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# Dean J. Franco, *Race, Rights & Recognition: Jewish American Literature since 1969*

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## REFERENCES

FRANCO, Dean J., *Race, Rights & Recognition: Jewish American Literature since 1969*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2012, 239 pages, ISBN 978-0-8014-5087-7, \$ 49.95

- 1 Dean J. Franco's book is divided into two sections and six chapters; there is also a long introduction and an epilogue. Each of the six chapters is ostensibly concerned with the works of a single author—"works" because Franco discusses short stories, essays, a memoir, and a play as well as novels. The authors are: Philip Roth (*Portnoy's Complaint*), Cynthia Ozick (various works but mainly "The Pagan Rabbi"), Allegra Goodman (*Kaaterskill Falls*), Lore Segal (*Her First American*), Tony Kushner (*Homebody/Kabul*), and Gary Shteyngart (*Absurdistan*). The order is chronological. Franco also discusses two other Jewish writers in the epilogue: Rachel Calof, the author of a "gripping" memoir, *Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains*, and Harriet Rochlin, "the best contemporary Jewish writer you have never heard of" (199).
- 2 Throughout, Franco displays a lively energy and interest in his subject, and pays careful attention to wording and form as well as to meaning and context. He makes an explicit attempt to get to the "heart," the "crux," the "center" of the matter. There are a number of what he hopes are "probing" readings, many of which are interesting and stimulating. However, these readings are clearly not the purpose of this book. Dean Franco has a different idea in mind: he wants to reinstate Jewish American literature, to return it to the position it deserves in the curricula of American universities. His readings of the works he discusses are designed to underpin that goal.

- 3 According to Franco, Jewish American literature is thought of as "white" and is therefore ignored by scholars of African American, Chicana, or Asian American literature (207). He wants to show that Jewish American literature has always been in dialogue with other ethnic literatures: "I am attempting to [...] understand how these writers have responded to the changing social regimes of racial recognition in the United States" (4). "What happens," he asks, "when we read the literature [of these authors] *not* for a chronologically unfolding story but for the dynamic encounter with America itself?" (14). His chosen authors all write "during flashpoints in the history of rights and pluralism" (15) and Franco reads their work "in tandem" with Elridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, Horace Cayton, and others—with some surprising results. *Portnoy's Complaint*, Franco tells us, is not really about sex at all. It's about race and civil rights. And "by placing his Jewish characters in close proximity to blacks and Puerto Ricans, Roth reveals the anxiety of Jewish racial instability" (49).
- 4 This organization of the book around particular works creates a number of difficulties for the reader—the most obvious being the many repetitions. We are told for example twice in less than twenty pages that Lore Segal's protagonist is "based on Horace Cayton, a prominent sociologist." We are also constantly reminded, presumably because it is not obvious, of what we have just read, or told, sometimes twice on the same page, what we are about to read ("In the second half of this book I [...] 111). But the main difficulty is the gap between what appears to be the straightforward, workaday, chronological methodology announced in the chapter titles (but not the subtitles), and what we in fact read in at least three of those chapters. As the section headings ("Pluralism, Race, and Religion" and "Recognition, Rights, and Responsibility") indicate, Franco's study is in reality theory-driven. Why, then, are the terms of the discussion not defined systematically at the outset but introduced piecemeal instead? Why is it necessary to wait until page 85 for this—surely essential—criticism of multiculturalism as a commodification of culture: "Simply put, multiculturalism has brought us culture as a series of objects that can be purchased and consumed including food, music, clothing, flags, film, tourism"? In the same way, there is never a full discussion of what "Jewish" in "Jewish American literature" means, although Franco asks the question in the introduction and takes it up again on page 175. Yet Franco's claim that—particularly since 1969—Jewish American literature has called the very notion of identity into question, makes a discussion of what constitutes *Jewish* identity indispensable. Other questions that pertain to the debate about pluralism are evoked almost haphazardly. Take, for example the sacred-secular distinction, which comes up in the chapter on *Kaaterskill Falls*—that is, half way through the book—conveying the impression that it would not have been raised at all if there had been no Hasidic Jews with their emphatically public practice of religion in Allegra Goodman's novel. There are, after all, many other evocations of precisely that question in Jewish American literature—Philip Roth and Cynthia Ozick come to mind. The reader cannot help wondering here and elsewhere: why this particular novel?
- 5 In the end, *Race, Rights & Recognition* touches on all sorts of aspects of postmodern and postcolonial thinking—including some of the frictions between the two—but never delves very deeply, leaving the reader with a sense of frustration. Franco does not always do justice to the works he examines (in particular he entirely neglects Jewish wit) and although he musters a whole arsenal of theory, in the end, he does not get much beyond asserting that what prevails is "a significant distrust of grand narratives

of nation and peoplehood [...], a rejection of received notions of Truth and Transcendence [...], and a wariness about reconstituting objective forms of identity such as nation, religion, and ethnicity” (173)—which is hardly news.

- 6 Franco is clearly well-meaning: his first part, he writes, concerns what divides us and his second suggests ways of overcoming our divisions. His book not only shows how “Jewish American literature is responsive to the politics and ethics that emerge from new social and cultural alignments after the 1960s, it also demonstrates how Jewish American literary criticism can reflect upon, revise, or perhaps even advance a broad social understanding of how we narrate difference in the United States” (207). This upbeat conclusion, with its belief in the ethics of recognition, will appeal to some readers.

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