

LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

The Salience and Pervasiveness of the Literary Figure of the Jew in Latin America: From Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz to Jorge Luis Borges

Dalia Wassner

Brandeis University, US

daliafw@brandeis.edu

Jews of Latin America, from the colonial period to the present, have been branded heretical, inauthentic, or treasonous and perceived as threats to the colonial domination of Spain's Counter-Reformation and modern iterations of nationalism in the region. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *El divino Narciso* (1689) and Jorge Luis Borges's "El milagro secreto" ([1944] 1993) indicate the salience and pervasiveness of the figure of the Jew, experientially and conceptually, in the region's literary conversations about power, collectivity, and legitimacy vis-à-vis colonial and modern Europe. The two works reflect a transatlantic, multigenerational, and multigendered conversation that approaches the elimination of the Jew as a bargain that involved a simultaneous loss of American agency on a world stage. Sor Juana emerges not only as Latin America's first female intellectual; she is Borges's precursor in demanding an American regional identity and global agency apropos of the metropole's exclusionary violence toward the Jew within.

Jews of Latin America, in colonial and modern times, have been branded heretical, inauthentic, or treasonous, perceived as threats to Spain's Counter-Reformation empire and to multiple iterations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism in the region.¹ At the same time, from the colonial period to the present, high-profile non-Jewish writers have adopted the figure of the Jew in literature to challenge the regional or national paradigms that have consistently defined Latin America as peripheral to Europe. In this manner, Jews have been written into Latin America's literary conversations of collective identity in a region consistently defined in relation to Europe.² Writing as either *conversos* or non-Jews, literary figures from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, including Fray Luis de León, Miguel de Unamuno, and Rafael Cansinos-Asséns, alongside Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Rubén Darío, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, and Mario Vargas Llosa, signal a transatlantic, multigenerational literary conversation whereby questions of imperial, regional, or national identity are tied to the presence—be it theoretical or physical—of the Jew within society.³

This literary exchange has been reinforced by friendships and admirations between converso and non-Jewish Iberian and Latin American writers since the sixteenth century, an equation that in the nineteenth century came to include Jews as well. For example, it is well documented that Rubén Darío, the Nicaraguan father of *modernismo*, included praise for Jews in his various nationalist writings (Aizenberg 2000) and was a foundational influence for Alberto Gerchunoff, the first modern Latin American Jewish writer.⁴ In turn,

¹ After forced baptisms by the Counter-Reformation Church, Jews and their descendants became known as *conversos* (Spanish) or *cristão-novos* (Portuguese) in the Iberian and Ibero-American contexts.

² For a comprehensive historical analysis of Latin America's adoptions of European political, social, and economic systems, see Whitehead (2006). For an exploration of cultural gazes between Europe and Latin America with a focus on the twentieth century, see Beardsell (2000).

³ For the role of Sepharad in Latin American literature, see Elkin (1995). For the works of Argentine writers (of mixed Jewish ancestry and non-Christians) on Jewish themes, see the final chapter in Lindstrom's (1989) *Jewish Issues in Argentine Literature from Gerchunoff to Szichman*.

⁴ See, e.g., Darío's "Israel," published in the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Tribuna* on October 5, 1896, and "Canto a la Argentina," published on May 25, 1910, by the Argentine newspaper *La Nación*—a commissioned work on the centennial of Argentina's independence.

the preeminent twentieth-century Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges, claimed Gerchunoff as a mentor while also positioning himself as an admirer of the Jewish intellectual Baruch Spinoza and a disciple of *ultraísta* Spanish writer and fellow fervent “Jew” Cansinos-Asséns (Kristal 2014; Aizenberg 1980).⁵ Likewise, the great Basque writer of the Generation of '98, Miguel de Unamuno, claimed at once to be a disciple of both the converso Fray Luis de León and Baruch Spinoza.⁶ Providing a long-overdue study of the figure of the Jew within Latin American literature, Erin Graff Zivin's (2008) foundational work *The Wandering Signifier: Rhetoric and Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary*, maps out the mechanisms and significance of representations of Jewish figures by Latin American writers between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, arguing that there exists a corpus of literature that evidences a notable role for “the Jew” in the region's unresolved struggles with otherness, be it based on racial, sexual, religious, national, or economic grounds.⁷

Leopoldo Zea (Mexico, 1912–2004), arguably Mexico's foremost postcolonial philosopher, joins a cadre of literary figures that has long noted the connection between Latin American standing on a world stage and the ruling governments' treatment of its Jews. Zea posited that Latin America's internal contradictions and struggles stem in large part from its Spanish and Portuguese colonial past, furthering the idea that the center's exclusionary treatment of the margins signaled a convergence between the Western Enlightenment and the Spanish Counter-Reformation. As such, the margins—be they the colony, the postcolony, or the world's Jews—serve as symbols of Hispaniola's downfall as it converged rather than diverged from an Enlightenment Europe justified by its Hegelian vanguard (Sáenz 1999, 107). As the postcolonial scholar Santiago Castro-Gómez argues, “Coloniality is not the past of modernity; it is simply its other face” (in Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui 2008, 283).

Building on literature and scholarship that traces the presence of the Jewish figure within Iberian and Latin American literary conversations of collective identity, the current article notes striking commonalities in the works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, colonial New Spain's preeminent *criolla* intellectual, and those of Jorge Luis Borges, the renowned Argentine writer of the twentieth century, widely credited with placing Latin America on the global literary map (Coetzee 1998). Specifically, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *El divino Narciso* (1689) and Jorge Luis Borges's “El milagro secreto” (1944) indicate the pervasive salience of “the Jew” in regional literary conversations about power, collectivity, and legitimacy vis-à-vis a more powerful Europe as much in the context of the Spanish colonial empire of the seventeenth century as in the face of the global threat of Nazism in the twentieth century. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz thereby proves not only to be New Spain's leading female intellectual (Merrim 1991, 1999; Franco 1989); she is among Jorge Luis Borges's precursors in challenging Latin American regional identity and global agency apropos of the metropole's exclusionary violence toward the Jew within.

Sor Juana, as she is known to posterity, was born Juana Inés Ramírez de Asbaje in 1648 in San Miguel Nepantla, the illegitimate daughter of a Creole mother and a Spanish father. She was a recognized intellectual and cultural figure of New Spain and engaged in heated and public exchanges with notable contemporary literary figures, many of whom vehemently criticized her intellectual activities, not least because of her gender.⁸ Scholars note the difficulty in accurately portraying Sor Juana as a participant in historical traditions of women's writings while maintaining her contemporary specificity (Merrim 1999; Martínez-San Miguel 1999). Merrim (1991, 25) argued, for example, that works such as Octavio Paz's (1982)

⁵ For more on Borges's admiration of Rafael Cansinos-Asséns, see Aizenberg (1980). For more on Borges's trajectory of appreciation of Jewish culture (Eastern European, Western, and Sephardic) and his early denouncement of German exclusion of Jewish authors from the literary histories published in Germany before World War II, see Kristal (2014). For a demonstration of his fascination with Judaism, see the poem “Judería” in Borges's first published book, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923). For a recent analysis of the poem, see Hernaiz (2014).

⁶ Fray Luis de León (Spain, 1528–1591) was a converso who included Hebraic and rabbinic motifs throughout his works (Stavans 2003; Swietlicki 1986). Baruch Spinoza, the seventeenth-century philosopher born into a Jewish family in Amsterdam, is credited for laying the groundwork of Enlightenment thought in the eighteenth century. Spinoza's family was of Portuguese origin and participated in the wave of Portuguese converso immigrants to the Netherlands who, beginning in 1593, sought refuge under the 1579 Decree of Toleration (issued by the Union of Utrecht nearly a century after the forced conversions on the Iberian Peninsula) whereby they reconverted to Judaism. For more on Unamuno's admiration of Spinoza's intellectual plight and the struggle of the Jews in his own day, see Unamuno's “Canción del sefardita,” part of his *Obras completas*, penned in 1928 while in exile in the Canary Islands.

⁷ For an overview of the emergence of a neo-Sephardic renaissance in Latin America, see Elkin (1995). For a more global study on the adoption of Sepharad as a politicized literary metaphor since the nineteenth century, see Halevi-Wise (2012).

⁸ Merrim (1999, xi) notes that Sor Juana is thought to have amassed the largest private library in colonial Mexico. See also Socolow (2000, 103, 166), Kirk (1998, 15), Sabat de Rivers (1996, 236), Merrim (1991, xiv), Franco (1989, xxiii), Martínez-San Miguel (1999, 107).

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Trampas de la fé, though lending Sor Juana much-deserved attention in modern times, also erred in writing “an exemplary history, whereas the past sets an example for the present.” Noting that Sor Juana is too often unequivocally painted as America’s first feminist, Merrim (1991, 119) posits that the nun was ambivalent about her own role as woman writer, describing her as an author of “womanscript” rather than a profeminist:

Victory, exoneration, idealized mask, mediator: placed over and against the continuing drama of the divided woman we have observed ... in Sor Juana’s theater ... that these divine light heroines constructed over a period of fifteen years express a desired or desiring self and comprise something of an act of resistance in the face of the tangled complex of circumstances that undermined the realization of that self. All told, nonetheless, one perceives in Sor Juana’s works what has been described as a certain “melancholy,” the melancholy of a woman who “soared above the rest” but never fully forgave herself her own daring, cognizant that she may have been of the “mistaken rules that rendered her daring presumptuous.”

Furthering the idea that it is precisely these ambivalent expressions that require attention, and positing that gender ambivalence does not detract from Sor Juana’s important participation in a milieu of female writers, Jean Franco (1989, xi) argued: “It is precisely in those societies [such as Mexico] that the conflicting claims of national, ethnic, and gender identity have to be confronted. And it is precisely Third World women who have insisted not only that there are differences *between* women but also that there are circumstance in which women’s emancipation is bound up with the fate of the larger community.”

Like Franco, who approaches feminism in the context of colonialism in the Global South, contemporary studies of gender (*género*) in Latin America have led to inquiries concerned not only with gender in terms of sexuality but also with established categories of society and knowledge at large, resulting in what La Fountain-Stokes called “a strategic reconceptualization ... as part of a politics of equality that also recognizes difference” (Martínez-San Miguel, Sifuentes-Jáuregui, and Belausteguigoitia 2016, 192–199). In this light, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the most notable female writer of her day and the quintessential insider-outsider in colonial New Spain,⁹ penned the play *El divino Narciso* in the language and cultural instrument of the conquerors to advocate for the rights of the margins as much in terms of their own validity as a female Creole intellectual and in terms of the very sustainability of the center from which she wrote (Mazzotti 2008, 81).¹⁰

Erin Graff Zivin (2008, 20) argued in her study of representations of Jewishness in modern Latin America that “ideas of Jewishness were often embedded within other discourses of alterity, including complex constructions of gender.” In the studied work of Sor Juana, these multiple forms of alterity present an early cultural manifestation of such composite marginalized identities in the region. Written for the Corpus Christi festivals of seventeenth-century Madrid, Sor Juana’s *El divino Narciso* was intended for a lettered Peninsular audience (Sabat de Rivers 1996, 235; Martínez San-Miguel 1999, 173).¹¹ It is a subversive baroque play that confronts inquisitorial rhetoric and Counter-Reformation policies by questioning not

⁹ Recent scholarship has posited that Sor Juana was most likely a *conversa* (Kirk 2005, 2013; Elkin 2014). Others have claimed she was a Jesuit, noting that she participated in what Ángel Rama has called “the lettered city,” whereby Jesuits attempted to create the conscience of the Creole identity (Sabat de Rivers 1996, 236). Either consideration renders Sor Juana’s outsider status vis-à-vis imperial Spain all the more poignant.

¹⁰ Although writers like Octavio Paz have stressed Sor Juana’s singularity, Sor Juana wrote in a tradition of female writers (stretching from France to England and to New Spain), who pretended that they were the first to do what they did because of patriarchal traditions that excluded traditions of female intellectuals (Merrim 1999, xxiii). Thus, although Sor Juana portrayed reclusiveness as a female writer, she herself articulated an awareness of writing in a tradition of feminist debates (Merrim 1999, xiv). And yet, writing as a woman in the mid-seventeenth century was a particularly incendiary act because Europe was torn apart by revolutions of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, which led to a crisis of culture between traditionalism and modern ideas of change. In this environment, “women were targeted as symbolic of disorder and they were also scapegoated in very tangible ways, as if control of the once-again disruptive element of women might restore a world turned upside down by change and turmoil” (Merrim 1999, xxx). Thus, rather than exceptional to the degree painted by Octavio Paz as a female writer in the seventeenth century, Sor Juana participated in a Western trend of women creating culture precisely because it was a time of retrenchment of gender roles. Placing Sor Juana in the company of Marie de Gournay, Margaret Fell, and María de Zayas, Merrim (1999, xxxvii) argues that the seventeenth century was marked by “significant numbers of European women [venturing] into print to defend their own sex.” For Franco (1989, xxii), Sor Juana acted conscientiously as a multiplied woman, with as many “I’s as a peacock’s tail.”

¹¹ Corpus Christi festivals were pageants created by decree of the Council of Trent in 1551 to accompany the autos-da-fé in celebration of the “triumph over heresy” that accompanied the Reconquista. *El divino Narciso* was published in 1688 in Spain and Mexico, but it evidently was never actually performed (Franco and Richards 2000, 161; Benassy-Berling 1983, 366). As cultural handmaidens to the Inquisition, Corpus Christi festivals were essential to the consolidation first of the Spanish kingdom of Castille and Aragón, and then of imperial Spain (Cohen 1993, 47–48).

only categories of gender but also categories of race, provenance, and religion (Oventile 2003; Juana Inés de la Cruz 1998; Kirk 1992, 1998). In seeming participation of the hegemonic Counter-Reformation cultural practice of the *auto sacramental*, *El divino Narciso* is presented as its own play, introduced within the *loa* or introduction to the main work. Yet in the play's *loa*, the dominant rhetoric is turned on its head through the narrative and counternarrative provided by two protagonist couples. The first couple comprises a noble Aztec woman named América—described as regal, poised, and self-possessed—and her gallant Aztec husband Occidente, positioned opposite their Spanish counterparts Religión and Celo. The *loa* begins with an indigenous religious celebration of the God of Seeds,¹² which offends Spanish lady Religión and angers Spanish conquistador Celo:

CELO: ¿Cómo, bárbaro Occidente;
cómo, ciega Idolatría,
a la Religión desprecias,
mi dulce Esposa querida?
Pues mira que a tus maldades
ya has llenado la medida,
y que no permite Dios
que en tus delitos prosigas,
y me envía a castigarte

OCCIDENTE: ¿Quién eres, que atemorizas
con solo ver tu semblante?

CELO: El Celo soy. ¿Qué te admira?
Qué, cuando a la Religión
desrecian sus demasías,
entrará el Celo a vengarla
castigando su osadía.
Ministro de Dios soy, que
viendo que tus tiranías
han llegado ya a lo sumo,
cansado de ver que vivas
tantos años entre errores,
a castigarte me envía.
Y así, estas armadas Huestes,
que rayos de acero vibran,
ministros son de Su enojo
e instrumentos de Sus iras. (Sor Juana, *loa* to *El divino Narciso*, vv. 130–150)

Literally setting the stage, the *loa* opens *El divino Narciso* by juxtaposing the colonizer's narrative, whereby the Spanish parties are “defenders” against “American insult,” to the American actors who question the right of the West to “terrorize all whom they encounter” and express their innocence before their punishment (i.e., colonization). In this way, Sor Juana writes in continuation of Bartolomé de Las Casas, a defender of “Indians” following the idea of the unity of humanity under God. As Pamela Kirk (1992, 150) notes, Las Casas's *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* had been banned by the Inquisition for thirty years by the time Sor Juana wrote *El divino Narciso*. Thus, by presenting Christianity and paganism as equally valid vehicles for God's divine mysteries, Sor Juana served as a seventeenth-century proponent of Las Casas's silenced advocacy for the humanity of indigenous people (Kirk 1992, 153).

Strikingly, while the Spanish Empire was engaged at once in a reductionist definition of society and in expanding colonial ambitions (Kennet 2000, 61), Sor Juana effected a critique of colonialism by contesting the overarching narrative whereby indigenous people were treated as either uncivilized or minors, in need of “civilized” males (i.e., Spanish Catholics) to transform them.¹³ Instructively, Sor Juana challenged not only the provenance of truth but also the gender norms of her day that likewise

¹² Many scholars agree that the God of Seeds is Huitzilopochtli; see Keen (1971).

¹³ For a discussion on categories of adulthood and ethnicity as they relate to Spanish colonization, see Mazzotti (2008, 81).

designated legitimacy and power to male knowledge and male action above that of women. Sor Juana thereby offers a contestation to colonial gender narratives by naming her male American protagonist Occidente, a synonym for *Western* in a gender previously denied to the continent. In fact, by creating male and female American and Spanish counterparts, Sor Juana employs gender inclusively to equalize the encounter:

OCCIDENTE: Qué Dios, qué error, qué torpeza,
o qué castigos me intimas?
Que no entiendo tus razones
ni aun por remotas noticias,
ni quién eres tú, que osado
a tanto empeño te animas
como impedir que mi gente
en debidos cultos diga [...]

AMÉRICA (A OCCIDENTE): Y tú, Esposo, y tus vasallos,
negad el oído y vista
a sus razones, no haciendo
caso de sus fantasías;
y proseguid vuestros cultos,
sin dejar que advenedizas
Naciones, osadas quieran
intentar interrumpirlas. (vv. 130–180)

The *auto sacramentales* on which *El divino Narciso* was based were traditionally employed to reinforce the religious beliefs and practices of the witnessing community (Martínez-San Miguel 1999, 173). However, Sor Juana subverts the religious-political vehicle to defend the validity of an indigenous religion with its claims to knowledge, an argument that, if followed, would contain radical implications for the marginalized groups and the dominating group alike of colonial New Spain.¹⁴

OCCIDENTE: Y dime, aunque más me digas:
¿sera ese Dios, de materias
tan raras, tan exquisitas
como de sangre, que fue
en sacrificio ofrecida,
y semilla, que es sustento?

RELIGIÓN: Ya he dicho que es Su infinita
Majestad, inmaterial;
mas Su humanidad bendita,
puesta inrúenta en el Santo
Sacrificio de la Misa,
en cándidos accidentes,
se vale de las semillas
del trigo, el cual se convierte
en Su Carne y Sangre misma;
y Su Sangre, que en el Cáliz
está, es Sangre que ofrecida
en el Ara de la Cruz,

¹⁴ Josefina Ludmer (1985, 48) claims that Sor Juana's writing was a dance between knowing and saying, such that for her to say what she knew, she had to couch it strategically between allegory and silence. An interesting counterpoint, Luis de Carvajal Junior—perhaps the most famous victim of New Spain's autos-da-fé in 1596—wrote in his own day in defiance of the Inquisition and in defense of his beloved Jewish faith. His letters repeatedly point to the sacrificial story of Abraham and Isaac as exemplary of the need to never doubt God or Judaism as the one true faith. Carvajal's is not a prescient call for multiple truths (as authors such as Marcos Aguinis [1991] have reinterpreted) but evidences the accused's participation in the milieu's binary approach to religion (Leibman 1967; Wassner 2014).

inocente, pura y limpia,
fue la Redención del Mundo. (vv. 346–368)

Attempting to reconcile two opposing sides in a binary milieu, the emissary of Spanish religion in the New World attempts to simultaneously defend the Eucharist and align its meaning and practice with that of the Aztec religion. The emerging conclusion reconciles both sides through a proposition that a play be performed to this effect in Spain, a proposition accompanied by an offhanded reflection that there is no reason that intelligent people should reject an idea simply on the basis of the ocean from which it happens to emanate:¹⁵

CELO: ¿Y dónde se representa?

RELIGIÓN: En la coronada Villa
de Madrid, que es la de la Fe
el centro, y la Regia Silla
de sus Católicos Reyes,
a quien debieron las Indias
las luces del Evangelio
que en el Occidente brillan.

[...]

¿Pues es cosa nunca vista
que se haga una cosa de una
parte, porque en otra sirva?

[...]

no habrá cosa que desdiga,
aunque las lleve a Madrid:
que a especies intelectivas
ni habrá distancias que estorben
ni mares que les impidan. (vv. 435–472)

Martínez-San Miguel (1999, 171) noted that *El divino Narciso* is only one of Sor Juana's three *auto sacramentales*,¹⁶ all of which reflect the nun's complex literary and social identity as a *criolla* intellectual, whereby her gender comprises only one of her conflicting subaltern identities that demand entry into the hegemonic cultural and political spheres of her day:

En este sentido, el auto sacramental es el escenario en que se conjugan lo femenino, lo colonial y lo criollo para proponer una entrada de estas subjetividades coexistentes en el espacio del debate epistemológico y en particular, el teológico. [...] Parecería que Sor Juana recurre a uno de los géneros más complejos de la literatura religiosa para proponer la entrada de sujetos subalternos a espacios o debates tradicionalmente reservados para un sujeto idealmente masculino y europeo.

Santiago Castro-Gómez's reflections on the "coloniality of power" likewise illuminate the subversive nature of Sor Juana's work, as she challenged the geopolitics of colonial power through her work within the Catholic Church:

The coloniality of power makes reference to the way in which Spanish domination attempted to eliminate the "many forms of knowledge" of native populations and to replace them with new ones more appropriate for the civilizing purposes of the colonial regime. It thereby indicates the epistemological violence exercised by the first modernity over other forms of production of knowledge, images, symbols, and forms of signifying. (Castro-Gómez in Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui 2008, 281)

Thus, the *loa* to *El divino Narciso* proves to be more than simply an ambivalent Creole text that reproduces the existent dominant epistemology, even considering the interpretation that the *loa* symbolically

¹⁵ For an in-depth study of Sor Juana's equating of Christian and Aztec religious practice in her *autos*, see Kirk (1992).

¹⁶ The other two *autos sacramentales* are "El mártir del Sacramento" and "San Hermenegildo y El cetro de José."

“evangelicizes” the European to the Aztec tradition (Martínez-San Miguel 1999, 181). Rather, by equating the Aztec religion to the Catholic one, Sor Juana argues for a veritable space for American cultural participation on the Spanish stage.

Pursuing this same initiative, in the main play *El divino Narciso*, Sor Juana opens by adopting the figure of the Jew to further claim the equality of all humanity. This time, the allegorical Jew is included in the allegorical *auto sacramental*, a play staged within the play to be performed at a festival that forcibly confirms the singularity of the one divine truth: Christianity. As Borges does three centuries later, Sor Juana adopts narrative tools that make blatant the subjective authoring of power, whereby the victors prove more an accident of time-bound history than an iteration of timeless truth. Opening with Sinagoga, who fulfills a parallel function to América in the *loa*, *El divino Narciso* presents three female characters who comprise a different sort of trilogy. Gentilidad and Sinagoga are thus from the outset engaged in heated debate while their mother, La Naturaleza Humana, looks on with curiosity at her bickering daughters:

SINAGOGA: Y solo en esto conformes
estamos, pues observamos,
ella allá entre sus errores
y yo acá entre mis verdades,
aquel precepto no impone,
de que uno a otro no le haga
lo que él para sí no abone;

NATURALEZA HUMANA: Digo, que habiendo escuchado
En vuestras méricas voces
Los diferentes objetos de vuestras aclamaciones:
Pues tú, Gentilidad ciega,
Errada, ignorante y torpe,
A una caduca beldad
Aplaudes en tus loores,
Y tú, Sinagoga, cierta
De las verdades que oyes
En tus Profetas, a Dios
Le rindes veneraciones:
Dejando de discursir
En vuestras oposiciones,
Pues claro está que tú yerras
(A LA GENTILIDAD)
y claro que tú conoces,
(A LA SINAGOGA)
aunque vendrá tiempo, en que
trocándose las acciones,
la Gentilidad conozca,
y la Sinagoga ignore...
Mas esto ahora no es el caso;
y así, volviéndome al orden
del discurso, digo que
oyendo vuestras canciones,
me he pasado a cotejar
cuán misteriosas se esconden
aquellas ciertas verdades
debajo de estas ficciones. (*El divino Narciso*, vv. 35–85)

By positing all religions as fluid within history and subject to human error,¹⁷ Naturaleza Humana is shown to be primarily desirous of peace between the two belligerent parties.

¹⁷ Martínez-San Miguel's discussion of Echo and Narcissus builds on Spadaccini's portrayal of Echo as a replica of América, at once in love with and rebellious against Europe (Martínez-San Miguel, in Merrim 1999, 146; Jara and Spadaccini 1989, 43).

Writing at a time of hegemonic Catholicism, Sor Juana brazenly invites her readers to consider a paradigm whereby Sinagoga owned divine law and Gentilidad (Greek and Roman pagans, to be joined later by Christians), narrated as “mistaken, ignorant, and dull,” rejected the original monotheistic religion. Foreshadowing that at a later point Jews will reject the truth (Gospel) while the Gentiles will accept it (Kirk 1992, 148), Sor Juana offers here not a tale of the downfall of a heretic but rather a contesting narrative whereby all actors are human manifestations of an earthly mother rather than a heavenly father. Considering the *loa* and the play together, the Jew performs alongside the indigenous in colonial Ibero-America, as Sor Juana challenges the *géneros* that defined her colonial milieu.¹⁸ As Oventile (2003, 38) has argued, “Catholic Spain staged its relation to the New World’s indigenous peoples in terms of European Christianity’s abjection of Judaism and of the Torah as vehicles of the sin and death Christ triumphantly vanquishes. In the Spanish conquest ... by way of the notion of idolatry, “Indians” could substitute for Jews to become placeholders for the festive opponent.” A nun in New Spain, Sor Juana levels a cultural and theological critique of the metropole, based on a united Jewish and indigenous perspective that demands an erosion of violent colonial categories in favor of a shared humanity. Thus, Sor Juana, a female Creole intellectual in New Spain, explicitly contests the metropole’s epistemological, racial, gendered, and religious claims to superiority. As such, this was a multiply brazen and dangerous charge made by a woman identified that recent scholarship has identified as a *conversa* (Kirk 2005, 2013; Elkin 2014).

Of note, the harshest period of repression against Judaizers in New Spain occurred in the years 1642–1649, when Spaniards witnessed the revolt of the Portuguese Duque de Bragança and feared that those of Portuguese descent would revolt against the colonial power (Hordes 1980).¹⁹ In 1648, only one year before the Portuguese revolt, Sor Juana was born into a milieu in which the frequency and virulence against suspected Jews reached its climax in the New World. At the same time, 1680 marked the year of the Pueblo Revolt, an indigenous Mexican revolt against the Spaniard conquerors (Liebmann 2012).²⁰ Incidentally, the Spanish accusation against heretics shifted in Sor Juana’s lifetime from “Judaizers” to “idolaters” precisely when Catholic priests, one generation after the conquest, were addressing a surviving population that was practicing Christianity as an amalgam of traditional indigenous religions and Christian practice (Elkin 2014, 133; Lafaye 1974).²¹ It is in this contested historical context that Sor Juana’s *El divino Narciso* stages the fragility of Spain’s claims to truth, crafting through the convergence of female, indigenous, and Jewish actors a challenge to Spanish exclusionary religious and political hegemony as much in the New World as on the global plane.

Evidencing a historical insight strikingly similar to that espoused by Zea in the twentieth century in the contestation of Hegelian discourse, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is in many ways a colonial precursor to such modern perspectives likewise reflected in the works of the illustrious twentieth-century Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. Both Sor Juana and Borges insisted on América’s right to self-definition vis-à-vis a violent Europe, and both adopted the figure of the Jew within colonial New Spain and modern Latin America, respectively, to present alternative narratives to European localized models of globally exported violence. Writing from the Southern Cone during World War II, Jorge Luis Borges adopted his own allegories to demonstrate that anti-Semitic violence authored in Europe was dangerous for a Latin America still dominated by its own Western gaze. In the Argentine’s signature labyrinthine writing style, Borges’s 1943 short story “El milagro secreto” offers a textured challenge to contemporary Nazi binary claims to civilization and barbarism, lawfulness and truth, at a time when history was uncertain as to which part of humanity

¹⁸ In *autos sacramentales*, Jews traditionally served as examples to the indigenous populations of the Americas of the fate that awaits those who cling to their erroneous convictions. For more on the Corpus Christi festivals as cultural and political instruments of Spanish conquest of both Peninsular and colonial territories and their peoples, see Netanyahu (2001), Elkin (2014), Terpstra (2015).

¹⁹ In colonial New Spain, the terms *Jew* and *Portuguese* were interchangeable because a large percentage of the Portuguese population was of Jewish descent. As a point of reference, one-fifth of Portugal’s population was forcibly converted from Judaism to Catholicism in a single night in 1497 (Elkin 2014, 5). Indicative of the political and societal application of the Inquisition is the increase of persecutions of alleged Judaizers during periods of colonial uncertainty, such as foreign powers attacking Spanish territories (Elkin 1996, 131).

²⁰ The year 1680 also marked Charles II’s recodification of the Law of the Indies, first penned in 1542 in response to Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas’s defense of the conquered indigenous populations.

²¹ Indicative of such challenges faced by Spain as a colonial power in its second stage of domination, the Corpus Christi festivals in New Spain were largely nativist festivals that meshed Catholic content with a Nahuatl worldview only when convenient (Burkhart 1989).

would be the victor and which the vanquished, and when the Nazis claimed vociferous sympathizers in Argentina.²²

Delicately situated between fiction and fact, existentialism and chance, Borges (1944, 71) provides the historical date when the writer-protagonist of “El milagro secreto,” Jaromir Hladik, witnessed the Anschluss while dreaming of a game of chess, a game within a dream described in terms of infinite stakes between two long-warring families.²³ The short story abounds with detailed statements on history, which strikingly coexist alongside existential questions of metaphysical truths and subjective artistic goals:

La noche del catorce de marzo de 1939, en el departamento de la Zeltnergasse de Praga, Jaromir Hladik, autor de la inconclusa tragedia *Los enemigos*, de una *Vindicación de la eternidad* y de un examen de las indirectas fuentes judías de Jakob Boehme, soñó con un largo ajedrez. No lo disputaban dos individuos sino dos familias ilustres; la partida había sido establecida hace muchos siglos; nadie era capaz de movernar el olvidado premio, pero se murmuraba que era enorme y quizás infinito; las piezas y el tablero estaban en una torre secreta; Jaromir (en el sueño) era el primogenitor de una de las familias hostiles; en los relojes resonaba la hora de la impostergable jugada; el soñador corría por las arena de un desierto lluvioso y no lograba recordar las figuras ni las leyes del ajedrez. En ese punto, se despertó. Cesaron los estruendos de la lluvia y de los terribles relojes. Un ruido acompasado y unánime, cortado por algunas voces de mando, subía de la Zeltnergasse. Era el amanecer; las blindadas vanguardias del Tercer Reich entraban en Praga. (Borges 1944, 71)

These are the opening lines of “El milagro secreto.” Ostensibly presented as a dream about a chess game, the reader soon learns that the game represents an eternal feud between two illustrious families and that an exacting clock demands that each move occur without delay. In this case, the story takes place between two human beings who happen to be occupying a specific space and time within what the reader learns is a collective family feud, or in other words: history. Hladik is introduced as a scholar of Jakob Böhme, who was a real-life Lutheran theologian credited with subversive Reformation writings concerned with Christian mysticism regarding issues of evil, sin, and redemption. Hladik was researching Böhme’s Jewish influences. At the same time, the protagonist was occupied with a second project centered on the mystical Jewish text *Sefer Yezirah*—a Jewish Kabbalistic work concerned with the creation of the world. Specifically cast as a student of Böhme and a translator of the *Sefer Yezirah*, Hladik is crafted as a seeker of interconnected Jewish and Protestant metaphysical truths related to morality, while in the protagonist and author’s (Borges’s) historical reality, Protestant society was extricating the Jew (such as Hladik) from its midst.²⁴

In a similar perspective to that offered by Sor Juana’s *Naturaleza Humana* and *Sinagoga*, Borges’s protagonist Jaromir Hladik takes solace in the fact that, even if vanquished by history, truth retains its power through literature. The second paragraph of “El milagro secreto” provides the historical accident of Hladik’s life: “El diecinueve, las autoridades recibieron una denuncia; el mismo diecinueve, al atardecer, Jaromir Hladik fue arrestado. Lo condujeron a una cuartel aséptico y blanco, en la ribera opuesta del Moldau. No pudo levantar un solo de los cargos de la Gestapo: su apellido materno era Jaroslavski, su sangre era judía, su estudio sobre Boehme era judaizante, su firma dilataba el censo final de una protesta contra el Anschluss” (Borges 1944, 71). Hladik, a writer of German-occupied Prague, is “found guilty” of both protesting the Anschluss and being Jewish. As much as Occidente rejects Celso’s verdict of intransigence in the work of Sor Juana, Borges narrates the senseless nature of Hladik’s “crime” while the protagonist is condemned for denouncing the very power desirous of killing him. Hladik’s fate is revealed to be all the more arbitrary and lawless precisely when enunciated as a result of a legal trial. Evidencing the subjectivity of the rule of law, Borges thus narrates the current Nazi condemnation of the Jews of Europe in language that reveals at once the subjectivity and the immorality of the legal process adopted by a country in search of world domination in the name of the highest culture known to mankind.

Yet the language of Hladik’s condemnation reveals a perspective that is not German: Hladik is condemned not only for being of Jewish descent but also for encouraging dissent in others, “pour encourager les autres”

²² Borges (1949) also wrote what some scholars note as a feminist text, “Emma Zunz,” included in *The Aleph*. Here, Borges cites the converso Fray Luis de León as an advocate for the elevated insights found among those “others” deemed as handicapped. For analysis, see Edna Aizenberg’s *The Aleph Weaver* (1984), and Ilan Stavans’s “Yo, Judío” (2008).

²³ “El milagro secreto” was published in *Ficciones* (1944), which is the source presently cited.

²⁴ By invoking *Sefer Yezirah* as Hladik’s work of translation, Borges joins both philo-Semitic and anti-Semitic writers who were fascinated by the mystery of Jewish identity in a continent that had rejected their absorption (Elkin 1995, 13).

(Borges 1944, 71). In a few words strung casually together, Borges literarily unites the racist policies of modern Nazism with those of imperial Spain's Inquisition and the West's general claims as the seat of civilization, all indicative of imperial legal systems erected in terms of exclusionary religious definitions. As Zivin (2008, 19) argued, modern European anti-Semitism was focused on expelling "the stranger within," a foreign entity perceived as a threat to the purity of the national corpus; in Latin America, "representations of the 'Jew' tend to recognize a primordial other that, symbolically or historically, forms part of the individual or collective self, traceable to the traumatic and violent encounter of the Conquest." Literarily tethering the colonial Spanish persecution by trial of the individual Judaizing heretic to modern German racist condemnation of the collectivity of Jewish people, Hladik's fate is thus narrated in the first page of "El milagro secreto" by Borges, the twentieth-century Argentine.

Rather than contest history, Borges, like Sor Juana before him, points out the fluidity of history and its disconnect from cosmic justice. Thus, Borges stages an existential bargain with God by a dreamer who knows of eternal feuds between two families; the dreamer defines himself as a scholar of mysticism of two religions and finds himself a condemned protagonist negotiating his own vindication according to, not survival of historical circumstance, but the possibility of completing a literary masterpiece before the set hour of death at the hands of his Nazi executioners. In Hladik's bargain, as penned by Borges, perfected literature produced by a historically condemned person confirms God's existence. Hladik speaks with God in the darkness of his cell: "Habló con Dios en la oscuridad: Si de algún modo existo, si no soy una de tus repeticiones y erratas, existo como autor de *Los enemigos*. Para llevar a término ese drama, que puede justificarme y justificarte, requiero un año más. Otórgame esos días, tú de quien son los siglos y el tiempo" (Borges 1944, 73). When Hladik awakes and seeks to distinguish his dream as fiction or fact (the latter indicating God's granted favor), Hladik summons Maimonides, the great Sephardic philosopher of the twelfth century: "Recordó que los sueños de los hombres pertenecen a Dios y que Maimónides ha escrito que son divinas las palabras de un sueño, cuando son distintas y claras y no se puede ver quién las dijo" (Borges 1944, 74). By drawing on Jewish Sephardic mystical texts, the student of Protestant mysticism and Kabbalah was able to confirm that his bargain with God had been granted precisely before the Nazis came to dictate his fate:

Se vistió; dos soldados entraron en la celda y le ordenaron que los siguiera. Del otro lado de la puerta, Hladik había previsto un laberinto de galerías, escaleras y pabellones. La realidad fue menos rica: bajaron a un traspatio por una sola escalera de hierro [...] Hladik, más insignificante que desdichado, se sentó en un montón de leña. [...] Las armas convergían sobre Hladik, pero los hombres que iban a matarlo estaban inmóviles. [...] Un año entero había solicitado de Dios para terminar su labor: un año le otorgaba su omnipotencia. Dios operaba para él un milagro secreto: lo mataría el plomo germánico, en la hora determinada, pero en su mente un año transcurriría entre la orden y la ejecución de la orden. De la perplejidad pasó al estupor, del estupor a la resignación; de la resignación a la súbita gratitud. No disponía de otro documento que la memoria. (Borges 1944, 74)

Hladik had asked God for a whole year to finish his work and God's omnipotence had granted it: Jaromir Hladik would die March 29 at the set execution time of 9:02, but in his mind a year would pass between the order of fire (9:00 a.m.) and its execution (9:02 a.m.). In this seemingly minor discrepancy, Borges forces the reader to question the seemingly stark lines between reality (history) and metaphysics (truth).²⁵ Borges thus creates what Zivin (2008, 155, 156) has called the "trauma of the open text," ushering in "a challenge of ethics." By creating narrative space within the text itself and thus "[acknowledging] the hither side of representation," Zivin (2008, 163) argues that Borges performs a political position rather than expresses one.²⁶ In other words, by letting the reader into unsealed narrative spaces, "the possibility

²⁵ Sergio Waisman (2008, 114) also argues that the real secret miracle of the story is that God granted Hladik a full year in his own mind to perfect his pending drama "The Enemies" while in "reality" only two minutes transpired, unnoticed by all historical actors involved. In that almost imperceptible span, "He [Hladik] omitted, he condensed, he amplified. In certain instances he came back to the original version ... He concluded his drama. He had only the problem of a single phrase. He found it," and then he died at 9:02 at the hands of his enemies (Borges 1964, 94).

²⁶ Borges's obsession with the Kabbalah—with its emphasis on codes and promises of unraveling secret cosmic truths—has been explained by Fishburn and Hughes (1990, 219–220) as owing in part to the performative utterance ascribed to the Kabbalah: "This belief illustrates the concept of the creative power of letters underlining the primordial function of language in the history of creation. It is said that 'the letters hover, as it were, on the boundary line between the spiritual and physical world.'" See also Aizenberg (1985).

of justice is infinitely postponed but also repeatedly demanded through the ethical interruption" (Zivin 2008, 177). As Zivin (2008, 177) notes, "It is no coincidence that the unnarratable 'others' that interrupt the totality of the self in Borges ... are all writers."

Illustratively, at the plot's climax, Hladik verified that he was alive by recalling Maimonides while also reciting Virgil's mysterious fourth Eclogue. Written in 42 BC, Virgil's work describes the birth of a boy who, upon coming of age, would rule the world. Some have interpreted the boy to be art itself (Virgil's poetry); another interpretation is that Virgil was forecasting the birth of Christ; all the while, the presence of ancient Hebrew scripture in Virgil's work has been well documented (Nisbet 1978). Echoing Sor Juana's evocation of Aztec América and ancient Jewish Sinagoga in *El divino Narciso* and its *loa*, Borges also positions religion against history, artist against art, and man against his (and her) creator. All the while, Borges writes himself into his story as he writes Hladik into history. After all, Hladik, the author of "Vindication of Eternity," is a clear cross between two of Borges's own titles, "Vindication of the Kabbalah" and "History of Eternity."²⁷

Predating Theodor Adorno's concerns regarding the possibility of producing art after Auschwitz,²⁸ Borges's protagonist awakens to the intransigent nature of history while simultaneously being vindicated by the transcendent justice of a perfected text.²⁹ The Argentine Borges thereby literarily demands space for multiple truths and marginalized truth tellers through a literary teleology that leads to ethical plurality even while historical genocide is achieved. In this way, "El milagro secreto" provides a striking example of a Latin American call to conscience against Nazi reductionist enunciations of national identity and imperial aspirations involving the elimination of Jews, a similar bargain on which Borges's own continent was founded. Moreover, "if the 'Jew' serves as a placeholder for Latin America's many controversial 'others,' so too does it codify the position of the Latin American intellectual himself or herself (and of the Latin American subject in general) within the unequal cultural terrain of the West" (Zivin 2008, 12). Borges therefore adamantly assumed a distinct historical responsibility for his own participation as a postcolonial Latin American author witnessing the success of Nazi Germany in Europe and its local support in 1943 Argentina.³⁰ Mourning of the very Western cultures that he admired and shared, through "El milagro secreto," Borges demands, What was the European reality that bore the Nazi as part and parcel, and not an aberration, of modern European history? And what is Argentina's responsibility to both the historical and epistemological violence currently emanating from overseas (González 1998, 178)?³¹

In this context, Borges's affinity for Jews as quintessential cosmopolitans began long before the start of World War II. Borges demonstrated a longitudinal interest throughout his career in Judaism, Jews, and Jewish literary giants in both America and Europe (Stavans 2008; Goldman 2015). Illustrative of Borges's understanding of the centrality of Jews for Latin America's postcolonial definition, the poem "Judería" was penned in 1920 and published in 1923 as part of Borges's first book.³² In 1933, the journal *Crisol* took note of Borges's sympathies to the extent that it disparagingly accused him of hiding his Jewish heritage, an accusation Borges (1999, 110) embraced.³³ By appropriating the term *cosmopolitan* for Argentines in an

²⁷ Waisman (2008) further identifies Hladik as Borges's alter ego, arguing that Borges's Jewish creation plays a role not unlike the Latin American feat crafted in "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quijote," where Menard copied word for word the great Spanish masterpiece and in the process created an American original. Yet Waisman posits that in "El milagro secreto" the stakes are not American originality vis-a-vis the European original masterpiece, but rather, American complicity in the current fallen European culture evidenced by the rise of Nazism (123).

²⁸ Adorno's oft-cited dictum that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" is found in his 1949 essay "Cultural Criticism and Society."

²⁹ As does Aizenberg, Lewis (2013, 166) defines Borges's literary tactics of *irrealidad* as an "ordering but dissolving act, [that] question not if art can exist after Auschwitz, but if society and politics ever really existed in the first place."

³⁰ During World War II Germany intended to dominate Latin America after securing its victory in Europe, and diplomats in Argentina along with Nazi Party agents labored for this effort (Newton 1996, 200). By the 1950s there were fifty war criminals among a slew of German scientists and technicians blatantly recruited by Argentina in the postwar period as part of an effort to recruit thirty thousand to forty thousand people to immigrate, especially Germans in Eastern Europe who would be welcomed during Perón's presidencies from 1946 to 1955 (Elkin 2014, 93).

³¹ Several other Borges works, including "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (*Ficciones*) and "Deutsches Requiem" (in *El Aleph*), address Nazism in Germany and the West's legacy of anti-Semitism after World War II (Kristal 2014, 356; Zivin 2008, 155).

³² Borges consistently noted that Jews turned suffering into vision and he believed that this suffering granted Jews the enviable insider-outsider perspective that Borges envied (Goldman 2015). For an incisive study of "Judería" and Borges's evolving choices to include or exclude the poem from subsequent compilations between 1923 and 1958, see Hernaiz (2014).

³³ Borges was in his thirties when Argentine politics leaned to the right. This political climate had been preceded by decades of anti-Semitism and restrictive immigration laws targeting Jews. In the 1930s and 1940s, Borges attacked Nazis and their sympathizers in Argentine newspapers. Also in the 1930s, Borges was a member of the Committee against Racism and Anti-Semitism, a stance that resulted in an 1934 accusation his own Jewish identity in the right-wing journal *Crisol*, which Borges famously defended in the literary journal *Megáfono* through the brilliant satire "Yo, Judío." Scholars have noted, though, that it was painful for Borges

effort to redefine modernity in global terms, and by assuming the figure of the Jew as its quintessential embodiment,³⁴ Borges refutes epistemological theories that have long defined Latin America as peripheral to Europe and the Jew as antithetical to the West: “Ser cosmopolita no significa ser indiferente a un país y ser sensible a otros. Significa la generosa ambición de ser sensibles a todos los países y todas las épocas, el deseo de eternidad, el deseo de haber sido muchos, que ha llevado a la teoría de la transmigración de las almas.”³⁵ In an article dated August 23, 1944, Borges (1999, 211) wrote: “For Europeans and Americans, one order and only one is possible; it used to be called Rome and now it is called Western Culture. To be a Nazi (to play the energetic barbarian, Viking, Tartar, sixteenth-century conquistador ...) is, after all, mentally and morally impossible.” Likewise, in his 1951 lecture “The Argentine Writer and Tradition,” Borges stated: “Everything that has happened in Europe, the dramatic developments of the last years in Europe, have resonated deeply here ... This would not happen if we were disconnected from Europe” (Borges 1974, 272). Again, in 1962, almost two decades after the publication of “El milagro secreto,” Borges continued to urge Argentina to craft its own path and to learn from world Jewry how to participate within a Western historical theater:

What is our Argentine tradition? I believe we can answer this question easily ... I believe our tradition is all of Western culture, and I also believe we have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or another Western nation might have. I recall here an essay of Thorstein Veblen, the North American sociologist, on the pre-eminence of Jews in Western culture. He asks if this pre-eminence allows us to conjecture about the innate superiority of the Jews, and answers in the negative; he says that they are outstanding in Western culture because they act within that culture and, at the same time, do not feel tied to it by any special devotion. (1964, 218).

If no nation or empire has succeeded in crafting an inclusive and diverse democracy to date, and yet if the West is destined to share a common language of modernity, then only those who have maintained a critical perspective are uniquely equipped to identify the failings and hypocrisies of an unattained modernity, and thereby overcome it in the name of a shared humanity.³⁶

Three centuries prior to Borges, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz painted for the colony and the metropole alike, a Celo and a Religión, in dialogue with an América, Occidente and also, a Sinagoga. Jean Franco (1989, xxiii) notes in a comparison of Sor Juana and Borges: “Is not this the way that master narratives of patriarchy have worked?—as inventions which nevertheless powerfully controlled interpretation. Women have long recognized the imaginary nature of the master narrative. Without the power to change the story or to enter into dialogue, they have resorted to subterfuge, digression, disguise, or deathly interruption.”

By writing in defense of the Jew's claim to truth and participation in Western history, Sor Juana and Borges, both literary giants of their day, embraced the *géneros* of the periphery (Jewish and American) to write a “challenge of ethics,” thereby claiming their rights as art makers to challenge the European violence that defined their respective milieus. Like Sor Juana before him, Borges saw in the Jew a cultural vehicle of truth vis-à-vis center and periphery, hegemony and subjectivity, history and ethics. Also like Leopoldo Zea, Sor Juana and Borges understood that Latin America was inextricably tied to Europe's power, gaze, and bequest; that the treatment of the Jew was salient to colonial Spain and to Latin America's twentieth century relationship to Europe, respectively; and that the American and Jewish figure alike, carried an important message regarding the very survival of the West itself.

to repudiate Germany because he had long admired the German language and culture. His response to the German publication of a children's book titled *Don't Trust Any Fox from Its Heath or Any Jew on His Oath*, read: “What can one say about such a book? Personally I am outraged, less for Israel's sake than for Germany's; less for the offended community than for the offensive nation” (Goldman 2015).

³⁴ For more on Borges's adoption of the Jew as enviable global citizen, see Aizenberg (1980), Stavans (2008), Kristal (2014), Goldman (2015).

³⁵ This line is quoted from a speech given by Borges at UNESCO, May 15, 1979: “Homenaje a Victoria Ocampo” (in Borges 1999).

³⁶ As the Latin American intellectual history scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2016, 71) reflects, Borges was writing during the second wave of decolonization, in the first half of the twentieth century: “Twentieth-century demands for independence took place in a context of European decline, internal warfare, and self-destruction. The two world wars (1914–1918, 1939–1945) raised the question of the extent to which European civilization led itself and others into a dark alley where they could only encounter self-destruction, genocide, or insensitivity toward violence instead of a humane, rational, efficient, and productive organization of society.”

Author Information

Dalia Wassner, PhD, is Director of the Project on Latin American Jewish and Gender Studies at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute of Brandeis University. Dr. Wassner writes on feminist cultural connections between Jews and other minorities involved in Latin American processes of national democratization. Her first book was *Harbinger of Modernity: Marcos Aguinis and the Democratization of Argentina* (Brill, 2014). She has taught courses in Jewish Studies; Latin American Studies; and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Brandeis University, Emerson College, and Boston University.

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