conviction that the only appropriate institutional home for Jewish studies was the German university. Consequently, he refused to accept a professorial appointment in the modern rabbinical seminaries that arose in Germany in the latter half of the century. However, Zunz was never permitted full entry into the ocean of European culture either; despite repeated entreaties, he failed to receive a position in a German university.

If Zunz marks the failure, at least in part, of Gans' vision of the river in the ocean, then Gans himself represents an ironic success. Gans too desired an appointment in a German university, though this avenue was foreclosed to him because of his Judaism. In a desperate mood, he left Germany and traveled around Europe in search of professional fulfillment.<sup>6</sup> After months of wandering, Gans decided to violate the first and cardinal requirement of members in the short-lived society of Jewish scholars in Berlin: in Paris in late 1825, he converted to Christianity, hopeful that this act would provide him with a "ticket of admission" to European society, as his fellow Society member, Heinrich Heine, once described his own conversion. Conversion did have the desired professional effect, earning Gans a full-time academic appointment at the University of Berlin in 1826, where he taught and wrote in the field of legal history (especially Roman law). And yet, Gans' legacy, certainly to Jewish history, is that of a *Taufjude*, literally a baptized Jew. Perhaps Gans was prognosticating his own future in his 1822 address to fellow Jewish scholars. For if anyone continued to live on as a river in a sea, it was surely the *Taufjuden*. Converted Jews in Germany tended to associate with other converted Jews or with friends

Jewish River  
 Ocean of European  
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and family who did not convert; moreover, despite their formal affiliation with Christianity, converted Jews often perceived themselves and were perceived by others as Jews by social and cultural affinity.<sup>7</sup>

The tale of Eduard Gans is interesting and powerful in its own right. But it is the larger predicament, indeed the tremulous tension, embodied in his river-sea metaphor, that extends our interest beyond the example of one German-Jewish intellectual. Gans' metaphor has often been read as an epitaph for German-Jewish culture, but I would suggest that we regard it here as an epigraph, an opening statement, for a renewed consideration of Jewish assimilation in the modern age. The term assimilation often conjures up frightful images for Jews and other minority groups, signaling the loss of collective identity to a hegemonic majority culture. But before accepting this image without comment, it might be worthwhile to revisit the career of this idea in Jewish history, particularly during the modern period. Time does not permit an exhaustive history of Jewish assimilation. However, I would like to point out the multivalence and historical complexity of the term by making recourse to a number of interesting sources drawn from Jewish history. This effort seems especially appropriate in light of recent intellectual and political trends in the United States that pose challenges to what we may call, in evocation of Salo Baron, the "lachrymose" conception of Jewish assimilation.<sup>8</sup> New insights drawn from the ever-malleable field of cultural studies, particularly those focused on diaspora and transnational communities, offer both novel and fertile grounds for rethinking the phenomenon of assimilation. Toward the end of this paper, we shall turn our attention to some of these new insights, taking note of their relationship to the Jewish case of diaspora identity.

But to return for a final time to Eduard Gans. If we accept that Gans captured the complexity of assimilation in his own day, we should be mindful of the fact that circumstances similar to those in which he offered his enigmatic charge have accompanied Jews in the West ever since. Indeed, nearly a century after Gans' speech, another German-Jewish intellectual pondered the prospect of Judaism's survival or, more intimately, the viability of his own existence as a Jew. This German Jew saw a number of his closest friends march to the baptismal font—not so much to advance their professional interests à la Gans, as to achieve harmony between their religious beliefs and practices, on the one hand, and between their inner spiritual world and the surrounding environment, on the other. This young intellectual, Franz Rosenzweig, found the logic of his friends compelling, and he prepared to convert to

Christianity in 1911. He had to attend a Kol Nidre service with his founders," that is, a service to whom he had converted; his mother and his authorities expel him from the synagogue in Berlin. The now legendary speech and solemnity of the occasion plans to convert to Christianity as a new passion. Over the years, he has written little on Jewish history and theological principles. These writings, and his conversion, as one of the seminaries.

Rosenzweig's conversion is consummate that was. Nor is it even his idea of a certain metaphorical volume of collected essays published in 1920. Curiously, there is very little in his work that appears as a guide to *Zweistromland* symbolism. It formed the "cradle" that provided a rich background for the destruction of the Temple. He read Rosenzweig's *On the Study of Mesopotamia* in Persian, Greek, and Hebrew of their own."<sup>12</sup> By the time he had returned to Europe, and particularly in integrating non-Jewish ideas, he observes the prevalence of and writing—first in German (Germanness and Jewishness). Rosenzweig, "to be Jewish."<sup>13</sup> What is the reformulation no

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Christianity in 1913. Rosenzweig's last act before conversion was to attend a Kol Nidre service so that he could "enter Christianity as did its founders," that is, as a Jew and not as a pagan.<sup>9</sup> Rosenzweig's parents, to whom he had confided his intentions, refused to attend services with him; his mother insisted that she would demand that synagogue authorities expel him as an apostate. Consequently, he found a small synagogue in Berlin populated by Eastern European immigrants.<sup>10</sup> As the now legendary story goes, Rosenzweig was so awed by the intensity and solemnity of the Kol Nidre service that he decided to abandon his plans to convert to Christianity and committed himself to Judaism with new passion. Over the next decade and a half, Rosenzweig, who had written little on Jewish themes prior to this time, set out to develop new theological principles to sustain Jewish identity in the modern age. These writings, and particularly his book *The Star of Redemption*, stand as one of the seminal achievements in modern Jewish thought.

Rosenzweig is interesting to us not only because he failed to consummate that which Eduard Gans had a century earlier: conversion. Nor is it even his iconoclastic *teshuvah* or return to Judaism. It is rather a certain metaphorical affinity with Gans. The title of Rosenzweig's first volume of collected essays on religious and philosophical matters, published in 1926, was *Zweistromland*, the land of two streams.<sup>11</sup> Curiously, there is no explicit discussion of the title in the book itself, and very little in secondary sources. But again the stream or river appears as a guiding metaphor. For Rosenzweig, the two streams in *Zweistromland* symbolized the Tigris and Euphrates, the rivers that formed the "cradle of civilization," and more germane to our concerns, that provided a rich cultural environment for the Jewish people after the destruction of the First Temple. As one interpreter, Philip Bohlman, has read Rosenzweig's title, "the Jews used the years in the *Zweistromland* of Mesopotamia (i.e., Babylonia) to enrich their culture, to absorb Persian, Greek, and Parthian influences and yet to assimilate these as their own."<sup>12</sup> By historical analogy, the Jews used their centuries in Europe, and particularly in Germany, to enrich their culture by integrating non-Jewish cultural sources into their own. Bohlman observes the prevalence of apparent opposites in Rosenzweig's thought and writing—first and foremost, *Deutschtum and Judentum* (Germanness and Jewishness)—and yet notes correctly that for Rosenzweig, "to be German did not negate the possibility of being Jewish."<sup>13</sup> What was at work was a subtle process of adaptation and reformulation not unlike the process of exegetical innovation that

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Rosenzweig's critic, Gershom Scholem, once discussed in his famous essay, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism."<sup>14</sup>

In Rosenzweig's scheme, it is not that the river of Jewish culture is absorbed into the sea of European civilization. Rather, the river of Jewish culture runs alongside the river of European (particularly German) culture. Each has its own, rather grand existence, though together their shared properties and proximity create an enormously rich cultural plain. Rosenzweig's metaphor suggests a different understanding of assimilation than that suggested by Eduard Gans. Assimilation does not mean absorption of a small body by a larger one. It entails a dynamic process of exchange and cross-fertilization between relative equals.

From a certain perspective, Rosenzweig's position seems shortsighted, indeed dangerously so. Was he so mired in self-delusion as to ignore the ominous signs of violence and hatred around him, even in the 1920s? Did Rosenzweig truly believe that a vibrant Judaism could take root on German soil? Did he share the deeply held view of his Jewish mentor, Hermann Cohen, that *Deutschum* and *Judentum* were compatible? Here it would be wise to stem the tide of historical inevitability, and adopt a strategy, following Michael André Bernstein, of "sideshadowing."<sup>15</sup> Rather than assume that the path Rosenzweig and other German Jews were embarked on necessarily led to Auschwitz, it seems more judicious to notice the vast spectrum of Jewish expressions in the Weimar period (1918-1933), some of which advocated total immersion in German society, but many of which advocated one form or another of Jewish cultural autonomy.<sup>16</sup> By resisting the tendency to place German-Jewish history on a straight course leading to an inevitably tragic end, new perspectives are opened on the nature and texture of assimilation. Undeniably, there was a kind of assimilation that spelled the disappearance of Jewish identity; this version, the one stressed in the classic lachrymose conception of Jewish history, has received, and merits, a negative connotation. At the same time, there was a kind of assimilation that reflected an ongoing, dynamic, and vitalizing process of exchange. It was the cultural possibilities inherent in this process that Franz Rosenzweig and many other Jews in Weimar Germany were alive to.<sup>17</sup>

If the idea of two connotations for assimilation—one pejorative, the other affirmative—does not seem especially novel, it behooves me to admit that it is not. In my own reflections on the subject, I have drawn much inspiration from the late Jewish historian Gerson Cohen, who

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delivered a commencement address in 1966 (at the Hebrew Teachers College in Brookline) entitled "The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History." There is something thoroughly incongruous about this title. Why was a committed Jewish scholar and rabbi, later to become the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, extolling assimilation, no less to a group of future Jewish educators? Apart from the fact that assimilation in 1966 was a much different phenomenon than in 1996 (as evidenced by the remarkable gap in intermarriage rates in the Jewish community), Cohen sought to make the point, and quite deliberately before a group of future Jewish educators, that assimilation had an undeserved reputation in Jewish history.<sup>18</sup> Too often, past cultures and communities have been judged solely by their ability to survive. As an historian, Gerson Cohen was loath to pass final judgment on figures or movements from the Jewish past which did not create in Hebrew, and hence which left few visible traces of their existence in classical Jewish sources. For instance, the fact that Philo of Alexandria was virtually unknown to medieval Jews did not mean that he was irrelevant either to Alexandrian Judaism or to the broader Hellenistic society of his own day.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond this affirmation of the methodological imperative to contextualize (or perhaps sideshadow), Cohen proceeded to a more substantive point: namely that figures such as Philo, whose memory was not preserved in the annals of rabbinic Judaism in large measure because of their extensive contacts with non-Jewish society, were estimable, indeed authentic, Jews. The rabbis' attempts to censor them out, to insist on a static, unchanging Jewish culture, conveyed exclusively in Hebrew, were misguided. The rabbis themselves preached in Greek, and their written language was permeated with Greek words.<sup>20</sup> The lesson Cohen drew was that assimilation was not only a constant feature of Jewish history, but that "in a profound sense this assimilation or acculturation was even a stimulus to original thinking and expression and, consequently, a source of renewed vitality."<sup>21</sup> Toward the end of his lecture, Cohen echoed the distinction offered by Ahad Ha'am, the great Hebrew essayist and Zionist, between two forms of imitation, *hikui shel hitbolelut* and *hikui shel hitharut*.<sup>22</sup> The first form represented total imitation of another culture to the point of self-negation. However, the second category referred to a competitive imitation in which the presence of one culture inspired creativity in another. Attraction to a great, albeit foreign, culture need not be destructive. It could also lead to empowerment, to the discovery of the distinct properties of the imitating culture.

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Ahad Ha'am pointed to the example of Jews in Egypt who "used their Greek knowledge to reveal the unique spirit of Judaism, to expose its riches to the whole world, and to diminish the genius of Greek wisdom." Gerson Cohen's own approach owes much to this conception of cultural mimesis. It was in this form of assimilation, Cohen argues, that "Ahad Ha'am detected the signs of health and vigor rather than of attrition and decadence." Likewise, it was in this sense of the word that Cohen concluded that "assimilation properly channeled and exploited can . . . become a kind of blessing."<sup>23</sup>

## II: Jewishness as Hybridity

What has been offered to this point is the genealogy of a resonant idea in Jewish history, an idea that strikes one simultaneously as banal and counter-intuitive. In its long and checkered career, assimilation has not merely had a deleterious effect; it has also vitalized Jewish culture through a ceaseless process of engagement with proximate cultures. While ensuring dynamism, it has prevented in turn the emergence of a "normative Judaism," a static, unchanging essence. Therefore, assertions of a pure and pristine Judaism should be taken with a grain of salt. This applies not only to the examples of ancient Alexandria or Muslim Spain, renowned for the high degree of cultural exchange between Jews and others. It applies as well to the supposedly insular bastion of medieval Ashkenaz, where Jews and Christians, despite their mutual hostility to the point of demonization, exchanged goods, ideas, and even ritual practices with one another.<sup>24</sup> Jewish culture, even in this context, was not shaped in splendid isolation; it was manifestly permeable to non-Jewish influences.

The idea that emerges then is of Jewish identity as a hybrid creation, comprised of different strands of influence. Though evident in pre-modern times, this hybrid quality is especially visible in the modern period, as the river metaphors of Eduard Gans and Franz Rosenzweig illustrate. Perhaps the most emblematic figure of such hybridity was Moses Mendelssohn, the great eighteenth-century savant of Berlin, whose commitments to full ritual observance of Jewish law, to a non-coercive religious tradition, and to wide-ranging philosophical study inspired a generation of Jews hungry for cultural and intellectual sustenance. Mendelssohn's example seemed to demonstrate the Enlightenment's tolerance of a new Jewish type, at once observant and enlightened, Jewish and German. And yet, few in Mendelssohn's circle

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of followers (least of all his children) proved capable of holding together  
the balance that their master had so delicately forged. Part of the reason  
for this was that the very tolerance promised by the Enlightenment had  
produced a substantially different result than Mendelssohn had hoped  
for. It beckoned to the Jew to enter mainstream society, while  
simultaneously communicating the need to constrict one's Jewishness.  
Thus, rather than yielding a seamless fusion of Jewish and European  
cultures, the Enlightenment, with its ambiguous double gesture, created  
a bifurcated personality, divided into national and religious, public and  
private, spheres.<sup>25</sup>

In this respect, the Enlightenment acted on the Jew in paradoxical  
fashion. Its terrifying "totalizing" force, so roundly condemned by a  
long line of thinkers from Nietzsche to Horkheimer and Adorno to  
Levinas to Derrida, did not produce a single, essential Jewish identity.  
Rather, it broke it down, fragmented it, leading at times to what Karl  
Marx called in his (in)famous essay "On the Jewish Question" the  
"decomposition of man."<sup>26</sup> Stated otherwise, the Enlightenment  
mandated the radical hybridity that marks the modern Jewish condition.  
Or perhaps more accurately, in a phenomenally ironic twist, we can say  
that it now prescribed the very fluidity that had naturally and  
unremarkably accompanied Jewish assimilation in previous ages.

**III: Diaspora Identities**

The impetus to undertake this reconsideration of the idea of  
assimilation in Jewish history does not come only from Gerson Cohen's  
largely forgotten lecture of 1966. Nor is it merely a function of Salo  
Baron's compelling argument in 1928 that political emancipation did not  
necessarily inaugurate a new era of resplendent progress in Jewish  
history.<sup>27</sup> Rather, it emerges in the midst of similar concerns expressed  
by late-twentieth-century thinkers who operate within the overlapping  
rubrics of cultural studies, postcolonial discourse, and postmodernism.  
Characteristic of this new and evolving "tradition" of writers is the  
exploration, and at times celebration, of hybridity as an existential  
condition.<sup>28</sup> The contributors to this new discourse include novelists  
such as Salman Rushdie and Toni Morrison, as well as a wide range of  
scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, bell hooks, and Homi  
Bhabha. Despite their diverse intellectual missions, these writers share  
a common interest in the interstitial, the space that exists between (and  
renders problematic) fixed cultural boundaries. Whether their primary

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focus be on the Chinese, Indians, Africans, or Caribbeans, these writers share a common language; they speak of the process of cultural formation in terms of diaspora or transnational communities.<sup>29</sup> Here the idea of diaspora, conveying both a sense of a native culture and of displacement from it, describes the struggle of cultural groups to stake out a position in the midst of a fast-moving current. This struggle is a political one, for dispersion invariably exposes the dispersed to the corrosive agents of hegemony and oppression. The interrelationship between dispersion and oppression, however, need not result in total submission or paralysis. In the first instance, it provides impetus to seek social and political empowerment. Moreover, it has encouraged postcolonial thinkers to examine the constructive possibilities of cultural identities that are neither native nor foreign, but dwell in "in-between" spaces," forever resisting the stasis of a fixed identity.<sup>30</sup>

The connection of this new thinking about diaspora identities to the earlier discussion of Jewish assimilation should be clear by now; in the Jewish diaspora experience, assimilation has produced many varieties of hybrid identity. What is less self-evident is the reason why the Jewish case has been largely excluded from this body of writing. I would like to offer a number of brief explanations for the relative neglect of the Jewish diaspora experience, and then conclude with a number of instructive counterexamples. First, the Jewish diaspora experience has not become part of this new discourse because scholars of Jewish studies and other interested parties have been reticent to venture beyond their own intellectual province. For similar reasons, Jewish studies has not been widely integrated into the confusing and energizing debate over multiculturalism and canonicity in the American university.

But there are factors other than the disinclination of Jewish studies scholars. Perhaps more determinative is the widespread impression of scholars outside of Jewish studies that the Jewish historical and cultural experience is part and parcel of a white Eurocentric majority culture. To many, the Jews neither look different nor, in most cases, speak a different language from the majority culture. Further, both in Central and Western Europe prior to World War II and in the contemporary United States, Jews achieved a level of affluence that qualified them to be counted among the most economically privileged members of society. Consequently, they are viewed as not sufficiently different from, or oppressed by, the mainstream to warrant inclusion as a diaspora or transnational group, which becomes in the postcolonial lexicon an unmistakably political designation. There may be other reasons for this

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It seems more in tendency to exclude of the most interesting discourse of diaspora. Needless to say, intellectual are absent. Cornell West and Henry public intellectual in to the Jewish history well as a sincere blacks and Jews in Kwame Anthony (Afrocentric) current in this country and *Father's House*, African racial purification segregation; he promotes cultural exchange to African continent cultural identity.<sup>33</sup>

The affinities cultural formation explicit in Paul Gilroy's *Consciousness*. Gilroy's understandings of throughout the book express his own ultimate origins and of passage, of cease. In celebrating the both from the Jewish movement of Zionism parallels in history

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neglect, including the equation of Zionism with Jewishness, on one hand, and with racist imperialism, on the other.<sup>31</sup> It is not possible within the confines of this essay to offer a fully satisfactory analysis of these points. Nor is there sufficient time to disentangle the problematic association of Jews with the white majority culture. Even less appealing is the task of compiling a table of victimology in which the Jews, alas, would rank quite high.

It seems more important to note interesting counterexamples to the tendency to exclude or devalue the Jewish experience of diaspora. One of the most interesting sites of this countertendency, and of the new discourse of diaspora generally, is in recent black cultural criticism. Needless to say, reports of the decline of the African-American intellectual are absurdly premature.<sup>32</sup> Not only have figures such as Cornell West and Henry Louis Gates reinvigorated the tradition of the public intellectual in America. They have shown uncommon sensitivity to the Jewish historical experience in its creativity and in its tragedy, as well as a sincere commitment to repair fractured relations between blacks and Jews in this country. Along with their Harvard colleague, Kwame Anthony Appiah, they have questioned the essentialist (e.g., Afrocentric) currents flowing within certain academic and social circles in this country and abroad. For instance, in his important book *In My Father's House*, Appiah meticulously dissects the notion of black African racial purity, often used in support of political action and social segregation; he presents instead a detailed analysis of the dynamic cultural exchange that obtained between oppressor and oppressed on the African continent, and that yielded a dynamic and evolving African cultural identity.<sup>33</sup>

The affinities between this kind of model and Jewish models of cultural formation are intriguing and, in fact, have been made quite explicit in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Gilroy's book is a sustained polemic against essentialist understandings of black racial or cultural identity. A recurrent motif throughout the book is Gilroy's reliance on the homonym roots/routes to express his own clear-cut proclivities: "root" connotes a search for ultimate origins and fixed identity. By contrast, "route" conveys a sense of passage, of ceaseless and agitated movement, of dynamic creativity.<sup>34</sup> In celebrating the latter routes of passage, Gilroy draws direct inspiration both from the Jewish experience of diaspora and from the historical movement of Zionism. He urges a more deliberate recognition of the parallels in historical experience between blacks and Jews, both in their

diaspora passages and in their respective oppressions. He also calls for acknowledgment of actual historical influences (e.g., of Zionism on early black nationalist thought).<sup>35</sup>

In an intriguing chapter on the great African-American leader, W. E. B. Dubois, Gilroy makes use of a familiar metaphor to summarize a central theme in one of Dubois' novelistic forays. He observes that in the conclusion of Dubois' *Dark Princess*, the union between a man and woman of different skin colors "is constructed so that the integrity of both its tributaries remains uncompromised by their confluence."<sup>36</sup> Although Gilroy does not relate this river-like metaphor to the writings of earlier Jewish thinkers, the predicament that it describes clearly has parallels. Indeed, it represents an idealized version of the phenomenon of "double consciousness"—a term which appears in the subtitle of Gilroy's book and which he borrows from the work of earlier black thinkers, especially Dubois.<sup>37</sup> Double consciousness, according to Gilroy, is the condition of women and men of African origin who act within and upon Western societies. Their experience does not entail the wholesale abandonment of a native tradition to modernity, but rather its constant and creative reformulation.<sup>38</sup>

What is especially commendable about Gilroy's book is the appreciation that he was not the first to articulate such an idea. Indeed, much of his book is a study of and testimony to past African-American thinkers, especially Dubois, who presciently comprehended the complicated, hybrid nature of black identity. This recognition distinguishes Gilroy from many others in the field of cultural studies, who often give the impression that they are inventing the wheel for the first time. Gilroy pushes hard to affirm the apt remark of Jean-François Lyotard that the postmodern—whatever it may be—is "undoubtedly a part of the modern."<sup>39</sup>

Gilroy's example is germane to our subject in two regards. First, he calls attention to a process of black cultural formation that is analogous to the process of Jewish assimilation described throughout this paper; moreover, he makes explicit the virtues of comparing the historical experiences of Jews and blacks. Such a comparative perspective can produce, as it does in Gilroy's book, a genuinely humanizing effect. Second, Gilroy chooses to position himself within a broad tradition of African diaspora history, and thereby adds an important measure of historical richness and depth to his meditations.<sup>40</sup>

In contemporary considerations of the Jewish community (whose leaders frequently inveigh against the evils of assimilation), it would be

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advisable to follow Gilroy's lead in incorporating both comparative and historical dimensions: that is, to remember first that groups other than Jews have faced similar challenges in preserving communal integrity; and second, that a measure of historical perspective can provide nuance to our understanding of assimilation. Recognizing that the problematic of assimilation is neither unique to the Jews nor unique within Jewish history is a first and important step toward comprehending the predicament of the Jewish community in the United States and throughout the world. This recognition can temper the impulse to overreact—to adopt positions that are fundamentalist, chauvinist, or in some way dismissive of the benefits of intergroup cultural exchange.

Various efforts have been made recently to articulate a vision of Jewish culture that celebrates the vitalizing potential of assimilation. The first, rather comic vision emanates from a man impersonating a writer named Philip Roth in the novel *Operation Shylock* by the author of the same name. The fictional *faux* Roth is the ideological father of a movement called "Diasporism" that "seeks to promote the dispersion of the Jews" from Israel "to those very lands (i.e., Europe) where everything once flourished."<sup>41</sup> A bit more serious, though not without its comic features, is the vision of an extraterritorial Jewish religious culture offered by Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin in a 1993 article in *Critical Inquiry*.<sup>42</sup> The Boyarins' call for a deterritorialized Judaism culminates with a curious evocation of Neturei Karta, the ultra-Orthodox and anti-Zionist sect based in Jerusalem. Far from illuminating the sort of dynamic identity-formation that the authors favor, Neturei Karta holds to a thoroughly essentialist view of Jewish identity, indeed, a kind of religious Canaanism severed both from Zionism and more conventional Jewish orthodoxy.

Both the fictional Philip Roth and the Boyarins present their respective diasporic visions *ex nihilo*, removed from the tortuous historical path of modern Jewish culture. And here, I would like to make a final point that bespeaks my own disciplinary grounding as an historian. The current cultural climate in which anxiety over group identities is expressed, be they African-American, Latino, or Jewish, has interesting historical precedents. Similar debates have occurred, for instance, in France over the course of the last thirty years, with a particularly interesting Jewish coloring.<sup>43</sup> In this country, attempts to balance the assimilatory impulse and the instinct to preserve group integrity long preceded the 1990s. In the second decade of this century, a group of intellectuals sought to lay the framework for a "cultural

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pluralism" that encouraged the free flow of ideas, customs, and habits in American society without entailing the loss of distinct group traits. Centered around the philosopher Horace Kallen, this largely Jewish circle quite naturally focused on the trials and tribulations of American Jews. Even the non-Jews in the circle, such as the writer Randolph Bourne, shared this emphasis.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, it was Bourne who asserted that the idea of "transnationalism," of a complex of identities that did not reside only in citizenship, was "a Jewish idea."<sup>45</sup> Bourne lived in an age and milieu in which the rapid currents of immigration rendered problematic "the old tight geographical groupings of nationality."<sup>46</sup> Navigating these currents without disappearing was an all-consuming challenge. Bourne's own instinct was to embrace "the so-called hyphenate"—the very essence of a hybrid cultural identity—for it "has actually been our salvation."<sup>47</sup>

It is useful to remember Bourne's discussion today, eighty years after it was published. His awareness of the tension-filled path of groups in a liberal political order anticipated both the sentiment and language of observers in our own day. At the same time, Bourne's gaze was fixed on the Jews, whose experience he believed emblematic of a much larger cultural phenomenon. Recalling Randolph Bourne can and should encourage the integration of the Jewish experience into the unfolding narrative of multicultural identity formation in the United States. In the same vein, recalling Bourne's essay, and especially the illuminating lecture by Gerson Cohen from 1966, provides the requisite historical perspective on a condition, namely assimilation, that has defined Jewish history since its inception, and will continue to vitalize and haunt Jewish communal existence well into the future.

#### NOTES

1. The midrash from *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* is included in the monumental Bialik-Ravnitski compilation, *Sefer ha-Agadah*, revised edition (Tel Aviv, 1961), 604.
2. See Gans' second presidential address to the Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden of April 28, 1822 in S. Rubaschoff, "Erstlinge der Entjudung. Drei Reden von Eduard Gans in 'Kulturverein,'" *Der jüdische Wille* 2 (1919). I have consulted here the English translation in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds. *The Jew in the Modern World* (New York, 1980), 192. Interestingly, though not surprisingly, the Hebrew version of Gans' speech excludes the sentence "to merge does not mean to perish." Cf.

- S. Rubaschoff, "Erstlinge der Entjudung," *Der jüdische Wille* 2 (1919).
3. Simon Rawidowicz, "The Jewish Question: A Jewish Perspective," companion of Jews throughout the world, *The Jewish Question* (Philadelphia, 1974), 21.
4. In his important article "The Jewish Question in Germany," *Wissenschaft des Judentums im deutschen Reich* 1 (1880), 1-10.
5. See Ucko, *passim*, and Gans, "The Jewish Question," *Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden* 2 (1822), 3-28.
6. See Hans Günther, *The Jews of Germany* (Tübingen, 1965), 113.
7. A curious model for the "Jewish Question" is found in Friedländer, the Jewish Question, Teller in which the form of the performance of Christianity performs the ceremonial of the Church, the dogmas of the Church, is excerpted in Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz, eds. *The Jew in the Modern World* (New York, 1980), 192.
8. The irony stems from the "Jewish Question" that the problems into the Jewish Question, the dissolution of tradition, the desire to assimilate. On the other hand, Semitism, is thus directly related to assimilation possesses the Jewish Question. See Baron, "Ghetto and Assimilation," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 1 (1950), 515-526.
9. The story is related by Glatzer, in "Franz Rosenzweig and the Jewish Question," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 1 (1950), 515-526.
10. See S. H. Bergson, "The Jewish Question," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 1 (1950), 515-526.
11. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of David* (Berlin, 1937), 192.

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5. Rubaschoff, "Erstlinge der Entjudung," 112, to the Hebrew translation by  
 Rubaschoff (later Zalman Shazar) in *Ore dorot* (Jerusalem, 1971), 367.

3. Simon Rawidowicz observes that fears of extinction have been a constant  
 companion of Jews throughout the ages: "He who studies Jewish history will  
 readily discover that there was hardly a generation in the Diaspora period  
 which did not consider itself the final link in Israel's chain." Rawidowicz,  
 "Israel: The Ever-dying People," Idem., *Studies in Jewish Thought*  
 (Philadelphia, 1974), 211.

4. In his important article on the Verein, Sinai Ucko refers to its members as  
 "children of assimilation." Sinai Ucko, "Geistesgeschichtliche Grundlagen der  
 Wissenschaft des Judentums," in Kurt Wilhelm, ed. *Wissenschaft des*  
*Judentums im deutschen Sprachbereich*, vol. 1 (Tübingen, 1967), 320.

5. See Ucko, *passim*, and Ismar Schorsch, "Breakthrough into the Past: The  
*Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden*," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*  
 33 (1988), 3-28.

6. See Hans Günther Reissner, *Eduard Gans: Ein Leben in Vormärz*  
 (Tübingen, 1965), 113.

7. A curious model for this status surfaces in the 1799 proposal from David  
 Friedländer, the Jewish Enlightenment figure, to Pastor Wilhelm Abraham  
 Teller in which the former volunteered to convert to Christianity provided that  
 the performance of Christian rituals not be seen as "a sign that he who  
 performs the ceremonies is tacitly acknowledging that he accepts out of faith  
 the dogmas of the Church." Teller rejected Friedländer's request. This letter  
 is excerpted in Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*, 99.

8. The irony stems from Baron's important claim in "Ghetto and  
 Emancipation" that the advent of modernity introduced new and vexing  
 problems into the Jewish condition. Among the ills which Baron diagnosed is  
 the dissolution of traditional communal bonds and, by implication, a fervent  
 desire to assimilate. Our appropriation of the term "lachrymose conception,"  
 which Baron first used to describe the historiographical infatuation with anti-  
 Semitism, is thus directed against the implication in Baron's essay that  
 assimilation possesses but one connotation: a process leading to self-denial.  
 See Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation," *The Menorah Journal* (June 1928),  
 515-526.

9. The story is related by Rosenzweig's student and close friend, Nahum N.  
 Glatzer, in "Franz Rosenzweig: The Story of a Conversion," in Idem., *Essays*  
*in Jewish Thought* (University, Alabama, 1978), 232.

10. See S. H. Bergmann's introduction to the Hebrew translation of  
 Rosenzweig's essays, *Naharayim* (Jerusalem, 1960), x.

11. Franz Rosenzweig, *Zweistromland: Kleinere Schriften zur Religion und*  
*Philosophie* (Berlin, 1926).

12. Philip V. Bohlman, *"The Land Where Two Streams Flow": Music in the German-Jewish Community of Israel* (Urbana and Chicago, 1989), xi.
13. *Ibid.*, xii.
14. Gershom Scholem, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism," in *Idem.*, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), 282–303. Though this process can be characterized as dialectical, in that each culture assumes part of the other in producing a new version of itself, it is important to note that Rosenzweig had abandoned his earlier prewar interest in Hegel. While studying with Friedrich Meinecke at Freiburg, Rosenzweig produced a dissertation on Hegel and the state (published only in 1920). Following the war, however, Rosenzweig had moved away from his study of German idealism to the project of "das neue Denken," a new Jewish way of thinking. See Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago, 1994), 68.
15. Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley, 1994). This method allows the historical observer to imagine a number of possible occurrences or outcomes in the past rather than submit to the probability of a single occurrence that appears consistent with the trajectory of later historical events.
16. For an excellent analysis of the range of cultural possibilities, see Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven, 1996).
17. This is not to diminish the importance of the forces of "dissimilation," as Shulamit Volkov has formulated it, in German-Jewish culture during and after the First World War. Clearly, figures such as Rosenzweig were in retreat from the ideal of assimilation as a form of self-denial. Their search to recover a meaningful Jewish tradition reflected rejection of the older ideal, as symbolized by the *Taufjude*. For a discussion of this quest for Jewish meaning, see Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923* (Madison, Wisc., 1982), or David N. Myers, "'Distant Relatives Happening onto the Same Inn': The Meeting of East and West as Literary Theme and Cultural Ideal," *Jewish Social Studies* 2 (1995), 75–100. Notwithstanding this quest, Rosenzweig was—by temperament, culture, and aspirations—an unmistakable product of the German cultural world.
18. According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, prior to 1965, Jews married non-Jews in 9% of the cases; in 1985, the rate of marriage between Jews and non-Jews was 52%. See Barry A. Kosmin, et. al., *Highlights of the 1990 CJF National Jewish Population Survey* (New York, 1991), 14.
19. Gerson Cohen, *The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History*, Commencement Address/June 1966, Hebrew Teachers College, Brookline, Mass., 5–6.

20. *Ibid.*, 5. The phenomenon is a fascinating contrast of Hebrew into Greek, by the language of Western discourse, one, born of an age in which Jewish thought. See Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Discourses*. Rowe for calling Levinas into context.
21. Cohen, *The Blessing of Assimilation*, point in discussing two aspects of ancient Jewish history. His intent on adopting a more incremental and uncoerced path absorbed into Second Temple Judaism, the Hasmoneans," *Modern Jewish Assimilation, A History* (1992), 1–12.
22. See Ahad Ha'am, *Ha-derakhim*, vol. 1 (1901).
23. Cohen, *The Blessing of Assimilation*.
24. The entire quest for Jewish meaning in medieval Europe has been discussed in an article of Yisrael Yuvatzky, "The Quest for Jewish Meaning in Medieval Europe," may have been absorbed into the mainstream, suggesting that the late medieval quest for Jewish meaning, "Ha-nakam veka-kedusha," *Zion* 58 (1993).
25. Jews profoundly influenced the culture, reflected in the famous phrase, "The Jew is at home." See Michael Brenner, "The Jew at Home," by Y. L. Gordon in *History of the Jewish People*, *of Russian Jewry* (New York, 1991).
26. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," Robert C. Tucker, 33.
27. See Baron, "Ghetto," volume 1.
28. See, for instance, Gerson Cohen, Williams and Laura Williams, *The Jewish Question in Jewish History* (New York, 1991).

*Streams Flow*": Music in the  
and Chicago, 1989), xi.

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*imilation in Jewish History*,  
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20. *Ibid.*, 5. The phenomenon of rabbis' studying and expounding in Greek is a fascinating contrast to Emmanuel Levinas' longstanding aim of translating Hebrew into Greek, by which he means Jewish thought into the universalist language of Western discourse. Levinas' ambition is a highly self-conscious one, born of an age in which Jews themselves were more familiar with "Greek" than Jewish thought. See Annette Aronowicz's introduction to Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington, IN, 1990), ix-xi. I thank Bill Rowe for calling Levinas' famous "translation" project to my attention in this context.

21. Cohen, *The Blessing of Assimilation*, 7. Uriel Rappaport makes a similar point in discussing two ways of understanding the term "Hellenization" in ancient Jewish history. The first refers to a self-conscious political movement intent on adopting a "Greek way of life"; the second refers to a more incremental and unconscious process by which Hellenistic culture was absorbed into Second Temple Judaism. See Rappaport, "The Hellenization of the Hasmoneans," Menachem Mor, ed., *Studies in Jewish Civilization 2: Jewish Assimilation, Acculturation, and Accommodation* (Lanham, Maryland, 1992), 1-12.

22. See Ahad Ha'am's classic essay, "Hikui ve-hitbolelut," in *Al parashat ha-derakhim*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1921), 169-177.

23. Cohen, *The Blessing of Assimilation*, 9.

24. The entire question of interaction between Jews and Christians in medieval Europe has received new attention following the controversial 1993 article of Yisrael Yuval in which he argued that Jewish martyrological motifs may have been absorbed into Christian blood libels against Jews, thereby suggesting that the latter were not simply Christian inventions. See Yuval, "Ha-nakam vaha-kelalah, ha-dam vaha-'alilah: mi-'alilot kedoshim le-'alilot dam," *Zion* 58 (1993), 33-90.

25. Jews profoundly internalized the demand to divide their identities, as reflected in the famous Haskalah charge to be "a man in the street and a Jew at home." See Michael Stanislawski's interpretation of this line from a poem by Y. L. Gordon in *For Whom Do I Toil? Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry* (New York, 1988), 51.

26. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 33-34.

27. See Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation," and the introduction to this volume.

28. See, for instance, Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (New York, 1994), 402.

29. For a helpful survey of recent shifts in the use of the term "diaspora," see Michel Bruneau, "Espaces et territoires de diasporas," in Idem., *Diasporas* (Monpellier, 1995), 5–23. See also Gabriel Sheffer, ed., *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (New York, 1986).
30. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994), 1. See also Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 190.
31. Stuart Hall, for instance, explicitly rejects the notion of diaspora that refers to "those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland. . . . This is the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising, form of 'ethnicity.' We have seen the fate of the people of Palestine at the hands of this backward-looking conception of diaspora—and the complicity of the West with it." Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 401.
32. See the March 6, 1995 edition of *The New Republic* devoted to "The Decline of the Black Intellectual," and especially Leon Wieseltier's attack on Cornell West, 31–36. Ironically, in the same month that Wieseltier's piece appeared, Robert S. Boynton devoted a long article to the reemergence of the American public intellectual in the form of African-American thinkers, noting the interesting parallels with the Jewish intellectuals of New York from a previous generation. See Boynton, "The New Intellectuals," *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 1995), 53–70.
33. K. A. Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (London, 1992).
34. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 19.
35. Ibid., 205–217.
36. According to Gilroy, the conclusion "offers an image of hybridity and intermixture that is especially valuable because it gives no ground to the suggestions that cultural fusion involves betrayal, loss, corruption, or dilution." Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 144.
37. For Dubois, double consciousness meant that "one ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." This passage from Dubois' *The Souls of Black Folk* is quoted in Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 126.
38. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 187–191.
39. Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?," in *Modernism/Postmodernism*, ed. Peter Brooker (London, 1992), 148. But cf. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 42.
40. Gilroy fails to mention in this regard the sociologist, Orlando Patterson whose 1977 book *Ethnic Chauvinism* offers interesting insights into the historical path and social status of the Jews. Patterson identifies them as a

classic "symbiotic et  
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*Ethnic Chauvinism:*

41. Philip Roth, *Ope*

42. See Daniel and Jo  
of Jewish Identity," C

43. French-Jewish t  
Finkelkraut, have ger  
identity in the Diaspor  
attempt by Richard M  
minority rights status f  
the-century Bundists  
*peuple en diaspora* (P  
*on the Seine: Jewish*  
14–19.

44. The social ideal  
cultural "symphony,"  
the "melting pot" that  
in this period. For a f  
Rischin, "The Jews an  
in Gladys Rosen, ed.  
York, 1978).

45. Randolph S. B  
*Menorah Journal* 2 (

46. Bourne, "The Je

47. Ibid., 278.

of the term "diaspora," see "Diasporas," in Idem., *Diasporas* (London, 1994), 1. See also *and Double Consciousness*

the notion of diaspora that can only be secured in relation to the imperialising, the fate of the people of diaspora—and Cultural Identity and Diaspora,"

in *Republic* devoted to "The Myth of Leon Wieseltier's attack on diaspora that Wieseltier's piece alludes to the reemergence of the trans-American thinkers, noting the actuals of New York from a Jewish Intellectuals," *The Atlantic* in *the Philosophy of Culture*

offers an image of hybridity and diaspora it gives no ground to the loss, corruption, or dilution."

argument that "one never feels his two thoughts, two unreconciled whose dogged strength alone emerge from Dubois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, 126.

the Question: What Is Post-diaspora? ed. Peter Brooker (London, 1994), 42.

sociologist, Orlando Patterson offers interesting insights into the diaspora. Patterson identifies them as a

classic "symbiotic ethnic group," who possess highly developed skills in adapting to and surviving in alien societies. Groups such as the Jews thus inhabit a "transsovereign" plane of existence, an idea that resembles the idea of transnationalism mentioned at the end of this paper. See Orlando Patterson, *Ethnic Chauvinism: The Reactionary Impulse* (New York, 1977), 63.

41. Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (New York, 1993), 44.

42. See Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Summer 1993), 693ff.

43. French-Jewish thinkers from Emmanuel Levinas to his student, Alain Finkielkraut, have generated interesting insights into the formation of Jewish identity in the Diaspora over the past half-century. Especially interesting is the attempt by Richard Marienstras and the Cercle du Gaston Crémieux to gain minority rights status for French Jews, a position that harks back to the turn-of-the-century Bundists and autonomists. See Richard Marienstras, *Être un juif en diaspora* (Paris, 1975), 191–204. See also Judith Friedlander, *Vilna on the Seine: Jewish Intellectuals in France since 1968* (New Haven, 1990), 14–19.

44. The social ideal toward which this group hoped to move was that of a cultural "symphony," which stood in direct contrast to the guiding metaphor of the "melting pot" that so colored the immigrant experience in the United States in this period. For a fine treatment of these competing metaphors, see Moses Rischin, "The Jews and Pluralism: Toward an American Freedom Symphony," in Gladys Rosen, ed., *Jewish Life in America: Historical Perspectives* (New York, 1978).

45. Randolph S. Bourne, "The Jew and Trans-National America," *The Menorah Journal* 2 (December 1916), 280.

46. Bourne, "The Jew and Trans-National America," 279.

47. Ibid., 278.