

# An Incessant Historical Struggle for a Jewish Bantustan: *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*

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**Abstract**—This article tries to investigate the connection space and time as they pertain to the fictitious world of Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007). The book shows significant concerns regarding the existence of Israel as well as the concept of a Jewish state. By analysing the function of eruvim in the construction and contestation of Jewish identity in Chabon's postmodern detective novel from 2007, this study argues that Chabon creates a universe in which geographical place complicates rather than simplifies Jewish identity in diaspora and postmodernity. This study accomplishes its goal by analysing the function of eruvim in analysing Chabon's postmodern detective novel from 2007. So, the Jewish Alaska that exists in Chabon's imagination has a significant link to the contentious assertions that he has made regarding the contemporary geographical state of Israel.

**Index Terms**—Bantustan, homeland, Jewish identity, alternative history, geographical location

## I. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernist narrative is used in Michael Chabon's novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, published in 2007. This work combines hard-boiled detective fiction, alternative history, and dystopian genres. The unique amalgamation of genres in Michael Chabon's novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007) exemplifies a trend toward using genre fiction in Chabon's body of work as well as in American literature written in the 21st century in general. The novel written by Chabon has been described as "a stylish genre-busting detective noir murder mystery/political thriller/alternate history sci-fi hybrid" (Dewey, 2014, p. 18). It addresses severe historical and political issues through the medium of "entertainment," which Chabon insists is the distinguishing characteristics of the narrative.

The novel by Chabon depicts an alternate history that is sardonic and has aspects of hard-boiled fiction and dystopian literature. The term "chutzpah" may be translated from Hebrew as "impudence." The Hebrew word has also become common in American English, as it has a wider meaning. A. Mars-Jones used this phrase in his article to emphasize the genre specificity of the novel by alluding to R. Chandler, the founder of hard-boiled fiction. "The tropes typical of this genre are in full force.

The protagonist of the novel, Meyer Landsman, is a jaded alcoholic policeman who is harsh yet sensitive. He decides to take on one final case almost on a whim and then discovers that it is connected to the destinies of his closest and dearest friends and family members. "There is an undercurrent of feeling in the authors Chabon has adopted as his models, as harsh or steely it may be, but it's nearer the surface here, even though the speech never loses its salty snap" (Mars-Jones; cited in Karasik & Strukova, 2015, p. 237).

Even though this classification has been contested because alternative histories do not include staples of the science fiction genre, such as parallel universes, time travel, and extraterrestrials, *the Yiddish Policemen's Union* is considered a part of the subcategory of science fiction known as alternative history. According to Doležel (2010), "Science fiction projects a future that varies greatly from the reality of the author's present; counterfactual historical fiction alters the past to project a present that differs substantially from the actual state of things" (p. 107). It may seem that "fantasy" is the more suitable phrase to use when referring to alternative history since it diverges from what we know about reality or history.

Chabon attributes the negative reputation of genre literature to two misconceptions: that knowledge and depth are incompatible with entertaining; and that genre writing is overly formulaic, and too strongly dictated by confining generic standards, in contrast to "true literature, which is free (it is to be supposed) of all formulas and templates" (Chabon, 2008, p. 8). In contrast, Chabon emphasizes the fact that conventions and norms are meant to be violated, questioned, transformed, reversed, and/or played with in some capacity. In doing so, he recalls John Barth and brings to the attention of writers "the cycle of creativity, weariness, and replenishment" (Chabon, 2008, p. 11).

In his novel, "The Yiddish Policemen's Union", Chabon uses his vivid imagination to rewrite the history of World War II by re-creating the experiences of Jewish Holocaust survivors living in the United States and the lives of their Jewish-American grandchildren. Alternatively, alternative histories play out scenarios that diverge from the official past to offer fascinating issues about the history, politics, and/or culture of countries or governments. These histories contrast

with apocalyptic imaginings of the grim future of our planet. These works not only widen our historical imagination but also inexorably entangle our present since they bring attention to obscure or peripheral happenings by fictionally transfiguring them into realities. Consequently, alternative histories sometimes include covert cautions against actual political or societal trends that are occurring in the present day and that the writers see as being dangerous.

Instead than focusing excessively on substance (story, setting, characters) and style (genre), which hides subtly embedded political themes, Schneider-Mayerson suggests that attention be redirected to the context of alternative histories to facilitate political analysis. This would replace the practice of maintaining an excessively critical focus on the content (plot, setting, and characters). Importantly, “context” refers to both the immediate socio-political context of the author as well as the “context of the characters in each novel: the political, social, and cultural shape of the universe they inhabit.” This is because “context” refers to the “context of the characters in each novel: the political, social, and cultural shape of the universe they inhabit” (Schneider-Mayerson, 2009, p. 72).

In Chabon’s alternate history, the Allies launched a nuclear assault on Berlin in 1946. However, they did not drop any atomic bombs on Japan. After only three months of existence, the state of Israel was wiped out in 1948 as a result of a bloody war with the Arabs; the region subsequently became one of interminable violence, and Jerusalem is referred to as “a city of blood and slogans painted on the walls, severed heads on telephone poles” (Chabon, 2007, p. 17).

*The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* is a work of alternative history that contains elements typical of the hard-boiled detective story. This is a literary subgenre that was popular in the latter half of the 20th century and which Chabon adopts by modeling his work after authors Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. In a novel that translates hard-boiled Chanderlesque staples into the context of Yiddish-speaking Alaskan Jews, Chabon even manages to sneak in a casual yet perceptive allusion when protagonist Landsman discovers a “Yiddish translation of Chandler” (Chabon, 2007, p. 305) at his uncle’s house.

The eruv becomes a dazzling metaphor for the ability of imagination to overcome real (geopolitical) barriers and establish an alternate refuge within one’s mind and art, regardless of the Jewish theme and in the context of Chabon’s reaffirmation of the fantastic. This is especially true when considering the novel’s context, which is Chabon’s reaffirmation of the fantastic.

According to Barbara Mann, modern conceptual artists, who are frequently Jewish, have long understood the symbolic connotations of the eruv, which has resulted in “the eruv emerging as both a motif and device in critical theory and art” (Mann, 2012, p. 138). The eruv nearly turns into a metafictional reflection on the author’s creative process when it’s used as a cliché for artistic method. In this way, Chabon takes on the role of the novel’s boundary maven Zimbalist, defining the parameters of his own fantastical realm (a distant, imaginary, doomed Jewish kingdom by the arctic sea) and using his imagination to make the strange and unfamiliar (a fantasy about a Jewish state in Alaska) palatable and convincing.

“Chabon encourages us to think more fully and generously about the people who lost that “Israeli-Arab war” (Scanlan, 2011, p. 525), who are used politically and religiously, and are bound to uncertainty and humiliation, much like Chabon’s Sitka Jews. History provides Chabon with the opportunity to investigate the explosive combination of religion and politics in the settings of Jewish, American, and Jewish-American history, which is far from being an exercise in literary a politicism.

As Chabon’s alternate history expands into the current day, drawing attention to the plight of the Palestinians, who were the true losers in 1948, it rises to the level of first-rate political fiction.

This alternative a more general return to the joy in narrative, world-making, and plot-weaving may be seen in Chabon’s conception of the artist as an eruv-maker, which he describes in his novel. Scanlan observes that this is “possibly a twenty-first-century shadow of modernism’s faith in the ability of art to transform the world”. This is happening at the same time (Scanlan, 2011, p. 526).

## II. THE VALUE OF FREE WILL

Chabon breaks away from compatibilism and an essentialist approach to Jewish identity and geography by adopting the generic frameworks of a hard-boiled detective story and alternate history. He does this to propose a complex approach to history as shaped by human actions’ intricate web. The events in the novel take place in a different version of historical reality in terms of time and location. In the world of the narrative, the effort to form the nation of Israel after Globe War II was unsuccessful. However, another endeavor concerning the future of the Jewish population worldwide was successful. In 1939, Secretary of the Interior under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Harold Ickes, suggested that the state of Alaska could become a settlement site for European Jews. At the time, European Jews were in increasing danger due to the hostile policies of Nazi Germany. Ickes made this suggestion in the context of Alaska being able to become a site of a settlement. The novel written by Chabon imagines a future in which this plan is successful and Jews from all over the globe emigrate to Alaska rather than to Palestine. The majority of the action takes place in the city of Sitka, which, as several reviewers have pointed out, seems astonishingly suitable considering that it already has a name that sounds Yiddish (Kravitz, 2010, p. 95).

According to the narration, “Sitka Jews rarely see or speak to Indians, except in federal court or the small Jewish towns along the Line” (Chabon, 2007, p. 103). Elsewhere in the text, the author emphasizes the Jewish fear of the native population by stating, “Fifty years of movie scalpings and whistling arrows and burning Conestogas have their effect on

people's minds" (Chabon, 2007, p. 104). Some of the characters wish their reality were much more dependent on borders. This may be because they want to get out of the precarious position in which their settlement in Sitka depends on the whim of the American government. In a world where borders appear arbitrary, an eruv is used by an Orthodox community to define its borders, symbolically reestablishing the boundaries' permanence in a world when they might appear meaningless. Parallel to this universalist distance from the nationalist or particularist discourses, which are portrayed as obsessive, the narrative's central character's perspective reflects this distance. This is because the main character is a universalist.

Along with investigating the standard plan for the murder, Detective Meyer Landsman also traces the intricate network of human activities that created the outcome for the Sitka community. This is how the plot of the novel centers on the investigation led by Detective Meyer Landsman. Anderson (2015) observed that the term "Landsman" could be a reference to "landsman-shaft," which he described as "one of the sets of organizations that gathered Jewish immigrants together by identifying them with other immigrants who arrived from the same regions in Europe" (p. 90). Landsman, who is the focalizer of the narration, is depicted as someone who, throughout the entirety of the novel, views the actions that are based on religious or nationalistic ideology as being absurd, pointless, and detrimental to the overall quality of life. The author, Chabon, quotes the protagonist as saying, "he'd much prefer go to Madagascar" (Chabon 99) before being compelled to visit Verbov Island, alluding to the island's history as a potential location for Jewish resettlement prior to World War II. The narrative goes on to explain that the Verbovers' tribal appropriation of Jewishness has left him feeling "less Jewish"; as a result, "he has stopped shaving and no longer fears God. He is not a Verbover Jew and don't consider him as a Jew at all. Furthermore, if he is not a Jew, he is nothing." (Chabon, 2007, p. 102).

How the novel characters treat territoriality and national identity is, to a considerable extent, reflective of how they approach the concept of free will. This, in turn, provides context for what the novel has to say about the historical circumstances under which Jews first settled. Meyer Landsman, who serves as the novel's primary narrator and protagonist, has a point of view that is, at least in part, influenced by the tropes typical of the hard-boiled detective tale genre. In a typical noir scenario, events would either follow the line of reasoning that one is doomed to fail or they would provide support for the viewpoint that the universe is ruled by chance; in this instance, the failure would be the consequence of the characters' acts that were not well assessed. The second choice provides further evidence in favor of the hypothesis that the noir literary genre was a reaction to the postwar empowered feminine (Farrimond) since it maintained the potential that the strong patriarchy may be reinstated. However, the significance of the individual's ability to make their own decisions was a recurring theme in hard-boiled fiction. This is also the case in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*.

All the novel's characters share a common dichotomy: they all perceive their actions as the product of their own free will, but they also feel limited by the freedom others have when they exercise it. It goes much farther into how the narrative treats the Jewish people's ultimate fate. The concept that God may have a hand in determining the future success of an individual or a country cannot be tolerated under any circumstances. Mendel Shpilman seems to be the one whom God has selected to be the Messiah; nevertheless, the pressure of being expected to live up to that expectation finally causes him to despise himself. Shpilman tries to flee from it by abusing substances and isolating himself from society. Changing his name is one of the measures he takes toward accomplishing this goal. The Verbovers have chosen to create an exclusive society for themselves, but the United States government's insistence on moving through with the Reversion poses a challenge to this endeavor.

Even if the preparations do not proceed as they were supposed to because of individual faults, the terrorist plot to blow up the Mosque in Jerusalem is an effort by people acting of their own free choice to change the path that history would follow. These larger social and political issues are juxtaposed with Landsman's attempts to maintain a relationship with Bina. This is significant because it draws attention to the core conflict in the work, which is between the optimism of Jewish utopianism and the pessimism of the hard-boiled genre.

### III. IDENTITY

Chabon so generally relates to the generation of modern Jewish American writers whose American and Jewishness nourish and inspire their work. Identity Chabon is a member of this generation. The representation of Jewish culture in *The Yiddish Policemen* is in line with Tresa Grauer's critique of modern Jewish American literature. Grauer believes that although concerns about identity are an inevitable feature of modernity, the fact that they are the primary topic of attention in this particular literature sets it apart from other similar works. This cultural dichotomy is expressed in *Union*, which makes the issue of identifying the central theme of Chabon's novel.

...discussions about identity, which have been going on for a long time in the milieu surrounding the creation of Jewish American literature, have now become the literature's self-conscious topic. Less for its coherence as a body of literature characterized by identity than for its concentration on that identity should include the wide variety of literary works that have developed over the last twenty-five years and be evaluated collectively when it comes to literary analysis (Grauer, 2003, p. 270).

From Landsman's point of view, his native Sitka is the only conceivable Yiddish homeland, which allows Chabon to perceive the issue of Zionism, colonialism, and exile from a fresh viewpoint. Chabon's alternate Yiddishland in America is located in the United States. His imagined Yiddishland is described by Chabon as "a frigid, northern land

with furs, paprika, samovars, and one long, magnificent day of summer" (Chabon, 2008, p. 18). Chabon made this description public for the first time in 1997. Imagining a Jewish Homeland in the United States of America is much more than speculative fiction; in reality, as Susanna Heschel has said, "America as a location of Jewish emancipation has been one of the driving myths of the contemporary Jewish imagination" (Heschel, 2003, p. 31).

The settlement is also a colonial history, and Berko Shemets, Landsman's half-Indian cousin, reminds of the violent suppression of Indian lives and culture throughout the American enterprise. At the same time, Berko Shemets serves as a metaphorical reference to the Israeli colonization of Palestinian land after 1967. In the aftermath of the explosion of a prayer house that a group of Jews had erected on disputed territory, Berko's Indian mother passes away.

"... Jews need a habitable place. In the sixties, a few of them started to take it, mostly members of various tiny Orthodox groups," (Chabon, 2007, p. 43). Later in the novel, Berko discovers that his Jewish father, who worked as a counterintelligence operative for the United States, is partially to blame for the riots and the consequent murder of his mother. As Berko struggles with the contrasting aspects of his identity, we are reminded of the impossibility of having a sense of self rooted in both a connection with Zionism and with the people who have been wronged by it, as shown by (Schweid, 2003, p. 39).

Berko's dual identity manifests itself via linguistic diglossia as a result of his effective assimilation into Yiddish society, which results in his losing some of his native languages in the process. Berko's reluctant Tlingit reveals the double bind that comes along with his cultural exile when he is confronted with an old Indian buddy. Berko's existence as an observant Jew is the consequence of an intentional and challenging choice: "Every single day of my life," Berko says to his estranged father, "I wake up in the morning and put this stuff on [skullcap and four-corners] and pretend to be someone I'm not. I've been doing this for a long time." (...there is no connection to any religious practice (...)). It has absolutely everything to do with dads by God's grace (Chabon, 2007, p. 317). Berko is cognizant of the traditional transmission of Jewish identity via the matrilineal line; nonetheless, he demonstrates that identification is the outcome of an intentional act of self-assertion. Berko was uprooted from his original tribe, and his absent father left him to fend for himself. Berko is the most exiled of all the exiles.

#### IV. THE GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE

The image of a game of chess, which appears numerous times throughout *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, is particularly illustrative of the diagonal space. This image appears throughout the novel and offers a very appropriate metaphor for understanding how Sitka organizes space and time. The victim of the murder that Detective Landsman is looking into was a former chess prodigy who was found dead with a chessboard by his side; numerous other characters are depicted while playing chess; and Landsman comes from a long line of skilled chess players. The narrator explains that, unlike other games, "chess is acceptable for religious Jews to play even on the Sabbath" (Chabon, 2007, p. 88). Sitka's space-time appears to unravel and operate like a chess game; in fact, chess games are built via movements and counter-moves, acts and speculations, horizontal moves and vertical moves, but are also produced, and more substantially so, out of diagonal shifts, a third option. Sitka's space-time itself appears to function as a game of chess. "Landsman pursues Albert Einstein across the milk-white, chalk-white ice, hopping from square to shadowed square across relativistic chessboards of culpability and atonement, across the imaginary land of penguins and Eskimos that the Jews never quite managed to inherit" (Chabon, 2007, p. 372). This is another allusion to space-time, and Chabon names its theoretician.

There are also sections in the novel that are metaliterary. Chabon discusses the wider question of the potential creative power of narrative-telling: "This is not about getting the tale right. Because you and I, we know, all, that the tale is whatever we decide it is, and whatever lovely and clean we make it, in the end, a story is not going to make a damn bit of difference to the dead in any way, shape, or form" (Chabon, 2007, p. 288). And after another hundred pages, they say, "But we aren't telling a narrative." "No?" "Huh-uh. This is the tale that Detective Landsman is about to tell us. In the same manner that it has done from the beginning. We play a role in the narrative. You. Me." (Chabon, 2007, p. 365).

In fact, Chabon argues, via Landsman, that Jewish identity is "best realised outside of a defined physical location; to put it another way, in diaspora" (i.e., outside of Israel) (ibid.). Landsman's motto, "my motherland is in my hat," expresses this same sentiment (Chabon, 2007, p. 368).

Landsman is a skilled professional outcast and a tireless worker. His lack of trust in other people's honesty is a big reason for his success as a crime solver. His own vulnerabilities are what make him such a skilled investigator, but his tough and cynical exterior belies a "broken-down masculinity" (Kaminsky, 2014, p. 166), reminiscent of the wounded male characters of Hemingway and Faulkner who disguise their fragility behind a facade of cynicism and clever talk. His own vulnerabilities also serve to his advantage as a detective. Chabon creatively redefines Jewish identity in stark opposition to Jewish orthodoxy is by making Bina Meyer's identification based only on his relationship with her rather than on his cultural or ethnic background.

In this cross-genre setting, what begins as a murder investigation develops into a political intrigue with global ramifications. When the story moves into a parallel history, this is exactly what will occur. The author's "strong thematic commitment to topics surrounding Jewish identity," as Witcombe puts it, may be explored further from this premise. This provides a foundation for exploring a more comprehensive theme structure (Witcombe, 2016, p. 31).

Landsman's investigation into a local addict's death uncovered that the dead person had been a chess prodigy and a messianic figure in the local Hasidic Jewish community in a previous life. This is Emanuel Lasker who is the sole son of the leader of the ultraconservative Verbovers, a group with mafia-like power over the city's underbelly and a strict no-tolerance attitude for non-believers. Mendel Shpilman is the name often used to refer to this particular individual.

In a review of the book, Elizabeth (2009) states that the story reminds her of a recent speculative fiction written by a prominent author called *The Plot Against America*, which also features Jews in a negative light. Philip Roth's alternative history, on the other hand, poses the question "What if?" The work of Chabon is an explosion that just exclaims, "Take a look!" He then begins to imagine the bizarre world of Aleyska, which has an American flavour but is not actually an American setting.

"The eruv has become a contentious, symbolically rich venue for identity negotiation," as stated by (Witcombe, 2016, p. 31). "Eruvic home spaces offer an atmosphere rich in numerous meanings, identity markers, and narrative alternatives," as stated in the article. (Witcombe, 2016, p. 47) "focusing on the way that this pliable space is manifested in the home spaces that both authors [i.e. Michael Chabon and Howard Jacobson] portray," a sense of dislocated Jewish identity emerges in which characters can negotiate, appropriate, and discard identity markers despite the weight of societal pressure they are subjected to (Witcombe, 2016, p. 48).

## V. CONCLUSION

*The Yiddish Policemen's Union* examines how the changing of geopolitical borders transforms people and political thriller into victims or winners of territorial rearrangements via the lens of the novel's unusual combination of alternate history, political thriller, and noir detective fiction. Also, the novel focus on Chabon's use of genre to investigate how the redrawing of political borders casts people and communities in either victim or victor roles. He suggests seeing the course of history as one that is influenced by a tangled network of human endeavours. The events in the novel take place in a different version of historical reality, both in terms of time and location. With the use of the grotesque as an artistic medium, the author of the novel directs the reader's attention to the novel's depiction of the realisation of the trauma theory. Chabon depicted that Jews were once again confronted with the prospect of historical upheaval and geographical displacement and Sitka became a Jewish territory during this time. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* shows significant concerns regarding the existence of Israel as well as the concept of a Jewish state.

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