

GOING BEYOND, GOING AGAINST: NEW
STUDIES ON JEWISH LATIN AMERICANS
CONTRA LA CORRIENTE: NUEVOS ESTUDIOS
SOBRE LOS LATINOAMERICANOS JUDÍOS

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Introduction

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Going beyond, going against—this research dossier on Jewish Latin Americans aims to fill lacunae and map new areas in Jewish Latin American historiography, bibliography and cultural studies. It covers a broad range, illustrating the vitality and innovativeness of contemporary scholarship.

Going beyond—our aim is to insert less heard voices into the conversation on Jewish Latin Americans, voices of women, Sephardim, and philosophers, voices of crypto-Jews and artists. We want to go beyond the more commonly heard sounds coming from established communal, institutional sources to present a fuller range of Jewish Latin American experiences. We emphasize these experiences as *Latin American*, an integral part of the area's history and culture. Publishing this collection of texts in a journal of Latin American studies like *EIAL* therefore seems appropriate.

Going against—the articles in the dossier often challenge accepted ideas about Jewish Latin Americans in the spirit of providing updated insights, and incorporating them into larger scholarly trends. What role has Zionism really

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played in the life of Jewish Latin Americans, aside from the accepted goal of leaving the Diaspora and relocating to Israel, a move that most Jews on the continent have avoided? Were the bonds of flesh and blood and a heritage transmitted by women the only “family” ties that held New World crypto-Jews together? What about the anonymous and ignored immigrant illustrators who tried to reconstruct post-Holocaust Polish Jewish cultural memory in Buenos Aires on the covers of memorial books, dialoguing with the Yiddish texts? Can post-Holocaust European philosophy in its negotiations with liberationist Latin American thought offer an historical opening for a hybrid Latin American Jewish philosophy?

These essays connect with key directions in current scholarship, focusing on “history from below,” rather than on “official” stories; on rethinking early modern history, the Atlantic, and the scholarship on crypto-Jews and colonial Latin American societies; on remapping research on Sephardic Jews and women in Latin America, and the place of “beauty” in configuring nationality; and on highlighting the image—especially the image as it interacts with writing—as a constructor of narrative and the repository of remembrance.

Malena Chinski’s article, “Illustrating Memory: The Book Covers of the Collection *Dos poylishe yidntum* (“Polish Jewry”), Buenos Aires 1946-1966” focuses on a specific “paratext”: the images presented on the book covers of the 175 volumes published in Argentina as an homage to Polish Jewry, the largest ethno-national collective victim of the Nazi genocide. Chinski analyzes the trajectory of the mostly unknown graphic artists who created these works; the moments in the history of Polish Jews condensed into the illustrations, and the images as potential vehicles of Polish Jewish cultural memory. In doing so, she sheds light on little studied material.

Adriana Brodsky traces the history of the beauty contests organized by the Sephardi communities in Argentina, which elected “Miss Sefaradí” and “Reina Esther” while raising money for the Jewish National Fund. The piece ponders the role played by Zionism in the configuration of ethnic and national identities among Jewish-Argentines of Moroccan, Syrian, and Ottoman origins. Zionism provided a platform from which Sephardim constructed an identity as a single collective, regardless of their geographical origin prior to migration to Argentina. As Brodsky emphasizes, these beauty contests also force us to examine the ways in which Argentina and its culture shaped the performance of ethnic events in the Southern Cone. Sephardim used respectable middle-class Argentine halls, music bands and concepts of beauty when organizing these contests. At the same time, they merged these ideals with the traditions of Purim carnivals in order to create a contest that was as Argentine as it was Sephardi and Jewish.

The development of a Latin American Jewish philosophy is at the center of Santiago Slabodsky and Emmanuel Taub's pioneering essay. They survey the conversations between European and Latin American philosophy, explore the possibilities of leaving behind the centrality of the object to privilege space as a unit of analysis, and point to the hybrid nature of the emerging Latin American Jewish philosophy. Their work is a first step in a barely taken direction.

Without neglecting the importance of the nation (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, etc.), trans-nationalism has played a crucial role in the life of many Jewish Latin Americans, as these essays clearly evidence. From the earliest underground communities of crypto-Jews, many Jewish Latin Americans have formed part of trans-national networks of kinship, trade, political activism, ideological commitment, memory, and cultural and linguistic practice. Ronnie Perelis' article analyzes this global network of *conversos* and open Jews living throughout Europe and the Americas in the colonial period. These disparate groups were connected to each other through a complex web of familial, economic and cultural ties. Commercial links were solidified through marriage, so that they were intertwined with a longing for family in the metaphorical and spiritual terms.

From early on, many Jews have challenged narrow definitions of nationality, and have sought to enlarge the social space by introducing dimensions often muffled or resisted by the existing order. They have done so in many ways, whether it is by inserting Yiddish and the rich cultural heritage it represents into the mix of Latin American languages, offering models for memory work through Holocaust commemoration, insisting on the right to believe or disbelieve otherwise, or co-existing in multiple "homelands" at the same time. Each of these essays underlines this going-against-narrowness in some manner.

Alongside the four research articles included in this issue, Christina E. Chavarría's contribution points to the need to explore new archives in order to better understand certain facets of Jewish Latin American experience. Her essay reviews the holdings from Latin America and Spain of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum which are crucial for research on Latin America during the 1930s and the 1940s, and invites scholars to make use of these rich resources.

The large number of reviews of recently published books on Jewish Latin American topics included here attests to the vitality of this field of research. The reviews are devoted not only to the larger Jewish communities of Argentina, Brazil or Mexico but to smaller communities like Colombia as well, since the size of a group should not be a criterion for determining the research attention it should receive. Smaller communities and sub-communities can teach us as much about the ebb and flow of ethnic relations. Books on Latin Americans in Israel, Jews and non-Jews alike, allow us to expand the boundaries of the discus-

sion on Latin America and to disaggregate the concept of “Latin America” from geography, moving it to into the realm of culture. As we have argued elsewhere, “Latin America” can be found around the world, sometimes in unexpected places.

We would like to thank Maayan Pasamanik for her assistance in preparing this dossier as well as to our colleagues in the Latin American Jewish Studies Association (LAJSA) who take an active part in the elaboration of new approaches to the study of Jewish experiences in the Americas. Earlier versions of Malena Chinski’s and Ronnie Perelis’ texts were presented at LAJSA’s XV International Research Conference at Arizona State University in Tempe. We both look forward to seeing further pioneering scholarship in Jewish Latin American studies.