The Wandering Signifier: Rhetoric of Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary, by Erin Graff Zivin. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. 222 pp. \$21.95.

Erin Graff Zivin's *The Wandering Signifier: Rhetoric of Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary* explores representations of Jewish presence in the region in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin American literature. The book does not present itself as a study of Jewish experience and identity, but is instead an investigation of how literary representations of "Jewishness" bear witness to conflicts that accompany the historical transformation of Latin American societies during the previous two centuries. The key distinction between representations authored by Jewish writers on the one hand, and literary portraits of "Jewishness" by authors who do not necessarily meet any definition of Jewishness (and who in some cases apparently had very limited first-hand experience of "real Jews"), establishes a productive tension. Graff Zivin acknowledges that cultural representations of "Jewishness" have frequently coincided with—at times helping to conceal—real experiences of violence and discrimination against Jewish communities. At the same time, she insists on the distinction between "Jewish" and "Jewishness" in order to underscore the crucial role played by representation (and thus fabrication, distortion, and figuration) in the unfolding of "real experience." "Jewishness" describes a rhetorical function of naming "differences" that have not been fully assimilated into dominant national and regional narratives of belonging in Latin America. Graff Zivin argues that these literary representations have the potential to secure prevailing hegemonic configurations (by providing negative examples of what the nation must overcome or repress) or to destabilize these operations (by preserving or reintroducing the thought of a remainder that has yet to be assimilated into dialectics of self and other, familiar and stranger, and so on).

The Wandering Signifier contains an introduction, three central chapters and a conclusion. Following the initial chapter, which clarifies the concept of "Jewishness," the central chapters are organized around three concepts associated with popular views of Judaism. The first concept is *diagnosis*, or "Jewishness" as constructed by nineteenth-century medico-scientific (positivist and social Darwinist) discourse. In its most extreme manifestation, "Jewishness" is equated with a biopolitical "pathology" that infects the nation while threatening to undermine key philosophical, political, and cultural distinctions between inside and outside, friend and enemy, citizen and foreigner. Graff Zivin examines the association of Jewish life with social decadence and biological disease in canonical and lesser known nineteenth-century Latin American novels by Jorge Isaacs (*María*, 1867), Julián Martel (*La bolsa*, 1891), Rubén

Darío (*Los raros*, 1896), José Ingenieros (*Al margen de la ciencia*, 1908) and José Asunción Silva (*De sobremesa*, 1925). The chapter concludes with two contemporary Hispanic Jewish women writers, Luisa Futoransky (*De pe a pa*, 1986) and Margo Glantz ("Zapatos," 1991), who submit this tradition to an active re-reading by proposing new, less derisive juxtapositions of Jewishness with disease and deformity, while also deviating from traditional ways of affirming Jewish belonging.

The second concept, *transaction*, exploits popular associations of Jewishness with money and prostitution. Graff Zivin reminds us that in medieval Europe it was Jews who were relegated to the profession of money-lending while also being inflicted with the social stigmas associated with this vocation (the Jew as greedy, as hoarder, as conspiratorial manipulator of national and international finance). As literary topoi, however, both money lending and prostitution open up new spaces in nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels for reflecting on social interaction as perhaps the two forms of modern sociality par excellence: sex and commodity exchange. The works discussed in this chapter include Martel's *La bolsa*, Jorge Luis Borges's "Emma Zunz" (1948), Hilário Tácito's *Madame Pommeroy* (1920), Clara Beter's *Versos de una* . . . (1926) and Rodolfo Enrique Fogwill's *Vivir afuera* (1998).

While the last of the three terms, *conversion*, unavoidably brings with it the old Spanish obsession with the myth of genealogical purity (*pureza de sangre*), Graff Zivin also uses this term to initiate competing interrogations of gender and sexual difference. In comparing Isaac's classical novel *María*, Justo Sierra O'Reilly's *La hija del judío* (1848), and Alfred Dias Gomes's *O Santo Inquérito* (1966)— which portray Jewish fathers with daughters who convert to Christianity—with a pair of novels portraying Jewish male converts, Heitor Carlos Cony's *Pessach: A travessia* (1967) and Mario Vargas Llosa's *El hablador* (1987), she asks: "What is it about the female body that makes it an easily convertible signifier? . . . Why must all three daughters die, while the [male] converts . . . of Cony and Vargas Llosa survive?" (p. 138). The answer to these questions emerges with a comparative analysis of literary treatments of sexual difference, most notably in the figure of the circumcised male in Cony's *Pessach*, which, more than simply providing an image of "Jewish difference," also seems to function as a sign of what Freud calls castration. The mark of castration is a cut suffered by the subject, but it is also the condition of possibility of becoming a social subject in the first place. I note, parenthetically, that the discussion of sexual difference and castration is a product of my own reading of *The Wandering Signifier* and does not appear in Graff Zivin's own commentary. It seems to me, moreover, that Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis

would have provided an enriching theoretical component for her analysis of these themes.

The conclusion explores what Graff Zivin terms "the limits of representation," a motif she develops through readings of Borges's short story "Deutsches Requiem" (1946), Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1980), and Sergio Chejfec's *Los planetas* (1999). This formulation of the limit, which is indebted in large part to Emmanuel Levinas's reflections on ethical experience as irreducible to the language of ontology, underscores a paradox concerning the possibility or impossibility of literature "speaking" of something that exceeds or resists established modes of representation. For one, Graff Zivin describes how Borges's prose alludes to "the hither side of representation, the exception to being" (p. 163) through the use of textual and rhetorical devices (ellipses, footnotes, ambiguity, humor). However—and here is the other side of the paradox—in *signaling* a reality that does not appear among the myriad of representations that comprise a literary world, Borges's text cannot help but reintroduce the traces of representation at the very point where representation supposedly falls short. If representation is constitutively inadequate for our experience of the world and of others, as Levinas suggests, at the same time Borges's writing leaves us with the knowledge that there is no such thing as a complete escape from representation (except, perhaps, in psychosis).

The Wandering Signifier makes an important and much-needed contribution to Latin American literary studies. The book develops a series of thematic explorations that have previously been understudied in this field, while also making a convincing argument as to the importance of Jewishness for Latin American literary and social history. Moreover, Graff Zivin's readings are enlivened by her sophisticated grasp of difficult theoretical debates (Levinas and Derrida in particular). While I do not possess the expertise to speak about the book's relevance for Jewish Studies, it seems clear to me—speaking as a Latin Americanist—that in *The Wandering Signifier* Graff Zivin has established a new and vital bridge between two fields that have avoided sustained consideration of their points in common for too long now.

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