Introduction

This volume is dedicated to the rich multilingualism and polyphony of Jewish literary writing. It offers an interdisciplinary array of suggestions on issues of research and teaching related to further promoting the integration of modern Jewish literary studies into the different philological disciplines. It collects the proceedings of the Gentner Symposium funded by the Minerva Foundation, which was held at the Freie Universität Berlin from June 27 to 29, 2018. During this three-day symposium at the Max Planck Society’s Harnack House, more than fifty scholars from a wide range of disciplines in modern philology discussed the integration of Jewish literature into research and teaching. Among the participants were specialists in American, Arabic, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Romance and Latin American, Slavic, Turkish, and Yiddish literature as well as comparative literature. The symposium was conceived and carried out in cooperation between the Freie Universität Berlin, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University, the University of Haifa, and the University of Duisburg-Essen.

One point of departure for the joint initiative resulting in the publication of this volume was a conversation about the fact that there is no permanent chair for Hebrew literature in Germany. While Hebrew literature is a subject at universities worldwide, it surprisingly seems to be somewhat neglected in Germany. When we conducted a sample examination of the course catalogues from the last ten semesters at the fifteen largest German universities in German, Slavic, American, Romance, and comparative literary studies, we discovered that Jewish literatures were not adequately represented in academic teaching. As a result, students are neither given the chance to study key texts of world literature nor the literary works in which many of the challenges of our present moment are negotiated. Further discussion with European colleagues made it evident that this is not a phenomenon restricted to Germany: major modern Jewish texts written in Arabic, French, German, Hungarian, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian, Turkish, and Yiddish do not form an integral part of their respective national philologies in Germany, Europe, Israel, Latin America, or the United States. A third issue under discussion was the state of diasporic literatures in courses on Hebrew literature in Israel. More generally, we observed that in our current BA and MA courses, the focus on teaching the basic gist of relevant understudied texts leaves very little room to introduce our students to a fuller range of world literature. Similarly, our day-to-day teaching routine sometimes neglects more profound methodological reflections. Thus, the editors of this volume have joined forces with scholars from different philological disciplines drawing on different historical focuses and methodological approaches in order to develop con-
crete proposals on how to address this lacuna, based on case studies from various language cultures. 

Despite its inherent transnationality, much of the research into Jewish literatures continues to unfold within a national framework—an approach that is also traceable in hyphenated terms such as “Jewish-American” or “German-Jewish”. In addition, the significance of analyzing and comparing what constitutes “Jewishness” in a German or Turkish, Christian or Muslim, literary context must be taken into account. The fact that Islam has now become the second largest religious community in Europe shifts the discourse on Jewish literatures in unprecedented ways. We must react to this. The process of modernization that Judaism has undergone, and which can be traced in its literary history, offers ample opportunity to connect with the challenges that Muslim cultures are facing. Precisely because our students have diverse backgrounds, we need to emphasize the numerous connections in a historicizing perspective rather than essentializing cultural differences.

Seeking to redefine and explore the sociological and cultural conditions of different migrant experiences, diaspora studies has unfolded new perspectives across disciplines in recent decades, and yet, a systematic inclusion into the respective philological disciplines in Germany and Israel remains a desideratum. The volume at hand aims to develop ideas and concepts for bringing together different epistemological and textual approaches into the curricula and research programs of the corresponding departments of literary studies in Europe, Israel, and the States. Jewish literatures from their ancient traditions to modernity—from the Bible, Mishna and Talmud, Kabbalah and Hasidism and beyond—challenge our very notion of literature. Even works by authors of Jewish belonging in modernism alone—from Marcel Proust to Osip Mandelstam, from Bruno Schulz to Bernardo Kucinski, from Natalia Ginzburg to Hélène Cixous, from Paul Celan to Dan Pagis—not to mention contemporary Hebrew, Russian, and Palestinian writing in Israel, challenge scholars to transcend the strict confines of national philologies and their respective disciplines.

In his book *From Continuity to Contiguity*, Dan Miron acknowledges the fact that most authors in the history of Jewish literary thinking came from multilingual environments and were deeply immersed in the respective lingua franca in the literatures and cultures of their time. Such an observation is not without significance. Miron suggests the mapping of a “modern Jewish literary complex” which is “vast, disorderly, and somewhat diffuse”, and which is “characterized by dualities, parallelisms, occasional intersections, marginal overlapping, hybrids, similarities within dissimilarities, mobility, changeability” and more. While we share Miron’s poly-perspectival conception of Jewish literatures, which challenges a monolithic, national understanding of what Jewish literature
means, we also need to move beyond Eurocentric definitions of what Jewish literatures were and still are. Menachem Brinker’s study *Hebrew Literature as European Literature* once again demonstrated the close ties between Hebrew literature and the European literary world. And yet Brinker, like Miron, Gershon Shaked, and many others, considers neither the liturgical traditions of Judaism nor the dialogues of Jewish authors with the traditions of Islam. To address these gaps, the 2018 Gentner Symposium proposed a re-orientation in our fields of studies, acknowledging the multilingual, post-national, ambiguous, and diffuse nature of Jewish literatures, the nature of which also challenges the binaries of Western experience and the conceptions of the East (the Orient), the dichotomies of modernism and tradition, critique and prayer, subjectivity and communal being. Questions of canonisation and curricula need to undergo a renewed discussion, as do our methods and practices of reading.

This volume contains essays with very different approaches. Such a broad conception of Jewish literatures, which is to take into account not only Western European and Latin American literatures, but also the modern Jewish cultural production in the East, in Hebrew as well as in other Jewish and non-Jewish languages (Judeo-Spanish, Judeo-Arabic, Classical Arabic, Turkish, Persian), seems the intellectual alternative that we have to develop against isolating, essentialist perspectives. The volume offers cross-cultural perspectives in a dynamic, multilingual setting, encouraging a post-essentialist engagement with belonging in literary texts, unrestrained by a national canon.

For this reason, we do not consider this volume to be yet another contribution to the definition of what might be understood as Jewish literature; instead, it focuses on the literary representation of different constructions of Jewish belonging. In literary studies, we insist on linking the concept of Jewish belonging to the status of the literary text, not the biography of the author. Nevertheless, we keep witnessing in our respective fields repeated attempts to identify and solidify essentialist understandings of Jewish literature and culture. As recently as 2001, Michael P. Kramer, for example, sought to apply the concept of race to determine what should and should not be regarded as Jewish literatures. The debate that followed is documented in the journal *Prooftexts*. Kramer’s polemic criticized pluralist understandings of belonging as an evasive strategy so as to avoid the necessity of facing the consequences of a consistent definition. In contrast, we argue that Jewish belonging as represented and imagined in literary texts is not an *a priori* given, but is instead constructed in and through specific narrative situations. For this very reason, the methodological discussions presented in this book are not intended to establish a canon of Jewish literature.

The Gentner Symposium provided us with an interdisciplinary and collaborative conference setting, which brought together the expertise and the mutually
reinforcing perspectives of a variety of literary disciplines in the humanities—such as linguistics and philology, cultural studies, literary hermeneutics, and comparative literature. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to our contributors for their willingness to engage in this unusual format. From our point of view, both the symposium and also the joint efforts to create this volume brought together a group of scholars who recognize that concerted research is indispensable to the future of Jewish studies and the humanities as a whole. We therefore feel that the symposium yielded new approaches for the teaching of diverse Jewish literatures in both Jewish and also non-Jewish languages. The discussions at the symposium offered the opportunity to experiment with different analytical methods, thus encouraging an intensified use of critical and discursive tools of a comparative quality for dealing with the theoretical and practical incorporation of the respective texts of Jewish literatures into the overall framework of literary studies.

As a result, this volume suggests a far-reaching—and not dichotomous—conceptualization of canonical texts of the Jewish literary corpus, which includes writings within Arabic, English, French, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Latin-American, Polish, Portuguese-Brazilian, Russian, Spanish, Turkish, and Yiddish studies. Rather than buying into overly enthusiastic concepts of a “transnational space” (assuming that all forms of belonging to a nation state have been dissolved), we suggest a rationale that allows for a historical perspective on experiences related to migration, diaspora, and belonging—in all their variants and concomitant, specific sets of problems.

We proceed from the conviction that philological knowledge is attained by means of a continuous dialogue with the literary text as such. In line therewith, we accentuate literature as determined by language and highlight that historical understanding must be accompanied by an awareness of the inevitable historicity of knowledge. Individual researchers cannot possibly have at their disposal all the tools necessary for comparative research if the literary cultures in question comprise texts in Arabic, French, German, Hebrew, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian, and Yiddish. Consequently, the volume is also meant as an impetus to building networks for future collaboration.

In presenting different case studies, our volume dedicates special attention to the importance of modern Jewish literatures for didactics education within the current parameters of globalization. The case studies assess the potential for moving teacher training further towards a paradigm of transnationalization via the systematic integration of modern Jewish literatures into the curricula of language teaching. The different essays examine these aspects from a wide range of philological perspectives. We have tried to include analyses of different literary genres (poetry, drama, prose) and different literary periods and move-
ments. Our aim is to advance the exploration of key terms and theoretical models that further a complex understanding of Jewish literatures as post-essentialist. We hope to contribute to the development of a high quality interdisciplinary curriculum at both undergraduate and graduate levels. In this way, the volume also intends to promote research on interdisciplinary and integrative methods of teaching and studying modern Jewish literatures and enhancing their visibility.

Our publication in open access format is meant to be an opening towards further cooperation, not an end of it. We hope to enable the construction of a collaborative network based on cross-disciplinary data available to all interested students and teachers of literature. We are very much aware that the plethora of scholarly questions in Jewish literary studies cannot even be approximated by the methods and languages of a single discipline, but instead require a variety of verified approaches and perspectives, enabling the incorporation of concepts and methods from several disciplines simultaneously. We sincerely hope that the case studies collected in this book will stimulate a continued dialogue on the matters we have raised.

The publication of this volume would not have been possible without the continuous commitment from and support of Dr. Lou Bohlen of the Minerva Foundation as well as Dr. Ulrike Krauss, Katja Lehming, and Dr. Christina Lembrecht of De Gruyter Verlag Berlin. We owe them gratitude for enhancing the visibility of this project. A special thanks goes to Dr. Elizabeth Bonapfel for her diligent copy-editing.

We wish to dedicate this book to our students, who rightly expect us to reflect upon post-essentialist approaches to literary studies.