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Filip Boratyn

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Beyond Determinism: Geography of Jewishness in Nathan Englander's "Sister Hills" and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*

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1. Introduction

- ¹ In October 2017, *The New York Times* asked three major Jewish American literary figures of the early 21st century about their thoughts on the relationship between Jewish identity, the United States, and the State of Israel. Nathan Englander emphasized the need to enclose what he saw as "shifting" identity within borders, and said: "That's what I latch onto when thinking about contemporary American Jewish novels engaging with Israel, the ideas revolving around fluidity, of borders drawn and redrawn, of changing landscapes and altered realities" ("On Being Jewish, American, and a Writer"). This sentence contains an interesting contradiction. On the one hand, Englander highlights the "fluidity," the contingency of the constructs he mentions; on the other, he clings to the concept of borders that by definition has a policing nature. The act of enclosure performed by any border cannot be erased even if the border's instability is agreed on. If Englander's remarks were to be juxtaposed with his writing, fluidity would hardly present itself as an apt descriptor of stories full of characters who are quite comfortable with essentialist approach to ideological constructs. Stories such as "Sister Hills," published in his 2012 collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*, present characters devoted to safeguarding the established borders and unwilling to allow for fluidity in how they approach their national identity, territory, or religion. Much of this connection between the national identity and the delineated territory is achieved by the story's use of the discourse of religious determinism.¹

- 2 As much as "Sister Hills" can be read as an examination of how essentialist concepts of borders dominate the discourse about Israel, Michael Chabon's 2007 novel called *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* presents a much more fluid, postmodern take on the question of Jewish statehood. Chabon's novel functions within the generic framework of a hard-boiled story and thus contextualizes all its depictions of the borders' demarcation within the general skepticism about the stability of essentialist concepts characteristic of the genre. Interestingly enough, none of this play with the contingency of border-related issues is set in Palestine, as the action of the novel takes place in an Alaskan town of Sitka, the settlement of which by Jews was considered by the Americans during World War II. It appears that while Englander's story depicts and problematizes a compatibilist² interpretation of the controversy of Jewish settlement and shows that the understanding of borders as clearly demarcated—contrary to the idea of postmodernism—is still common, Chabon's homage to hard-boiled fiction rejects the idea of divine predestination as fanatical and embraces the narrative of border-free universalism. The overlaying of the generic and tonal difference between the two texts, with their starkly different approach to the geography of Jewish settlement, begs the question: is it possible for contemporary Jewish American writing, as Englander would have it, to highlight the fluidity of borders in direct relation to the State of Israel? "Sister Hills" and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* suggest that while the Israeli setting carries with it a burden of essentialism connected to the Biblical discourse surrounding "the Holy Land," only a more speculative approach, avoiding both the Palestinian setting and the history of the Palestinian conflict, opens up the discourse about Jewish statehood to more postmodern contexts and introduces free will into the geography of Jewishness.

- 3 The focus on the notion of borders is particularly justified in the case of these two texts as they engage with the theme of borders in general, while also connecting to the much broader cultural context of the disputes and controversies surrounding the borders of the State of Israel. The long-documented academic focus on sociopolitical and cultural aspects of geographical boundaries (cf. Minghi; Prescott; Van Houtum; Brunet-Jailly) has recently taken into account the apparent contradictory split between the seeming disappearance of boundaries in the spirit of "postmodern territoriality" and, on the other hand, the persistence of nationalism, for which the notion of borders understood in many different ways is one of the essential foundational concepts (Newman and Paasi 186; Newman; Paasi). The drive towards border-free world is in direct relation to postmodern notions of selfhood and a critical approach to national identities. It found its way into praxis, for instance, in the project of the European Schengen Zone; however, the pressure to reassert the significance of borders is still relevant in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the fight against illegal Mexican immigrants in the United States. Even a closer look at the Schengen Zone reveals that it actually does not constitute a utopian realization of the border-free project. The Schengen Zone's internal functioning always relied on particularly diligent policing of the border of the European Union as a whole. The borders might have shifted, but the concept remains in power as strongly as ever, making a case for the extension of the border studies theoretical framework from the fields of human and political geography to those of cultural and literary studies.

2. The Compatibilist Geography of "Sister Hills"

- 4 A particular emphasis on safeguarding the stability of borders can be observed in Nathan Englander's "Sister Hills," a story that introduces an element of fate, divine or otherwise, into its consideration of the way human actions shape territoriality and, more generally, nationhood. The story focuses on a number of dualities, the central of which are its main characters: Rena and Yehudit, two Israeli women settlers. The story takes place in four specific moments in Israeli history, tying the fate of its characters to the fate of Israel as a whole. The first of these moments is in 1973, shortly after the settlement, when the male settlers have gone to war and Yehudit, who fears that her daughter is on the brink of death, decides to symbolically sell her to Rena, thus conforming with an ancient Jewish ritual, in order to save the daughter's life. The plot resumes then in the time of the intifadas in 1987, when a rapid civilizational progress of the settlement has occurred, and 2000, when Rena, after suffering from a string of personal losses, decides to claim her right to be the mother to Yehudit's daughter. The narrative finally shifts to 2011, when two stereotypically Millennial Russian settlers, unappreciative of the sacrifices made by their predecessors, come to live in the neighborhood.
- 5 Englander's story aims to illustrate how time changes the women's approach to the contract they have made early in their lives. It also stresses the importance of this seemingly futile gesture by suggesting the validity of its magical function in a number of ways tying to the story's compatibilist view of fate. Most importantly though, the dualism of the relationship between the two women has to be read as an analogy for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which frames the whole text and relates it directly to the consideration of borders and territoriality. The conflict enters the text explicitly as the plot is linked with the intifadas; it is also present in the story as the factor responsible for the absence of male characters in the foreground. Perhaps its most literal incorporation into the thematic level of the piece arrives at its beginning when Rena is discussing the question of legitimacy of Jewish settlements with a Palestinian boy, who mocks the fact that Israelis refer to an ancient contract with God as their main claim to the land inhabited by Palestinians for centuries. He emphasizes the lack of practical grounding of symbolic and performative Jewish claims: "If it was your tree, I'd have seen you at my side last year during harvest. I'd have seen you the year before that, and ten years before that, and a hundred" (Englander 38), he says in response to Rena's attempt to cut the tree down. The boy then puts a curse on her "head" and on her "home" (Englander 38), unless she leaves the tree be, which she eventually does, even as she continues to chop at it for some time. The thought of the curse does not leave her mind that day, but she imagines the boy might have meant a literal, physical revenge. Instead, Rena is faced with a string of personal tragedies. The rest of the story illustrates an attempt on the part of the Israelis to reclaim the seriousness of the idea of an ancient legal agreement with a higher power, as well as an attempt on Rena's part to reclaim agency in her own personal life. Within the story world, recognizing the agreement's validity is a necessary step conditioned by the tradition of rabbinical law. The agreement is then affirmed when the characters accept the conflict between Rena and Yehudit even if they feel uneasy or even outright antagonistic about it.
- 6 The essential point of view concerning the Israeli and Palestinian territoriality showcased by the story is that religious legitimacy and historical precedence might

have more nation-building value than mere custom and respect for continuity. The argument between Rena and the Palestinian boy clearly sets the conflict between religious claims to the land and the historical continuity as central to the story's plot, with the boy still expressing hope that "the Jewish court will return the hill to [the Palestinians]" (Englander 38). The rest of the story proceeds to highlight the way the tradition of religious principalism overtakes pragmatic sensitivity to reality in the Jewish state's approach to justice. As Englander has been critical towards religion in the past, for instance recognizing ways in which it uses exclusion as means of safeguarding what is perceived as purity of the community (Propst 37), in "Sister Hills" he ambivalently identifies religious tradition as one of the main forces in the construction of the nation. The story world embraces change when it is motivated by transcendentally sanctioned law. Brian Willems has read the debate between Rena and Yehudit, that is, also the debate between the Israelis and the Palestinians, as one concerning "the 'as if' of Jewish law 'being taken seriously'" (10). The story, which includes a long scene of a rabbinical trial that convenes to decide the fate of Yehudit's/Rena's daughter, provides several examples of such "as if" cases, enumerated also in Willems's essay (10). They refer to cases customarily agreed upon not to be followed through, that is, for example, when a boy jokingly marries a girl at a bar mitzvah, the couple is not expected to continue living as a husband and a wife. According to Willems, in the story the controversy stems from the fact that Rena does follow through on the agreement in which she "as if" became a mother to Yehudit's daughter (10). Transferring this analogically to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Jews for centuries did not take the "as if" of their ownership of the Palestinian territory seriously, yet when they did, controversy and shock arose.

- 7 This, however, can be put into yet clearer concepts by reading the controversy as one concerned with recognition of performative acts. After all, in order to resolve the national and the personal conflicts, both sides need to accept the performativity of the legal agreements to which Rena or Israel refer. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued for a spatial rather than temporal view of performativity, which would allow for the existence of acts which she called "periperformative." These acts are characterized by varying levels of performativity; the performative power has been denied to them, yet they nevertheless make a claim to it (67-68). A slave who manumits himself by writing a letter to his master in spite of not having such legal power is one of the examples of such an act provided by Sedgwick (89). The question posed by "Sister Hills" seems to be: was the act based on which Rena makes her claim performative or periperformative? On the one hand, Yehudit says that "[i]t was a joke," "a silly superstition," and "old-country mumbo jumbo," "a game." On the other hand, Rena responds to this by saying: "A deal is a deal" (Englander 54). Rena's actions are tied to Zionism through the analogy highlighted in her interaction with the Palestinian boy, but they also intersperse the personal with the political, since they represent an attempt to regain personal agency in a life beset with personal tragedies. The view that prevails in the end is that the performativity of a contract invoking God's authority has to be recognized since, as the story suggests, the whole success of the community has depended on it. The Russian Millennial couple seen in the end of the story is an example of how, even though the importance of these contracts could be easily overlooked and dismissed as local, colorful superstition, the development of the settlement depended on the agreement between the two matriarchs. If the women had not performed the magical ritual at the beginning, the settlement might not have survived the 1973 conflict, therefore in the

end everyone, including the conspicuously silent and humble daughter, accepts the performative character of the act. The same logic is extended to the question of the legitimacy of the Israeli claim to the territory in question: the success and the progress of the State of Israel relies on universal acceptance of their ancient claim to the Palestinian land, one which is best justified by reading the ancient contract with God as performative and thus legally binding. In 2011 the Palestinians are reduced to an abstract, abject, repressed entity, walled off from the relatively safe space to which the Russian couple is moving. Lisa, who is actually Russian American, expresses concern that underlies a worry that the awareness of the Palestinians' fate may present an inconvenience for her and her partner. "Do they treat the Palestinians all right on the other side of the wall?," she says, adding that "[w]e are kind of left-wing, you know. I mean, for the extra space, we'll live here, for the extra bedrooms, but, you know, we feel bad for the Arabs, with all the roadblocks and things like that" (Englander 71).

- 8 The story adds a degree of irony to Rena's and Israel's fate in its description of what happens after the verdict. Two days later, after the Rosh Hashanah dinner, another intifada begins and Rena decides that it is time for the tree to finally fall down, perhaps encouraged by her victory in court. Aheret declines to help her because of the religious prohibition against work during a holy day, so Rena chops the tree down by herself and tremendously exerts herself in the process. After finding her lying down next to the tree, Aheret decides that her second mother's life is not in danger, therefore she is not allowed to use a phone to call an ambulance. According to Aheret's judgment, Rena's quality of life will deteriorate if she does not receive immediate help, but she will not die. Aheret even mentions the possibility of having this matter settled by the rabbinical court. Still, she makes Rena an offer that she will break the prohibition if Rena gives her freedom. Rena declines, saying: "don't need to walk.... Because I have you to take care" (Englander 70). This scene aptly encapsulates the story's ambivalent attitude towards Rena's and Israel's reliance on the religiously sanctioned law by showing the cost of deciding to treat it as seriously as they do. She reclaims some of her personal agency, but the law is now yet another factor limiting her freedom.
- 9 The validity of the contract with God is further reinforced by God's apparent presence in Englander's narrative, at least in the form of fate, which is one of the factors shown to shape the characters' existence. On the one hand, the argument that "Sister Hills" presents a fatalistic view of reality would be hard to defend, as characters are free to make their choices, at least to some extent. Yehudit does decide to sell her daughter because she believes that this action will save her life. Rena does decide to pursue her right to de facto motherhood after a series of personal losses leaves her lonely and without help. On the other hand, reading the story's reality as wholly shaped by free will would be an equal fallacy since a clear, divinely inspired determinism is present in the story world. Rena's personal tragedies happen within the context of the Palestinian boy's curse, representing an intervention of a magical force into her life, if not the will of God or a higher power. Still, she bears partial responsibility for what happens to her: before his death, Rena's son Tzuki leaves her because she rejects him due to his sexual orientation. In the spirit of compatibilism, people are free to choose the paths they will follow, yet only some of these paths align with God's design by being good, just, and compliant with what the human and the divine sides agreed to in the covenant, even if Rena's difficulties in the wake of the Palestinian's curse complicate the question of what God's design for her fate and the fate of Israel is. Jonathan Klawans points out a

famous quote from Mishnah Avot 3.16 which is often used to illustrate the essence of compatibilism: "All is foreseen, but freedom of choice is given" (49).

- 10 Moreover, "Sister Hills" suggest that freedom does not mean that each choice is equally viable. The choices that violate the proper course of history on both personal and national scale are doomed, or at least this is what the characters think. This belief is enough for them to be reluctant to pursue such questionable paths. Therefore Rena, when standing in front of the Rabbinical court, has only one thing to prove—that letting her assume the role of the mother to Yehudit's daughter is a choice that complies with God's design for Israel's fate. At first, the rabbis cannot imagine deciding in favor of Rena, dismissing her request as "the madness of grief" and calling the agreement between the two women "a trivial pledge" (Englander 55). Rena very quickly retorts by suggesting an analogy between the tradition of Divine contracts and her conflict with Yehudit. She talks about "a covenant with God, which gives [the Israelis] the right to [their] land as a whole" and asks whether "the contracts, with God and man, written down nowhere, only remembered, do they still hold?" (Englander 61). This obviously harkens back to the question of the degrees of the contracts' performativity but it also illustrates how Rena convinces the rabbis by suggesting that the fate of the whole project of Israeli settlement is dependent on the execution of the women's agreement. Allowing Yehudit to break the contract would be equivalent to sabotaging God's design for Israel's success as the contract was made in God's name, in order to save the daughter Aheret and therefore save the whole project of the settlement in Sister Hills. Rena reminds the court that on the following day of Rosh Hashanah "God decides who will live and who will die," (Englander 63) making them aware of the limits of their freedom to decide. It was enough for the rabbis to believe even to a slightest degree that the women's contract was of foundational importance in the development of the settlement in order for them to decide to uphold and execute it.
- 11 Alongside the characters, Rena in particular, emphasizing God's role in the course of history, the narration itself, by adopting a heavily stylized tone, reminiscent of a legend, a myth, or the Bible, becomes reflective of the state of mind of its characters and their belief in the importance of their participation in the nation-building process. The language of "Sister Hills" does not betray doubt if the construct of Jewish identity should be upheld or rather exchanged for a more universalistic ideal of a proper heterosexual life avoiding the issues put forward by consideration of ethnicity, as is the case in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. If anything, the constructedness of identity is obscured by heavy biblical language and symbolism serving to reaffirm the essentialist notions of Jewishness. The third-person narration is full of pathos, devoid of any traces of postmodern distance or self-awareness and eager to replicate the syntax of the Scripture without a parodic agenda. Some sentences, characteristically for the Biblical style, start with conjunctions: "And her ax needed sharpening. And as strong as she was, her arms would need strengthening" (Englander 39). Additionally, various repetitions occur either on the level of syntax, as when certain specifically constructed clauses reappear in the same sentence, or on the level of vocabulary: "But that tree was a dense tree." (Englander 39). Certain archaisms also occur as when the word "for" is used as a conjunction: "For the tree... was much shorter than you'd imagine for something so tough." (Englander 37). This biblical gravitas presented without irony attests to the story's portrayal of the essentialist conception of Jewishness but it also allows for an interpretative supposition that the level of narration is aligned with

Rena's view of reality as at least partially determined by God, therefore justifying treating it as the story's main point.

3. Postmodern Borders and Free Will in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*

- 12 Quite a contrary vision of a world full of borders but also full of people whose universalistic sensibility highlights the borders' constructed, artificial character is created by Michael Chabon in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. By adopting the generic frameworks of a hard-boiled detective story and alternate history, Chabon breaks away from compatibilism and an essentialist approach to Jewish identity and geography, proposing a complex approach to history as shaped by the intricate web of human actions. The novel takes place in an alternate historical reality, both in temporal and spatial terms. In the story world, the project of creating the State of Israel has failed after World War II, but another undertaking concerning the fate of the global Jewish community has succeeded. Harold Ickes, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's secretary of the interior, proposed in 1939 that the state of Alaska could become a site of settlement for European Jews, who were at the time increasingly endangered by hostile policies of the Nazi Germany. Chabon's novel presents a scenario in which this project prevailed and Jews from all over the world fled to Alaska rather than to Palestine. Most of the story takes place in the town of Sitka, which as some critics have remarked, seems remarkably appropriate given its already Yiddish-sounding name (Kravitz 95).
- 13 The precarious status of the Jewish community in the novel seems to be directly linked to lack of clarity concerning the status of their borders: they occupy the territory of the specific part of the United States, from where, throughout the course of the plot, they are to be deported. Since the federal government never agreed to recognize what was derogatorily called "Jewlaska" (Chabon 29) as a separate state, for years it was existing as an interim federal district. Just as in "Sister Hills," the characters are not in complete control of their fate but in the case of Chabon's novel this is wholly dependent on human decisions, though not made by Jews themselves. They cannot claim the Alaskan land as their own, since they struggle with the indigenous Native American population dominating the non-urban regions of the state in a way which is clearly parallel to both the conflict with the Palestinians and the treatment of Native Americans by the settlers from Europe. As the narration states, "Sitka Jews rarely see or speak to Indians, except in federal court or in the small Jewish towns along the Line" (Chabon 103), elsewhere emphasizing the Jewish fear of indigenous population: "Fifty years of movie scalpings and whistling arrows and burning Conestogas have their effect on people's minds" (Chabon 104). Some of the characters clearly wish that their reality was much more reliant on boundaries, perhaps out of the desire to escape the precarity of the situation in which their settlement in Sitka is contingent on a whim of the American government. One of the more significant plotlines revolves around an Orthodox community that delineates its borders with the help of an *eruv*, symbolically reasserting the stability of the boundaries in a world where all borders seem arbitrary. At the same time, the point of view of the main character, who focalizes the narration, shares the universalistic distance from the nationalist or particularist discourses, which are presented as fanatical.

- 14 The plot of the novel revolves around the investigation led by Detective Meyer Landsman, who alongside uncovering the generic murder plot, charts the complex web of human actions that shaped the fate of the Sitka community. Landsman's name, as Daniel Anderson noticed, might refer to "landsmanshaft," "one of the group of organizations that grouped Jewish immigrants together by associating them with other immigrants that came from the same places in Europe" (90). The name may also be read as having much less culturally specific significance, that of "Man of the Land," pointing out in yet another way the novel's preoccupation with geography. Landsman investigates the murder of someone who is initially known as Emmanuel Lasker and later revealed to be Mendel Shpilman, the son of an Orthodox rabbi and a man considered by many Alaskan Jews to be the Messiah. Landsman's investigation eventually requires him to visit Rabbi Shpilman, one of the religious leaders of the Orthodox Jewish community on Verbov Island and the father of the deceased. The Verbover Jews have established an *eruv*, a form of enclosing the space for themselves in order to circumvent the Sabbath laws by extending the private space of their homes into the territory of the whole neighbourhood, which becomes a private sphere of the whole Orthodox community and allows the observant Jews, for instance, to carry objects from one house to another without fear of breaking the Sabbath. One of the men introduced in the novel, Zimbalist, is tasked with safeguarding the integrity of the delineated boundary, policing its unspoiled wholeness as the religious validity of the *eruv* relies on strict physical enclosure from the outside, public world.
- 15 There are many ways in which the narrative frames the *eruvim* as fanatically scrupulous about ostentatiously guarding the enclosure of their neighborhood and presents their endeavor as ridiculous. It is achieved for instance through filtering the community's representation through the consciousness of the novel's protagonist. Landsman, who is the focalizer of the narration, is described throughout the novel as someone who sees the actions based on religious or nationalistic ideology as absurd, pointless, and detrimental to the overall quality of life. Before he is forced to visit Verbov Island, he states that "he'd much rather go to Madagascar" (Chabon 99), recalling the island's status as one the possible places of Jewish resettlement before World War II. The narration later specifies that the Verbovers' tribal appropriation of Jewishness makes him feel "less Jewish": "He goes clean-shaven and does not tremble before God. He is not a Verbover Jew and therefore is not really a Jew at all. And if he is not a Jew, then he is nothing" (Chabon 102).
- 16 Landsman is presented as a broken alcoholic whose heterosexual relationship with ex-wife Bina has failed, leading him to depression and destructive behavior. A longing for a life compliant with the dominant American model of a well-structured heterosexual family fuels his frustration and informs the ending that asserts his eventual commitment to try to reestablish the relationship with his ex-wife. This view of a happy, undisturbed, long-term heterosexual relationship and the establishment of nuclear family as the ultimate goal of life has its ultimate expression in the American culture of post-World War II liberal consensus, coinciding with the peak popularity of the hardboiled genre and film noir. Even though the hardboiled tradition, with its predilection towards bleak endings, could superficially be considered skeptical about the possibility of realizing this dream, the conservative longing for an orderly life in an exemplary nuclear family is the basis of the genre's ethos. In the spirit of postmodern self-awareness, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* seems to accept this longing and is more

hopeful about turning it into reality as the answer about whether or not it will succeed remains open at the end of the novel. The fact that the narrative veers away from the hardboiled tropes, as it does not suggest the relationship's eventual failure, serves as an act of affirming the heterosexual relationship as a goal. This ideological goal presents a clear alternative to religiously or nationalistically driven characters. The novel's logic contrasts committing oneself to ideology as it is conventionally understood—a set of strict political or social beliefs—with devoting one's life to building a normative family, therefore, committing oneself to ideology as it is understood in the Marxist tradition (cf. Althusser) and sees the two alternatives as mutually exclusive. In this context, then, the *eruvim* come out as suspicious from the beginning since Landsman sees their commitment to the intricacies of Jewish law as over-the-top and, as Daniel Anderson notices, cartoonish (91). As the narration attests, "[t]he truth is, black-hat Jews make Landsman angry, and they always have. He finds that it is a pleasurable anger, rich with layers of envy, condescension, resentment, and pity" (Chabon 102). The envy might relate to the well-structured and seemingly purposeful character of their existence, the longing for which is echoed in Landsman's attempts to make his relationship work. The rest of the protagonist's sentiments find their reflection in the place that the Orthodox Jews occupy in the story.

- 17 Landsman's visit to Verbov Island conforms with a specific generic trope of a Chanderesque story, in which the investigation leads the protagonist to a place that is exotic and even grotesque in spite of its geographical proximity to the character's everyday environs.³ In this context, the Verbover community with all its peculiarities and unusual customs, as well as the Verbov Island territory, become framed as grotesque right from their appearance: "The street grid here on the island is still Sitka's, ruled and numbered, but apart from that, you are gone, sweetness: starshot, teleported, spun clear through the wormhole to the planet of the Jews" (Chabon 101). In the context of this trope, the mere distinctiveness of a place from its surroundings makes it weird. The community eventually has to leave the Island alongside all the other Jews because of the Reversion of the settlement in Alaska. The project of sustaining a separate, bordered out space within Alaskan territory fails, being replaced by what Landsman settles for in the end: a heterosexual relationship which keeps the private sphere where it belongs according to the dominant post-Enlightenment culture. "[T]here is no Messiah of Sitka. Landsman has no home, no future, no fate but Bina," (Chabon 411) say some of the last words of the novel, asserting the rejection of stable notions of territory in which the Verbovers would believe and of nationalistic ideology espoused by the Jewish terrorist group that is eventually revealed to have been responsible for Mendel Shpilman's death.
- 18 In *eruv's* case, the approach to geography and borders is of crucial importance for understanding the ideological differences between the groups concerned. Davina Cooper analyzed a controversy concerning the establishment of an *eruv* in north-west London and has argued that the critics of the *eruv's* establishment adopted what she called a "liberal modernist perspective," emphasizing the notions of "universalism, evolutionism, the public-private divide, secularism, and Enlightenment rationality" (Cooper 530). In *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* the Verbovers are depicted as a fanatical group challenging not only the modernist nationalist universalism, but also the postmodernist border-free perspective that might be ascribed to Landsman. The novel's protagonist does not betray commitment to any stable national identity, unless

his devotion to the ideal of a heterosexual couple is seen as aligned with the American ideology to a sufficient extent to read him as assimilated enough.

- 19 The way the characters in the novel approach the questions of territoriality and national identity is largely echoed in their approach to free will. This, in turn, informs what the text has to say about the historical conditions of Jewish settlement. The central consciousness of the novel, Meyer Landsman, espouses a view that is partially conditioned by the generic conventions of the hardboiled detective story. The typical noir scenario would fit either into the logic of predestination to failure or support the view of the world as governed by chance; in this case, the failure would be the result of the characters' misjudged actions.⁴ The latter option is more supportive of the thesis that the noir genre was a backlash against the postwar empowered femininity (cf. Farrimond), as it still held up the restoration of the strong patriarchy as a possibility. Nevertheless, the importance of free will recurred in hardboiled stories, as is the case also in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. The responsibility for Landsman's miserable life situation is put on his shoulders from the very beginning and his conscious decision in the end to reattempt to have a successful relationship with Bina is part of this logic.
- 20 This fusion between seeing one's actions as the result of one's free will and the constraints imposed on one's free will by the others' exercising of the same privilege, is prevalent in case of all the characters in the novel. It also further extends into the novel's approach to the fate of the Jews as a people. What is certainly rejected, is the notion that a nation or a person may be predestined by God to succeed. Mendel Shpilman seems to be chosen by God to be the Messiah, yet the burden of being treated like one eventually leads him to self-loathing. Shpilman attempts to escape it by using drugs and withdrawing himself from society; the change of his name is one of the steps in that direction. The Verbovers choose to establish a closed community for themselves, yet the American decision to proceed with the Reversion becomes an obstacle to that project. The terrorist plot to blow up the Mosque in Jerusalem is a free-will attempt to influence the course of history even if the plans do not go as they were intended to because of individual mistakes. Landsman's attempts to maintain a relationship with Bina are juxtaposed with these larger social and political issues, highlighting the tension between hope derived from Jewish utopianism and the hopelessness of the hard-boiled genre as central in the novel's worldview. Toward the end of the novel, the narration illustrates the way Landsman's hope is often undermined with doubt and fear that it is all too good to be true:

Any kind of wonder seems likely. That the Jews will pick up and set sail for the promised land to feast on giant grapes and toss their beards in the desert wind. That the Temple will be rebuilt, speedily and in our day. War will cease, ease and plenty and righteousness will be universal, and humankind will be treated to the regular spectacle of lions and lambs cohabiting. Every man will be a rabbi, every woman a holy book, and every suit will come with two pairs of pants. (Chabon 406-407)

- 21 All of these plot points suggest that the geography of Jewishness is presented in the novel as a result of the complex web of human decisions and their unpredictable consequences. The project of establishing the State of Israel fails because of the Palestinians' decision to oppose it militarily. The Jews settle in the Sitka District because of the American policy and later leave because of the federal government's decision to discontinue support for this project. Any sort of emphasis on the identification of Jews as a Chosen People, being on "a mission from God," is dismissed

in the spirit of Meyer Landsman's skepticism. In line with the generic tropes of the detective story, in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* the events are always a result of someone's action and any sort of external conditioning stems only from the complexity of the actions' consequences. Thus, an idea of divine fate is excluded from the novel's philosophical framework.

4. Conclusion

- 22 The juxtaposition of "Sister Hills" and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* leads to a conclusion that it would be much harder to present such a postmodern narrative rooted in the contingency of human actions if it were to be set in Israel. This seems particularly true in the case of Jewish American writers, whose outsider position regarding the State of Israel makes it particularly difficult to pierce through the traditional discourses of Israeli statehood. As Englander put forward in "Sister Hills," the Israeli national identity is built on the essentialist discourses of God-sanctioned territoriality, whose hegemony precludes their representation as optional. Narratives set in Israel have to face the fact that postmodern takes on geography of Jewishness are not the norm. The fictional speculative setting of an alternate history novel gives it freedom to let go of the essentialism, while setting it in the United States opens up narrative possibilities available because of the author's position as an American Jew.
- 23 Another major difference between the two texts, besides the difference in genres, concerns the gender of the protagonists and the main focalizers of the narratives. In fact, most of the characters in "Sister Hills" are women, while almost all of the cast of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is comprised of men. Their respective entanglement in certain discourses of femininity and masculinity partially informs the responses of both casts to the Other represented by the Palestinians and the Alaskan Native Americans. The characters of "Sister Hills" are put in a typical wartime scenario, in which women are deserted by men who go to war, while women have to take on responsibilities that were traditionally denied to them, such as that of defending the household. Instead of highlighting the reading of the project of Israeli settlement as invasion of lands occupied by the Palestinians, the emphasis on women's experience pulls the focus of the narrative towards the basic need to defend the settlers' own lives and, similarly, the need to avoid the nation's annihilation as one of the essential reasons for the existence of the State of Israel. Rena's attempts to reclaim agency through asserting her right to be Aheret's mother can thus be read as a response to an unfair sacrifice she was forced to make because of her gender. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, in turn, fully echoes the masculinist discourses of territorial conquest and, at the same time, critiques them through highlighting their inadequacy. The Sitka Jews are put in a position that resembles the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also the subjugation of Native Americans as a result of the westward expansion of the United States. As the decision to settle in Alaska was not entirely made by Jews, they are forced to replicate certain rituals of imperialist politics, without any apparent willingness to commit to them. The postmodern character of Landsman's narration and his status as a generic hardboiled protagonist make him by default a representative of masculinity in crisis and therefore the crisis of the masculine discourse of territorial conquest.
- 24 Both "Sister Hills" and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* thematize Jewish identity as formed in and shaped by a specific geographic context, at the same time linking it to the

problem of the extent of free will in human actions, which, after all, create the borders. As such, neither of them presents a deterministic view of reality. While "Sister Hills" introduces a compatibilist view of the controversy surrounding Jewish settlements, allowing for some degree of divine intervention into the course of action, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* rejects any notions of predestined fate. The ideological difference between the two texts is in strong correlation with their generic difference, one being a biblically-stylized parable problematizing the role of traditionalism in the development of national communities, second a postmodern riff on the hard-boiled detective story, a genre famous for highlighting the cracks in stability of essentialist concepts. Both texts were written by American authors in the early 21st century, it is hard not to read them then as statements on Jewish American support or rejection of Zionism in the face of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Chabon's novel is very skeptical about the notion of using one's national, ethnic, or religious identity as motivation for violence or destruction, therefore questioning the justifiability of Israeli offensive actions. Englander's story examines how the sacrifices that the Israeli settlers made, as well as their ancient, God-given claim to the Palestinian land are taken advantage of in the shaping of the Israeli identity, which renders the story a portrait of the more conservative side of the divide. Both texts seem to come to one common conclusion: it is of the greatest importance to decide what stories Jews choose to tell about themselves, ones in which ancient contracts with God hold true, or ones in which the affirmation of the individual overcomes ethnic identity and history. Yehudit builds Aheret's identity on stories—this identity will make her accept Rena's decision to execute her rights to be her mother: "The [story] which Yehudit always told with great pride was that once upon a time, there were in this place two empty mountains that God has long ago given Israel but that Israel had long forgotten" (Englander 53). Chabon's novel's last words are simply: "I have a story for you" (411).

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NOTES

1. The example of Zionism illustrates that there was always a strong presence of religiously motivated determinism in social and political initiatives developed at the intersection of identity and geography. According to some of the religious Zionists, even the secular initiatives advocating the return to "Eretz Yisrael" were unconsciously following God's design for the fate of his Chosen People (cf. Schwartz 179). Still, secular Zionists, Theodor Herzl among them, predominantly avoided overtly religious rhetoric, as their Zionism was a child of the post-Enlightenment, turn-of-the-century progressivism and was characterized by a pragmatic approach to resolving social problems. In Herzl's writing Zionism was a necessity because Jewish existence in diaspora was a source of social tension, caused by the Jewish nation not having had its own state. The creation of Israel was to be a conscious human decision, with religion given a secondary position, respected but not overemphasized. Within the framework of his post-Enlightenment progressivism, the separation of church and state was an essential value to uphold, therefore the only section of Herzl's *A Jewish State* devoted to religion serves to assure the reader that there will be no theocracy in the newly formed state (38). Secular Zionism was then not deterministic per se. The success or the failure of the project was primarily dependent on human action, which could be entirely shaped by human free will (cf. Avineri). The tension between reading Zionism as determined by God or by man was bound, then, to shape the policies adopted by the State of Israel after the settlement in Palestine that was locked in a state of perpetual ideological conflict.
2. Jonathan Klawans recounted an ancient text of Josephus that divided Jewish positions on free will into three groups. The Essenes were supposed to be practicing a wholly deterministic view of God's intervention into human existence, the Sadducees were to espouse a position giving men an almost unlimited ability to choose between good and evil, pushing God aside into a role of a mere spectator of human drama. The Pharisees were to adopt a compatibilist position that would be situated somewhat in between, where determinism and free will coexisted (46-47).
3. Classic examples include Marlowe's visit to a makeshift detox clinic in *The Long Goodbye*, replicated later by the defamiliarization of the Chinese American neighbourhood of San Francisco in *Chinatown*, or the sense of absurdity and weirdness surrounding almost every location in Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*.
4. An illuminating discussion of fate and free will in various texts of hard-boiled fiction and film noir can be found in John T. Irwin's *Unless the Threat of Death Is Behind Them: Hard-Boiled Fiction and Film Noir*.

ABSTRACTS

The discourses of modern Jewish statehood have always been entangled with the notion of borders and with the tradition of religiously inspired historical determinism. The Zionist project negotiated between the God-given, predetermined character of the Jewish return to "the Holy

Land" and more secular justifications for settlement in the Palestine. Nevertheless, the establishment of the State of Israel relied on a strong assertion of redrawn geographical boundaries, which were symbolically strengthened by the authority of the Biblical geography of Jewishness. This article aims to investigate how two contemporary Jewish American literary texts, Nathan Englander's "Sister Hills" (2012) and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2008), address the stability of Jewish borders in relation to their reliance on the discourses of religious determinism. I argue that while the generic framework of a realist short story and the Israeli setting of "Sister Hills" lead it to examine the essentialism of the Biblical discourse surrounding "the Holy Land," Chabon's novel, through its adoption of a more speculative approach, which involves moving the center of Jewish statehood to Alaska, is able to open up the discourse about Jewish territoriality to more postmodern contexts and introduce free will into the geography of Jewishness.

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Keywords: Jewish American literature, Nathan Englander, Michael Chabon, geography of Jewishness

AUTHOR

FILIP BORATYN

Filip Boratyn is a Ph.D. student at the University of Warsaw and a graduate of UW's American Studies Center. His dissertation project focuses on the cultural work of enchantment in the contemporary American ecological imagination. He recently received the 2020 David G. Hartwell Emerging Scholar Award from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts for his paper "Magic(s) of the Anthropocene: Enchantment vs. Terroir in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach*."