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**David Brenner. *German-Jewish Popular Culture before the Holocaust. Kafka's Kitsch*. London & New York: Routledge, 2008.**

David Brenner focuses on popular culture as a means of exploring identity and ethnicity in his recent book. Brenner investigates works ranging from *fin de siècle* popular culture to fiction published as recently as 1994 in light of post-Holocaust theory. He not only looks briefly at Franz Kafka, as the subtitle suggests, but also at various media around 1900: the Jewish stage, Jewish periodicals, and popular non-/fiction.

In his exploration of Judaism, Brenner calls *fin de siècle* Jews in Germany “hybridized” (3). Drawing on this hybrid model, his own research is shaped by such a classification. He draws on feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, gender studies, cultural theory and postcolonial studies. Taking into account that such a “hybridized” approach can be challenging, he addresses the complexity of identity overlooked in the past as a main part of his project (3). This project draws heavily on Butler’s work on performativity and how identity is enacted. Brenner demonstrates the complex nature of identity by not just exploring Jewish aspects in a specific work, but he also involves other areas of identity, such as gender and nationalism.

Chapter one focuses on situating Jewish culture at the turn of the century, both historically and socially, as well as dealing with the topic of Jewish kitsch theater. Brenner provides a picture of the Jewish community that goes beyond highlighting the tensions between Jews and Christians in Germany by focusing on the friction that had existed with the Jewish community itself; namely, the tenuous relationship between Eastern and Western Jews. As suggested in the introduction, the Jewish community is not a homogenous group and the differences must be explored (3). Thus, the reader is introduced to two major periodicals: *Israelitisches Familienblatt* and *Ost und West*.

The following chapter looks at identity incorporating both Judaism and post-colonial theory by exploring a satirical column. This column was introduced in 1903 as way of investigating “Jewish nationalist controversies” (29) and introduced a new form of humor stressing immediate laughter with a poignant, cultural critique. Humor is a cultural element depending on language and customs. Brenner then reads the column “Brief aus Neu-Neuland” as an “anti-colonialist Bildungsroman” (36). Quoting Carl Hill, Brenner asserts the tension of jokes is always between “utopia and apocalypse” (40).

Departing from post-colonial theory, Brenner moves to the realm of gender theory in chapter three. This chapter looks at Karl/Martha Baer’s *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren*, a memoir published as popular non-fiction. Baer was raised as a woman, but at twenty-two decided to take on a “masculine persona” (41). Six affordable editions of this memoir published between 1907 and 1909 highlighting the book’s popularity. In his reading of the book, Brenner notes both autobiographies and memoirs are “unstable narrative modes” (48) and draws on

Foucault's and Butler's reading of a similar French-language work by Herculine/Abel Barbin. Brenner departs from their approach by applying "restrained sympathy," something he notes both scholars lack in their previous approaches (49).

Chapter four returns to the subtitle of the book: Franz Kafka. While previous scholars have certainly done Freudian readings of Kafka, Brenner uses Freud to read Judaism and then applies this reading to Kafka. Brenner suggests the love of a male God, the homophobia towards this God's body and the feminine portrayal of Israelite men create a tension between gender and religion. He links this to feminized characters in Kafka's works, but does not address the trend of non-religious focused works to have feminized male characters at the *Jahrhundertwende*.

The next chapter, on two stories published in the *Israelitisches Familienblatt*, continues the final thought laid out in the Kafka chapter: the concept of Versöhnung. The first work entitled "Versöhnung" by Meta Opet-Fuß, describes not only the reconciliation between Jews and Christians, but also among the Jewish community. The second work, *Die geborene Tugendreich. Ein Großstadtroman* by Rabbi Martin Salomonski, functions as a counterpoint to Opet-Fuß's work. The chapter concludes with a regrettably brief comparison of the role of women in Baer, Opet-Fuß and Salomonski, which would help to give the book a greater balance in its larger project of identity and gender.

In the final, short chapter, Brenner goes beyond the time suggested in the title ("before the Holocaust") to explore Maxim Biller's contemporary short story "Finkelstein's Fingers" (1994) and novella "Harlem Holocaust" (1990). Using Butler's work on subjectivity and performativity, Brenner suggests Jewish self-stereotyping is a "discursive instrument of performativity" (79) and antisemitism is "deconstructed as a reiterated performance" (83). The use of performativity, stemming from gender theory, has interesting implications in comparing the performativity of religious stereotypes back to Brenner's chapters on gender.

Both the strength and the weakness of this book lies in the large project it seeks to investigate. By using multiple discourses, Brenner demonstrates the complex nature of identity in relation to Jewish studies, but this can also strike readers as an unfocused look if they do not keep in mind Brenner's goal to develop the complex nature of identity. While each chapter has a specific project of exploration and a specific approach to read it, the book lacks a concluding chapter drawing these concepts raised in the work together. It would be beneficial to the reader to have Brenner's concluding remarks on the larger picture of German-Jewish culture to add to the field of cultural studies.

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