



The Family Flamboyant

Race Politics, Queer Families, Jewish Lives

Marla
Brettschneider

The Family Flamboyant

SUNY series in Feminist Criticism and Theory

Michelle A. Massé, Editor

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Marla Brettschneider

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For Dawn

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Acknowledgments

We flutter out the door on our way to a party. The neighbors sneer, “Why must they be so flamboyant?” Our friends at the party think we’re fabulous.

I come out as “Jewish” in a Women’s Studies class and assign one book by a Jewish author. A student writes on the end of semester evaluation: “This class was too Jewish.” Another writes: “Does she have to flaunt the Jewish thing so much?” These, they think, are criticisms.

At the end of a public lecture on adoption in which I’ve talked about my family, I get a short stack of cards with comments and questions to respond to. On the first one is written: “Your discussion of your family addresses just about every issue I am working on these days, thank you.” On the second is written: “Are you purposely trying to flout every convention?”

Flamboyance is in the eye of the beholder. What I find most interesting is the politics of what is called flamboyant, whether the beholder thinks this is good or bad, and why. Welcome to *The Family Flamboyant: Race Politics, Queer Families, Jewish Lives*.

This book has been many years in the making, with many changes in our lives, policy, and the world along the way. Although I, alone, am responsible for all its shortcomings, this book could not have been written without the involvement and sustenance of many individuals, institutions, and organizations.

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worth for organizing the 2002 Theorizing Difference session); Martha Ackelsberg, the related sessions at the American Political Science Association, and the 2001 day-long Special Session on Women and Politics and to Jane Bayes for organizing it; the marriage and monogamy session at the 2003 National Association of Women's Studies meeting; the Queer Seminar at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and to Felice Yeskel for inviting me to present my work; and the International Association of Women Philosophers Conference, Barcelona, Spain 2002.

I would not be on the journey I am today without the fiery women of Bnot Esh. For additional opportunities to live out moments of *olam ha'ba*, the world to come, I am grateful to the members of the National Havurah Institutes, the Jewish Multiracial community, Kol Zimrah, and Congregation Bet Simchat Torah. Jews For Racial and Economic Justice continues to be a tough and beloved testing ground for theorizing in the way I do.

I stand in awe within the divine web of politics and biology, difficult routes and moments of excruciating individual agency. There are not enough words to express the gratitude I feel: for all the neighbors, friends, family, babysitters, child care workers, clergy, counselors, and teachers—including the doctors and lawyers—who have cared for, nurtured, and helped grow our kids; to Suzie Lowenger and Lanie Resnick for helping to keep me alive in the many senses of that word; to Mary Bonauto from GLAD for clearing the path; to those at MAPS, to Beth for answering the phone, and Gayle Merlin Knee *all* for making our family possible.

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Journal of American Jewish History 88, no. 1 (March 2000): 156–159. John Hopkins University Press.

Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends 8, nos. 1 and 2 (Spring 2000): 124–127.

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- The Good Society* 14, nos. 1–2 (2004): 7–10.

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The Bronx
2006

Introduction

K-I-S-S-I-N-G

Beth and Stuart sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G;
first comes love,
then comes marriage,
then comes baby in the baby carriage.

We used to sing that song as kids. We would change the names depending on who was currently sweet on whom, or depending on whom we chose to torment that day. Beth is my older sister. Stuart Flurb was her first boyfriend; they met in Hebrew School. My middle sister Nina has a special knack for anointing people with nicknames, somehow revealing that specific aspect of their character you just couldn't put your finger on. Nina called him Fluart Sturb. It's hard to describe, but it was totally expressive. To this day, I still have to stop my brain in order to sort out which was the boy's given name and which was the one Nina dubbed him with.

I remember Beth bringing Stuart and some friends to the "den" in our home that served as her bedroom during her adolescence. I wanted to see what they were doing. I meant them no harm. But my banging on the closed door alerted my mother. All I remember after that is the scurry: kids hopping out the ground floor window from the room, mad dashes to stash stuff in the closet . . . and that I got my sister "in trouble." Beth never married Stuart; she's been in love but has not married nor has she born babies to put in baby carriages. She didn't even like to push my kids in their strollers. Why did we kids think that song made any sense? Why was its sharp edge double sided: meant to recognize and support

with one side, meant to estrange and harm with the other? Why was that ditty so powerful for us? What is it about desire and its supposed connection to the inevitability of family—as if enjoying the closeness that comes from sitting with a friend in a tree is linked, in the span of a sentence, a flash of thought, to the nuclear two-heterosexually parented family. The childlike fantasy can only go as far as the creation of babies. It cannot imagine staying single. It cannot envision queerdom, divorce, abuse, disruption, re-marriage, falling in love more than once. It cannot take in the long haul of child rearing and helping to develop strong independent beings on their way into the world. I never really hear people say: “I want to raise children,” they say: “I want to have babies.” Like the ditty, the circle ends with the most regressed aspect of the fantasy, being a baby.

My partner Dawn was a towheaded inquisitive child running barefoot through “cricks” and riding horses bareback. Her family were ranchers living in rural northern California. Not the rich kind, the earth is dust. I can barely breathe out there and can never stop thinking about Steinbeck. For money and to cope with the heat, in the summers the family ran a concession stand at a lake in the nearby mountains. Dawn played “garden” and considered one of the goats her best friend. They rose early in the mornings. While “mother” (in my New York Jewish home, a screeching “ma” would do) did her bible study and her own chores, she set the children down to practice piano for a full hour each before their chores and school. Dawn was raised a fundamentalist Baptist and her mom continued her early morning bible study until she died. Despite Dawn’s—let’s just call them “more ambivalent”—experiences as a member, from the outside her family embodied the ideal of “American family life” and could have been a poster family for the “Family Values” ideologues of today. Interestingly, Dawn found out at the age of forty-eight that her parents hadn’t been legally married until the birth of their fourth child, Dawn’s younger sister. That means her mom was a poor teenage white mother out of wedlock with three kids before she got herself “legitimate.” Members of the right wing in this country have been working very hard to protect the “American Family.” Crusaders charge ahead mobilizing the vast powers of the state to infantilize the family, to fashion Norman Rockwell paintings into living stories. This isn’t an easy thing to do, even for those with actual access in the U.S. legal system. I mean my goodness, they even let Dawn’s family slip through the cracks.

No one took Dawn’s mom’s kids away though. Being white and Christian, with a mother and a father, and passing well enough for a “legitimate” family, none of the kids were hauled off to foster homes or put up for adoption. Dawn had parents, and whether she liked it or not the ruling ideology—from church through the state to public opinion—

kept it that way. Now we live in a world where the law creates a category of children as parentless. (With the rather recent phenomenon of formal adoption, the law must create a child “parentless” before the child may be adopted.) This legal fiction goes beyond a PC acknowledgment that not everyone “has” a mommy and a daddy. The PCers mean not everyone is being raised by two married heterosexual parents; they still assume even abandoned children have progenitors commonly referred to as parents. In the biblical story, Solomon was presented with a child to whom two women made claims as mother. In the story the child has no voice, the women are hysterical, a great man must decide. He offers to split the child in two, knowing the “real” mother will back down at the threat of harm to the child. There cannot be two mothers. Child after child has been repeatedly told: “It may sound cruel dear, but King Solomon was very wise.” In the United States, we have a similar problem recognizing multiple mothers. Leave it to those in the U.S. legal system to invent the concept of the parentless child.

I have two friends, a lesbian couple, who may “appear” conservative to some but can be rather frank about sex. They love to sing Starhawk’s song about sex. (Did you know that Starhawk the witch, peace activist, and writer, is Jewish? Now why should that surprise you?) The lyrics begin:

Sex, sex,
we are all made from sex,
put your fingers in each other.
Yum yum yum.

I’ve seen them get up rousing renditions to delighted straight feminist and queer audiences. It seems they have found the primal life cycle commonality among us while playing with lesbian sexuality. This time we are at a Jewish feminist spiritual retreat that has been meeting for more than twenty-five years at a Catholic laywomen’s social justice center. Any one of the women present might have been heterosexually married in a previous incarnation of her life and is now a famous lesbian, or formerly a famous lesbian agitator now happily heterosexually married with kids, or married to a man and raising a child while the lover to whom she refers is a woman, or a bisexual transgendered woman nonmonogamously married to a man and raising three kids with her husband. This time when the couple sing the song, someone objects. She has six children and the first four were not “made from sex.” The woman is a lesbian. With the first four kids she was single and used insemination. These children know they do not have a daddy, they have a donor (in her case the sperm was actually a gift and not a purchase). The last two children she adopted

while in a relationship with a gay man. These two younger children have two parents, a mommy and a daddy, adopted and each gay nevertheless. The youngest is around the same age as my kids. We have had wonderful times being away together at another Jewish retreat we love and the kids especially enjoy sharing living quarters so the girls can play and shower together. When the gay dad joins us at the retreat with the two youngest—the ones that call him daddy—I find myself making interventions lest my kids feel marginalized by what seems like their friends’ “normative” family structure.

This is a world where for a few years my adopted daughters had legal documents attesting to their live births which recorded me as their mother. Although the men who served as sperm sources to their bio-mothers are known, their “live birth” certificates indicate no father. In these documents I am presented as the mother who birthed these children. I suppose if a child can be parentless altogether, there is no reason the miracle birth of a child with no human father cannot be recreated in U.S. law as well. It may be a Christian story, but like me, Mary was Jewish. For one of my kids, the line for father was simply left blank. If the law is going to make up these children’s stories, why must the forms presuppose a father space needing to be filled in at all? For my other child the line for father read: “sole legal legitimate parent.” An awkward name to be called out during a play on the basketball court. You would think in turn of the Christian millennium U.S. use of the word “legitimate” would be a mere anachronism applied to children—but no. And anyway, the father happens not to be the sole legal legitimate parent. This verbiage makes even less sense in that in the space for signature, there was none, but typed in were the words “sole legal parent & Marla Brett-schneider.” Suddenly, I am somehow two personages in the law, deserving an ampersand, not a qualifying comma. Years later, that ampersand will cause me trouble, inciting lawyers to question my legal parental rights.

I will discuss issues regarding the naming of my children later in this book, but for now I will let you know that on the certificates of live birth, the children have both my and Dawn’s names. The documents are awash in contradictions they cannot synthesize. The requirement that a child can only have one mother at a time; with a new sensibility of “lesbian rights” the acknowledgment that she has two, me and Dawn. Why the impossibility of a third? The biological mother is legally disappeared. In the film *First Person Plural*, Deann Borshay Liem is a Korean woman adopted by white U.S. parents. She is emotionally scarred by her inability to imagine two mothers given the “trauma” of international adoption. Yet lesbians have been co-mothering children for years. It is actually a leap of faith in the development process to imagine mothering

in a singular hue for many of these kids. A woman named Stefa gave testimony from her experience being a hidden child during the Holocaust: she notes that when she was reunited with her Jewish biological mother (after the mother was freed from Bergen-Belsen), and she was separated from her hidden adoptive mother, she cried so hard, for she “didn’t understand why [she] couldn’t have two mothers” (Kessel 2000, 61). Who ought to decide such things? The children, adult children, any of the mother claimants, the state, King Solomon, all together or some combination?

I live in a world in which I named my first adopted daughter after my maternal stepgrandfather, a man who raised no children to which he contributed biologically. Bloodlines be damned. With the naming of my daughter, the family feels he has been honored with a rightful heir. His wife, my maternal grandmother, escaped pogroms and came to the United States from Russia as a child with her mother. They arrived just as the United States began to close its doors to Eastern European immigrants in the 1920s. Back in Russia, my maternal great-grandfather was killed by Cossacks along the way of their escape, and his murder was avenged by the Red Army while they were still in transit. My grandmother’s life was spared at the last minute by the murderers. The Cossacks came onto their train to take the valuables of the women and to kill all the males. Why then, you may ask, were they interested in my grandmother’s life? Well, it seems my great-grandfather had wanted a boy so badly that they were raising my grandmother as one. Dressed as a boy, the Cossacks tried to pull my grandmother off the train too. A woman pleaded with them, “she’s not really a boy.” The Cossacks pulled down her pants and the matter was settled. No penis. Proof. My grandmother lives. It took my grand and great-grandmothers two years of traveling, but they eventually made it to a boat at port in Istanbul bound for “America.” I don’t know how, but with the help of some Christian peasants, changing birth dates to meet U.S. quotas, and a whole lot of love, luck, misery, and blessing, they made it onto Ellis Island and (more importantly) off to join the mass of immigrants early in the twentieth century.

While still a teenager, my unwed grandmother got pregnant. The man who became my mom’s biological father was forced to marry my grandmother because even here in the new world things weren’t quite new enough. There goes another unwed teen pregnancy. Eleven years later the couple had a son. The man beat and otherwise emotionally abused them all. My grandmother and the two kids escaped in the middle of the night aided by a Jewish social service agency. Before my mother’s bio-father (my grandmother’s first legal husband) was successful in getting my grandmother back, he had the decency to die. This made it

possible for my grandmother to later marry the gentle man I always called Papa and until some time in preadolescence knew as my only maternal grandfather. He had escaped pogroms in Poland and despite his Orthodox kin (some of who made it here too), he chose secular Judaism once in the new world. He offered to adopt my grandmother's two grown children. My mother proclaimed she loved him as her father, but she was about to marry my dad. Legally adopting her wasn't necessary, she was about to have the stamp of law affirming her attachment to a husband instead. My Papa did adopt her younger brother. My mother's brother married and had two kids. Unfortunately, like his bio-father, he also went off the deep end, scarring his family in ways I probably couldn't begin to imagine. For many years now, the "family" I have kept in touch with has not been my bio-uncle, but my married-in aunt and my cousins.

My paternal grandfather made it to this country alone, also in the early 1900s. He was fifteen years old and fated for a terrible marriage to a U.S. born woman who hated him for being an immigrant. After birthing three children, she was bedridden from emotional distress and eventually died. My dad grew up separated from his siblings. His brother and sister were raised with their mother's extended family and my dad raised by his single father. Later in life my paternal grandfather remarried. I never knew either my dad's bio or stepmom. I always knew my uncle and aunt, and didn't come to know about their years separated from my father until I was older. My father's brother never married and lived a simple life. Unlike all of our other relatives, he never brought any friends around for holiday gatherings. In my young adulthood, friends and I often delightfully speculated that he was gay; we joked that I would run into him at queer events around New York City. When he died, my sister Nina informed his only two friends of whom she knew. The next morning at his funeral, Riverside Memorial Chapel was literally overflowing with mourners. (Just to be honest about those stereotypes, Riverside Memorial Chapel is the one on the Upper West Side of Manhattan that you see in all the funeral scenes during films about New York Jews: Woody Allen-type films, the opening scene of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, etc.) We had had no idea that my uncle lived within such an intense, and large, circle of relations (who were not very gay!). My father's sister married, had two girls, and then divorced. Her first daughter married an Israeli who was born to Hungarian Holocaust survivors while they were trying to enter a holding camp in Cyprus on their way to Palestine. My cousin had two kids, divorced, and later in life back in the United States remarried another divorcee with kids. We still consider her first husband and his family "family," including the woman *he* married later in life. My aunt's younger daughter married a Moroccan Israeli living in the United

States, a previously divorced man with two children; their kids play with the grandkids of their father. Despite anti-Arab racism I have witnessed occasionally in my family, I even heard his own bio-kids exhibit a similar racial bias when they were young.

Funny, I always thought of my family as unbearably normal according to the mythic ideal of the “American” family. I’m not sure my story is that unusual among Jews and many others in the United States. But on (U.S.) American standards as well, I guess with all this dislocation, transnational migration, abuse, divorce, single adults, dykes, multiple marriages and so on, we actually *are* quite normal, at least empirically. (The things you figure out when you grow up.)

This is a world where, as an adult, I run into the sister of an old friend of mine on the Upper West Side. We all met as teenagers going to work on kibbutzim in Israel. I haven’t seen her in years, but now we have a new connection—we have kids around the same age. We’re trying to figure out how to work the system and get our kids into non-failing public kindergartens in New York City (an herculean task if there ever were one). She is the unmarried heterosexual adopted daughter of my friend’s father’s third wife. She has had her daughter through insemination with sperm from (what in layperson’s terms is called) “the genius sperm bank,” she is currently letting her bio-brother stay with her while her adoptive brother (born biologically to the mother they share) lives in an apartment in the same complex owned it seems by their jointly shared grandfather. When we meet at the Central Park Zoo on a sunny autumn afternoon, she and her daughter and me, with my multiracial adoptive family with two moms, are the city’s picture of families on an outing.

As a family we like to get out and about. My kids love to ride the subways and buses in New York. At two- and three-years-old, they were already swinging around the poles and hanging from the overhead bars like the teenagers that the undercover cops are always harassing. This is a world where I get on the subway with a Black man dressed in a black robe of an ultra-Orthodox Jewish sect, covered in a beautiful tallit (prayer shawl) over tzizit (religious undergarments), and sporting a necklace with a large flashy Jewish star. He’s haranguing the travelers with fire and brimstone about racial degradation, sexual improprieties, proper gender hierarchy, the need for class warfare, and the love of Jesus. In the turmoil I have been forced to abandon my newspapers, the English language version of the Jewish *Forward*—an old Yiddish socialist publication that decided to publish an English version given the ever diminishing demographic pool of fluent Yiddish speakers. I’ve been reading about a guy who has come out with a new CD from the Jews in Uganda (I am confused because we bought one such CD from this guy a couple of years

ago), about a non-Jewish Cuban musician who has integrated klezmer (an Eastern European style of music) into his new work, and about a public service campaign about Jews taking place in Sao Paulo. I've just read about the production of Woody Guthrie's Jewish music, the debut issue of a flashy Hollywood-style magazine conceived of by a gay Jewish immigrant from Iran, (I wonder how he fared in the post 9/11 INS roundup of Iranians in L.A.), and about the publisher who has all the English language publishing rights for Kafka's writings. I loved the piece on the then new Spanish-language Jewish newspaper (because, in contrast to the decline in Yiddish speakers, the Jewish "Hispanic"—as it is called—community in the United States has been growing). I know the Cuban rabbi who initiated it, Manny Vinnias, from Jewish multiracial circles. Since he's a beautiful soul and runs the most racially mixed class I could find in the Bronx, Manny would eventually become my kids' Hebrew school teacher for a spell. I miss my train stop because I am trying to figure out what the man in the tallit is getting at. With his heartfelt love for Jesus, does he consider himself some sort of Jew? I want to ask him a question. I'm trying to figure out how I can explain to my kids what's going on. I jump off the train when I realize I'm going to miss my appointment because I'm too far downtown now. I do not know what becomes of the man in the tallit.

In this book I hope to add to the ongoing conversation amongst feminists, queers and Jews, Jewish feminist queers of any number of races, and the variety of individuals and groups working on identity issues in politics as part of a larger project of justice politics. Here I interweave personal narrative, political analysis, philosophical critique, and plain old observations of interest. With a focus on the family, I look closely at an array of issues challenging us in our current struggles with justice politics. These issues are issues for families, critical theorists, Jews, feminists, queers, class warriors, and for antiracist activists. You may feel closer to certain aspects than to others, but I understand these as issues for anyone who cares about families and with an interest in what may still be challenging in identity politics, those: gendered any which way; sexual outlaw or proud member of the sexual mainstream; Jewish, not so Jewish, not sure if you're Jewish, once Jewish, your great-grandmother was half-Jewish, and definitely not Jewish at all (are you sure about that?).

I couldn't write a book about family without it fundamentally being about racial formation, queer lives and theory, feminist challenges and insights, class and economic politics, Jews and Jewish legacies. (Read on, you'll see why.) Some of the chapters tend more toward the theoretical and others concrete as the sidewalk outside my window. It's all here together because that's the way intellectual life is: a combination of ranting,

musings, thoughtful reflection, down and dirty critique, psychedelic imagination, generous recognition, and obstinate argumentation. The way dinner conversation might be on any holiday celebrated with my family. Very New York Jewish. Usually loud and pushy. Another stereotype, you might ask? Yes, and also quite descriptive in this case. I hope that you like it.

This book is intended to advance the discourse regarding the mutual constitution of our multiple identity signifiers by incorporating the much under-theorized contribution of Jewish life and experiences. Oy, that's a big sentence. Let me say that another way: This book draws on and advances the theory that not only are identities multiple, and multiply situated with respect to power, but that each politically salient aspect of our identity is mutually constituted through the development of the others. This means that one is not simply a man, or a Jew, or working class, or bisexual: one is all of these and each aspect actually co-creates the others. In this view, the gender of Jewish men and Jewish women, for example, is explicitly "Jewed." This work brings together and develops principally feminist, queer, class-based, and critical race theories by informing the discourse with Jewishly grounded theorizing as well as bringing the variety of these critical theories to bear on an analysis of aspects of Jewish history and thought. Here I look at family matters to both apply and develop this orientation of mutual construction theory.

Thus, the concrete work in this book takes on issues commonly associated with "family." My aim is to examine the family in a way that is at once recognizable and close, and simultaneously held at a lovingly critical distance. The basic question is: how can we unfamiliarize ourselves with a construct, an institution, an experience as familiar as "the family?" How can we talk politically about a body presumed to be a creature of affect? How can critical theory be the language to discuss the supposedly private mode of love and generations? At this historical juncture we must wake-up, shake ourselves out of the sleep into which we have been lulled with childhood bedtime stories of hetero-romantic love, marriage, and forever. The institution of marriage and family, the multibillion dollar business of marriage and family, are at the heart of systemic modes of injustice which propel our social worlds into the future. Locally, nationally, internationally, the commodification of affect which squeezes us into the constraints of the nuclear family are grounded in and make possible the political capacity for hierarchy, degradation, and annihilation of the spirit and psyche as kin to the annihilation of the peoples and cultures wiped off the map as global capitalism runs rampant as wild fires in southern California. We the people, as opposed to multinational corporations and the U.S. military-industrial complex, need to do some shaking up. We need to make that which is cozy a bit more

uncomfortable. Without doing so we will not be able to clear out enough space for insight, critical understanding, and relation with which we can re-engage in our worlds, in our desires, needs, passion in any way that is not simply reinscribing indignity and alienation.

Throughout this text on family business (we did have one, low-end textiles of course), I address issues within theories on identity itself grounded in the imbricating frameworks of Jewish, feminist, class-based, race, and queer critical theories. Here I also apply these co-constructed theories to a number of inherently related concerns significant in contemporary Jewish communities and families such as: racial transformations, adoption, various modes of family construction, marriage and monogamy, (trans) sexual and gender identity, and political activism. I address the fine balance that these newer contributions in the academy and on the streets may offer to Jewish life with traditional Jewish interests in continuity and communal self-definition.

With all the ruckus caused by feisty Jewish queers and activity on diversity more broadly in the Jewish community, I am often invited to speak or write for gatherings and collections with titles such as “The Changing Face of the Jewish Family” or “The Changing Face of Judaism.” These titles are meant to open the audience to hearing from and about Jews with (in the words of the organizers) “black, brown, yellow, olive, and red” faces in addition to the U.S. stereotyped pink of northern European Jews. The symposia are designed to bring out into communal public spaces the experiences and contributions of queers, gays, lesbians, multi/bisexuals, transgendered Jews, feminists, divorced and single adult Jews, poor and typed-middle-class yet financially struggling Jews. People are wanting to address the needs and learn from the insights of elder Jews, young Jews, coastal Jews and those in the heartland, those who are Jews through conversion or living in interfaith families. Progressive Jews continue to mine radical Jewish history for inspiration and guidance; feminists, queers, and non-Euro Jews simultaneously blast the mines open to interrupt the unacknowledged hetero-patriarchal Euro-centeredness of the all too common reiterations of the mining. At these panels, many of the presenters feel compelled to use the first portion of our coveted speaking time challenging the premise of the gatherings themselves. (Such a Jewish practice.) The Jewish community has always been diverse; since ancient times and biblical stories, Israel has always been peopled by those of many nations. Jewish communities have always been in a state of flux.

The concern with continuity in the Jewish community mapped onto debates about the family might more properly be reconfigured as an interest in change. Jews around the globe have made it through history by change: through the dynamism of lives lived as Jews, through the

dynamism of lives lived in community, of communities living with and against each other. Complex theories of identity, multiplicity, and change are crucial for understanding and caring for “continuity.” When people say identity politics is dead, they are generally thinking of identities claimed as static, isolated components of a life. But identity politics remains very much alive, kept alive in part by those who condemn and deconstruct it. Struggling with identities—their multilayered, shifting, contextually contingent, and historically constructed politics—is alive and well. In consideration of the family, of complicated (and thus quite empirically traditional) kin networks, of the power of assimilation, the force of capitalism, the deprivation of poverty, the indignity of prejudice, nuanced theories of identities are still called for in the messiness of our individual lives and our communal struggles for justice.

I know that I am not alone in these struggles. I have a great many comrades, both academics and street activists, producing works of beauty and critique on so many of the troubling political issues of our day. We are hard at work, serious at play, awestruck in prayer trying to untangle the jumble and meanings of our singular and collective lives in a new Christian millennium: in novels, poetry, and treatises; in film, dance, and all the arts; in experimental curating at museums willing to dare; in large and small demonstrations, marches, graffiti-ins; using the best of new technologies and the tried and true methods from knocking on doors to leafleting at neighborhood stores. In government, organizations, classrooms, yoga centers, comedy clubs, theatres, and places of worship, folks are creating new and bringing together the cutting edge political insights of Jewish, feminist, class, race, and queer theories and practices. Yet, we yearn for more. There is still so much to figure out and to change. We need more.

Feminist works are fundamentally transforming Jewish studies, exploding traditional assumptions and methods while reinvigorating Jewish life and scholarship. Queer studies also now has developed to such an extent that it is able to take on core aspects of Jewish life and tradition. A few Jewish scholars and activists are integrating contemporary work on class and economic justice while others are bringing antiracist concerns into Jewishly based analysis. There is, thus, currently a high demand for new approaches in this millennia-long tradition of Jewish scholarly debate. I consider myself part of these conversations, responding to this historic call by using my training in critical theory to bring multiple modes of identity-based critical analysis together in a Jewish frame. Among the few academics trained as political or critical theorists who have turned their attention to Jewish concerns, there are still too few drawing on the growing wealth of feminist, class-based, critical race, and queer scholarship and theory (let alone their mutually constitutive character).

What do you hear when you get quiet enough to listen?
I hear pounding.

I hear pounding all day every day as I write these words. I hear the pounding of children's fists as they cry out in frustration, the pounding of gavels in the courtrooms of our (supposed) justice system, the pounding of people marching in the streets, the pounding of radical activists at their computer keyboards trying desperately to get the word out, the pounding of hearts at the INS in a post-9/11 New York City detaining and deporting people with no due process. I hear pounding because for the past few months workers have been breaking through bedrock next door to build a new apartment building in what had been a rare patch of woods in the Bronx. Local activists tried to block the builders' securing a licence. Most of the local buildings are co-ops, the tenants in many of the nearby buildings are still the organizing type. We live in what we have nicknamed "amalgamated land." The neighborhood was built up early in the twentieth century by radical Jewish activists and union organizers: all co-ops, credit unions, and community services. I vote at Vladeck Hall, (I hope Vladeck was a Jewish anarchist!) because we still have old-fashioned community function rooms. A testament to the minority ethnic messianic vision within the labor movement. A little bit of heaven—that took a lot of muscle and perseverance to make—in the not so *goldene medina* (golden land) promised in the myth of "America." Those Jews worked so hard to get a local public school in the neighborhood to educate the poor and immigrant populations. The fate of P.S. 95 is the logical outcome of attacks on education and the dismantling of a democratic dream of universal education. Now our local public school is undersubscribed, a bussed school, meaning that the Board of Education uses it for the overflow of students in other Bronx schools, bussed in to fill-up the empty seats because too few local parents will accept the fate of sending their kids to what is now on the Chancellor's list of Schools in Need of Improvement. (SINI is the new euphemism for what the press calls "failing" schools.) Yet, the school is by now overcrowded. Go figure.

There are a good many of the founding generation still around in the Amalgamated co-ops and other buildings, and also many of their kids come back to live in this neat outpost in our beleaguered borough. Many also moved away, making room for an influx of every other ethnic and racial sort of New Yorker. In this book you will learn about the raced, classed, gendered, and sexed political forces that moved some of those Eastern European Jewish families up and out of the lower, urban mass. You will find out about the queer, and mixed race, and non-Euro Jews and non-Jews who moved into my community (to which community am I