



## Dispatches from a Jewish Studies Conference

By Libby Garland

Each year, the [Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania](#) gathers fellows from a range of institutions in the United States and abroad to research and exchange ideas around a particular theme; the year culminates in a conference at which fellows present their work. This year's theme was "[Modern Jewry and the Arts](#)," a rubric on the contemporary and wide-ranging end of the Jewish Studies spectrum that the Center explores.

I attended the Center's [annual conference](#) this May. Many of the papers were interesting in their own right, exploring such themes as the intersections between the political and the aesthetic, or the ways conflicts between nationalist and diasporic identities colored Jewish art.

But what struck me as most interesting was the extent to which the event reflected—both analytically and interpersonally—some of the major tensions in Jewish Studies and, indeed, in contemporary Jewish life. During the final session, these tensions surfaced in an emotional, heated debate. Meant to be a wrap-up, “whither Jewish Studies...” kind of session, it became instead a forum in which conference participants ended up in disagreement over what, in fact, the proper scope of Jewish Studies should be, and who was truly entitled to engage in Jewish Studies.

At stake were the premises of the conference, and of the center itself. Was there any utility at all in bringing together art historians or scholars of popular culture (people working on topics such as the American exhibition history of Ben Shahn, Yiddish vaudeville, Jews in the jazz recording business, or nostalgic recollections of New York Jews' 1950s television careers) not necessarily versed in “traditional” Jewish texts, with those steeped in Jewish Studies as it has been, with its *Wissenschaft* roots, its focus on linguistic, intellectual and textual tradition, and its more particularist understanding of Jewish history? Were these fields at all “additive,” i.e. could they be put together to achieve some more complete understanding of what “Jewish” has been, is, and might be? Were these groups of scholars part of the same intellectual enterprise, and were people from each camp qualified to comment on the work of the other?

In short, “what and who counts as Jewish?” was, as so often in Jewish events (academic or otherwise), a major sore point. Despite wishing that we could all

just get over it already and move on to other things, I found the ways this tension spun out at the Center's conference rather interesting testimony to the inseparability of identities and intellectual work, even in professional forums where we're not meant to be "doing that." That is, the question of "what counts as Jewish" (or "Jewish Studies-worthy"), in terms of *both* the objects and subjects of study, was paramount.

But as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett noted in the concluding session, reflecting both on the conference and on the Center's year-long exploration of "Modern Jewry and the Arts," the inverse problem was also in play: Why ask the "Jewish question" at all? Asking the question in the context of Jewish Studies, for which "Jewish" is constitutive of the field itself, is one thing. It is another to ask the question in the context of fields that have been shaped by different questions and methodologies, such as art history. In what way is any given phenomenon (e.g. Jews in the recording business) "Jewish?" When is "Jewish" a biographical irrelevancy, and when is it constitutive? In other words, what does "Jewish" help explain, whether about Jews or about anything else—art, technology, culture, the market, nationalism, race, politics? What are the analytic consequences of defining a phenomenon or research problem in "Jewish" terms? What gets added, and what gets obscured?

Similarly, Yale art historian Walter Cahn noted, in the course of his paper on painter Max Liebermann's renditions of Amsterdam's Jewish Quarter, that Jewish Studies is often a process of "looking for the Jewish elements" in history or culture even when, or sometimes because, the objects of our studies may have been trying precisely to avoid such categorization. This, too, is worth attending to. When is inclusion in "Jewish" a retrospective or unlooked-for act, and what does that say about the changing sensibilities, ideologies, priorities, and power of the (Jewish) spectators and theorizers?

Indeed, many of the panelists focused exactly upon the boundary between explicit and implicit, open and hidden Jewishness, as well as upon the problem of understanding shifting boundaries between Jewishness and "everything else"—other identities, other practices, other communities. Jeff Shandler, for instance, spoke about Jewishness in 1950s television as something that at the time functioned as a kind of "encrypted presence," as Jewish writers and producers created Italian or Irish characters that—like *Seinfeld's* George and Elaine—played out New York Jewish stories for a national audience. Despite Jews' retrospective desire to understand this era of television as a particularly Jewish cultural moment, he argued, Jews at the time were governed by what Henry Popkin, writing for *Commentary* in the 1950s, dubbed a "sha-sha" mentality—meaning that keeping Jewishness quiet was the goal (even while the expression of that practice was described in a Jewish phrase). Other conference speakers, too, were searching for ways to describe—and claim as Jewish—similar patterns: the silencing, absence, or blurring of artists' Jewishness; the inevitable gaps and repressions in transmission of family stories.

Many of the panelists were tracing, in fact, a phenomenon they were also enacting: the cultural, philosophical, and political repositioning that accompany generational change, and the tensions such shifts produce. Norman Kleeblatt began his presentation on the [Jewish Museum's](#) upcoming show *Mirroring Evil* – a sure-to-be-controversial exhibit of contemporary art that incorporates Nazi imagery -- with a story he invoked as a parallel to the Museum's dilemma, which also serves as an allegory for the Penn conference itself that we were attending. His story was about a recent [conference at Harvard](#) dealing with the contentious theme of black stereotypes in new African American art. The event ended up revealing painful fault lines between an older African American generation that stood for an art of "positive images," achievement and battling stereotypes, and a younger generation ready to question everything, including the boundaries of African American identity itself, and ready to portray a much messier, postmodern, morally confused aesthetic and political universe. This is not to say that the two conferences were exactly parallel. Rather, it is to observe that generational differences among scholars and artists are reflected as differences in how each cohort understands the communities they "represent" (both as members and as portrayers) and that this can make for deep divides that are at once personal and intellectual.

Moreover, such divides are not strictly theoretical. At stake in the definition of Jewish Studies are the material and political issues conference participants face in their home institutions and in their professional community at large: hiring and tenure decisions, allocation of funds, fellowships and awards, publications, and so on. Consider, for instance, a question that gets posed to candidates for certain fellowships or jobs in Jewish Studies: "Which Jewish languages do you know?" This has meant, first and foremost, Hebrew and Aramaic, and to a lesser extent Yiddish and Ladino. Consider, however, the implications of accepting English, German, Spanish, Arabic, or Hungarian as equally legitimate answers to this question. The fault line between scholars who regard the latter as acceptable and those who do not indicates the nature of the ongoing "redistricting" battles that will either make for upheavals in the field in years to come, or else leave "Jewish Studies" as a secluded discipline that focuses on a small range of scholarship while the broader study of Jewish culture and history happens elsewhere.

As the field—or rather the collection of scholarly enterprises for which "Jewish Studies" serves as an umbrella—shifts, and it is shifting, it is important to recognize that there are real power issues involved. Thus my wish that we might "all just get along," and be generous in our inclusiveness, is somewhat naïve. Still, my sense is that a transition to a broader, more interdisciplinary Jewish Studies, with all the tensions this configuration implies, is in process.