Bloody contradictions | Difference and identity in Jo Sinclair's "Wasteland"

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BLOODY CONTRADICTIONS: DIFFERENCE AND IDENTITY
IN JO SINCLAIR’S WASTELAND

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As they struggle with the “bloody contradictions” of hierarchy and oppression, many cultural workers and political activists find themselves in a double bind, needing to assert an identity that they understand as socially constructed, provisional, and even antithetical to their goal of rendering irrelevant the very difference on which identity depends. A politics or critical practice based on identity holds many dangers, as it must negotiate the risks of essentialism and the challenges of post-structuralist analysis. Literature can point to possible ways out of the identity conundrum, as its complex levels of expression can suggest fruitful directions for theorizing about identity and difference.

Gilles Deleuze writes, “Difference must leave its cave and cease to be a monster,” and in Jo Sinclair’s 1946 novel Wasteland, the characters attempt to do just that, struggling with differences of ethnicity and sexual identity, as they move from isolation to a tenuous assimilation into the larger society. Jake, the son of Russian immigrant Jews, struggles to overcome his shame at his greenhorn Jewish identity, his family’s emotional and economic poverty, and his sister’s lesbianism. Debby, the lesbian sister, leads the way out of the cave, as she has already come to accept and affirm her differences and to identify with all other oppressed people. Through accepting and claiming their sexual and ethnic differences, these characters are able to move beyond the barriers that their differences represent. Through their differences, both Jake and Debby come to see themselves as substantially the same as other people.

Difference never entirely collapses into sameness, however. The characters can only feel themselves to be a part of the larger unity of “America” by embracing that which makes them different. Jake enters the world as a working-class Jew, and Debby as a lesbian working-class Jewish writer. The degree to which Jake and Debby really do enter the American mainstream comes into question, since they only enter under the sign of difference; the mainstream, however, assumes a heterogenous, rather than unitary, identity. If identity depends on difference, it is on very shaky ground; critics and activists, then, have no choice but to embrace and exploit that instability.

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"Bloody Contradictions: Difference and Identity in Jo Sinclair’s Wasteland"

Ideas about difference and identity crowd the discursive battlefield on which poststructuralist theorists and progressive political activists wage their contentious and often productive struggles. Activists and polemicists depend on the assertion of identity, a cohesive defining of a collectivity, for the purposes of naming, organizing and mobilizing people who occupy similar positions within a hierarchy of power. Poststructuralist theorists dismantle the structure of identity, pointing out its internal contradictions and its unjustifiable exclusions, and arguing that difference, the shifting, irreducible, endless variety of beings and phenomenon, undermines any claim to group identity. The work of literary critics and literary critical theorists provides a fertile space for the continuing engagement of this intellectual and material struggle, as our practice requires us to pay close attention to the cultural productions by means of which sameness and disparity are in part produced, complicated and questioned. In particular, a reading of Jo Sinclair’s 1946 novel Wasteland yields some insights into the apparent contradiction between assertions of identity and declarations of difference.
In the sometimes pitched battle between these two ideological and political camps, the two approaches seem lethally dangerous to each other: either identity will subsume difference or difference will destroy identity. Many champions of the deployment of identity politics, in particular, seek to fortify the walls of their theoretical city against the post-structuralist invaders,\(^1\) defending the humanistic ideals and epistemologies that have undergirded many a respectable progressive social change movement. Some scholars fear that adopting post-structuralist ideas will undermine the foundationalism necessary for the forming of political unity that builds and sustains identity-based movements.\(^2\)

However, the necessity and usefulness of practicing identity politics does not preclude the necessity and usefulness of a deconstructive examination of those politics. As Gayatri Spivak tells us, “The critique in deconstruction, the most serious critique in deconstruction, is the critique of something that is extremely useful, something without which we cannot do anything.”\(^3\) The practice of identity politics has been encountering problems as a result of its internal contradictions: the women’s movement must stop and consider what the identity of “woman” is, and on behalf of precisely which people called women it speaks or works; gay male and lesbian liberation initiatives must constantly redefine their constituencies and their goals; anti-racist activists working to institute or defend affirmative action must deal with contentious issues of hybridity and racial definition. Perhaps poststructuralist theory does indeed have something (de)constructive to offer identity politics.

Identity depends for its definition on the concept of difference, since people find meaning in seeing themselves as the same as one another only in contrast to others, whom
they see as different. We construct identities around perceived similarities and dissimilarities, and a new understanding of difference cannot help but shed some light on the identity conundrum, since the two concepts are so closely linked. Difference, often coded as diversity, is everywhere in the academy and in liberal rhetoric. “Diversity” is good; variety in human expression and culture should be celebrated; everyone is different and therefore everyone is the same. This rhetoric belies the way that actual differences function in the social realm: in this world of guns and bodies, groceries and paychecks, prisons and executive suites, everyone may be different, but everyone is hardly different in the same way.

It is a commonplace that identity is socially constructed, although on the front of gender, for example, many thinkers still insist that a real (read biological, since the body functions as the site of lingering essentialist formulations) divergence predates and supports gender identity. Difference is also constructed, in a necessary, ever-changing process, always underway, always transforming. The process of differentiation characterizes existence; energy comes into being in forms that vary and proliferate variation. For a thing to be, it must be unique, that thing and not another. If groups of things or beings are linked together by the perception of shared characteristics, their group identity still rests on difference, a difference from other things or beings, which, for the strategic or transitory present, overrides the differences among themselves. Identity is a sometimes necessary fiction, a useful myth or illusion, a frozen moment in the endless process of differentiation.
In her now-classic introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick posits as her first axiom the deceptively simple assertion, “People are different from each other.” Pointing out the arbitrary nature of the homo/heterosexual distinction’s importance, Sedgwick notes that we lack the conceptual tools for dealing with the unlimited, rich, subtle, hugely varied categories of human variation. Although she certainly uses deconstructive strategies herself, Sedgwick goes on to say that the postmodern theorists of diffère/ance “are the last people to whom one would now look for help in thinking about particular differences.” Derrida may not be the best one to apply his own theoretical ideas to political practice; nevertheless, his work has a great deal to say about the functioning of difference. In his coining of the term *differance*, Derrida calls attention to the idea that difference is produced, that it is an effect. “Differance,” Derrida writes, is “the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to the other.” Thus difference appears as process, terms differing from each other as they arise and transform. *Differance* places sameness in juxtaposition to difference, since difference, of which opposition is the extreme case, can only apply to elements that are in some way the same. Derrida urges the reconsideration of all dualities, “not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *differance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same.” In Derrida’s work difference emerges as a process always in motion, always produced in relation to other differences.

Published in the same year as Derrida’s “Differance,” *Difference and Repetition* by Gilles Deleuze also provides useful perspectives on the idea of difference. Deleuze
conceives of difference as an essential process, primary, joyful, anarchic, always exceeding limits. Everything exists in complex and fertile relation to everything else, “a swarm of differences, a pluralism of free, wild or untamed differences . . ., all of which persist alongside the simplifications of limitation and opposition.” Deleuze writes that the forcing of identity onto difference distorts and betrays the play of infinite variation, and that binary oppositions also betray and distort complexity: “Oppositions are roughly cut from a delicate milieu of overlapping perspectives, of communicating distances, divergences and disparities, of heterogeneous potentials and intensities.” The release of oppositions is “not primarily a question of dissolving tensions in the identical, but rather of distributing the disparities in a multiplicity.” Lest this philosophy of affirming difference sound like a liberal apolitical embracing of diversity, Deleuze criticizes what he calls “the beautiful soul,” who “sees differences everywhere and appeals to them only as respectable, reconcilable or federative differences, while history continues to be made through bloody contradictions.” Deleuze here acknowledges that differentiation entails material struggle, but argues that the simplifications of establishing similarities cannot conciliate conflicting elements.

Literary critics also struggle on some level with these “bloody contradictions”: in our work we may draw lines of identity in the sand, or we may produce the next wave of theory or politics that washes those lines away; we also may desire, among our works’ effects, that they comment on or even intervene in the material political struggles to which we are committed. The texts that are the objects of our study can also produce identities or describe differences, and enact textual moves that show yet other ways of
conceptualizing human life, asserting identity without denying difference. Literature may seem an unlikely place to search for constructions of difference that might prove useful on the battlefield of “bloody contradictions,” but it is no more unlikely than is theory to produce useful ideas and strategies. Barbara Christian says that literature, in contrast to the opaque abstractions of theory, “seem[s] . . . to have the possibilities of rendering the world as large and as complicated as I experienced it.” Through their complex layerings of plot, character, point of view, figurative language, and all the other literary elements that we identify by means of their dissimilarities to and divergencies from each other, literary works can explore the complex relationship of identity and difference differently than can political advocacy or theory. Eve Sedgwick, in her discussion of the largely undertheorized complexities of human difference, suggests that “the shifting interfacial resistance of ‘literature itself’ to ‘theory’ may mark . . . the surface tension of this reservoir of unrationalized nonce-taxonomic energies.”

Of course the line between literature and theory marks a constructed and contingent difference, which itself is produced by other, hidden differences, and masks similarities. Both literature and theory attempt to name differences, to tease out their specific nuances and hidden faces. Barbara Johnson writes that “literature . . . is the discourse most preoccupied with the unknown,” where the unknown consists of “the oversights and slip-ups that structure our lives,” the disparities hidden behind our self-(re)presentations, our identities. Johnson writes that “literature stages the modes of its own misreading, making visible the literarity of the heart of theory and rendering the effects of its project of understanding unpredictable.” Thus literature not only exceeds
whatever theory the reader brings to the project of reading, but also differs from itself, from its meanings and effects that at first may seem apparent, or transparent. To read literature, then, is to participate in a process of differentiating, a process which, while not to be conflated with the often violent material effects of difference as it is acted out on and by bodies in society, also has its risks. Johnson again: “For it is precisely in the nature of difference that it consist in the engendering of uncertainty not only over its nature but also over the danger or usefulness of its very propagation.”

I want to bring to a reading of Jo Sinclair’s Wasteland an awareness of both the theoretical and political manifestations of the “bloody contradictions” of difference, reading Sinclair’s work for what it has to say about difference and identity, and how the novel functions as a move in the endless process of differentiating. Difference, and the characters’ attempts to construct coherent identities out of multiple figurations of difference, emerge as the central problems of the novel, and the text brings these contradictions to at least a literary resolution in complex and suggestive ways. Of the many differences that Sinclair deploys in her text, I focus here on two: the differences marked by the words “Jew” and “lesbian.”

These differences, and the struggle to make sense of them, are central to the novel. I write about them for at least three reasons. First, difference in Western culture means occupying the lesser position in a hierarchy; Deleuze writes “We should not be surprised that difference should appear accursed, that it should be error, sin or the figure of evil for which there must be expiation.”

I am all too aware of the material and psychological
consequences for Jews and for lesbians of this view of their/our difference, and wish to
strike a blow, through a refiguring of those differences, for ending those forms of
oppression. Although the oppression of Jews and of lesbians in the U.S. has changed
shape and ameliorated somewhat in the fifty years that separate my writing from Sinclair’s,
today’s newspaper brings the old news that marriage between two people of the same
gender is prohibited by the federal and state legislatures, a synagogue in Illinois has been
vandalized, the Southern Baptist Convention is mounting a major drive to convert Jews,
two lesbians were shot and killed while camping along the Appalachian Trail, and white
supremacists in Hayden Lake, Idaho are publishing literature (words do have many
meanings) featuring a picture of a white man pointing a revolver over the words “Take
Aim at the Jews.” My thinking about difference is both produced within, and aspires to
make some difference in, this climate of threat and discrimination.

Second, I hope that my thinking about these differences might be useful in thinking
about other diversities. My thinking about identity and difference has been informed by
work by and about Chicana/o, feminist, African-American, native American, Caribbean,
and U.S. working-class activists and theorists. While all differences are not the same,
some dynamics and critical moves may usefully perform the crossing of boundaries that is
in so many ways prohibited, discouraged, or punished, and perhaps those border crossings
may themselves weaken the systematic oppression of people based on difference. 18

Third, I hope to use these differences to myself enact a move from the margin to
the center. For these are the very differences through whose attendant difficulties I have
at least felt excluded from the U.S. mainstream, economically, socially, and intellectually.
Although the extent to which obtaining a master's degree in literature from the University of Montana constitutes entering the mainstream or center can certainly be debated, positionality, no less than theory and literature, operates at least in part through representation. So if obtaining a formal education and completing a thesis about lesbian and Jewish difference for me represents a move towards the center by means of those very differences that marginalize me, who will disabuse me of that folly? I will: complicating this mapping of relative positions on the power grid, my marginalized position already differs from itself, as I have lived squarely in the center with regard to class, race, and U.S. citizenship, to name just a few of the differences that accord me privilege. Still, I identify with (identification, according to Diana Fuss, is "the play of difference and similitude in self-other relations") the Jewish South African/Israeli/American critic Rael Meyerowitz's analysis of the intellectual path of Jewish American critics, who respond "to simultaneous and paradoxical urges: on the one hand, to inscribe their doubts concerning the sincerity of their American welcome within radical, challenging textual critiques, and, on the other, to confirm, even celebrate, their 'naturalization' by making their contributions within the cultural mainstream."  

_Wasteland_ is marked by the criss-crossing of multiple lines of difference, which move towards but resist resolving into a unitary identity. Difference is the central problem of the novel, yet difference itself refuses to sit still, to take one name, to occupy a clearly demarcated center, or, for that matter, to stay in the margin. Instead, variation multiplies and proliferates, complicating itself endlessly even in the moments when the plot and the
most authoritative narrative voice of the novel strain to force a simple resolution of difference into identity.

Jake, the main character of the novel, suffers from anxiety and a feeling of emptiness. The son of Jewish peasant immigrants, he passes as a gentile, using the name "John" at work and in public; we are told that he is "searching for a kind of identity." His main complaint is that his family is odd, different: "The whole bunch of them; they were different, not like other people. That's what makes a fellow ashamed. When a fellow is scared to death anybody he knows will ever catch sight of his parents, his sister" (28). He is ashamed of his family's poverty, of his parents' Yiddish and English speech, of his father's weakness, stinginess, and personal uncleanness. He is also ashamed of his sister Debby's unconventionally gendered appearance: "[S]he wasn't like other people," Jake thinks, "She was too different" (28). Difference already begins to fracture into parts, refusing a hegemonic identity. The family as a whole is different, but each member of the family also differs within that difference. The character of Debby, for example, embodies many levels of difference. Unique already in dress and appearance, she is also different in her identity as a scholar and a writer. Jake's desire for normalcy, for sameness or non-difference, is frustrated even by Debby's choice of subject matter: she writes about workers and "about colored people. Why the hell she should write about colored people! . . . See, she's different even in a thing like this! See, your lousy family, even when they get into a magazine they're different from other writers!" (31). Jake sees these differences as a problem, as a barrier in his search for identity, for a place in the assimilationist world
of the 1940s United States. In Deleuze's terms, difference here appears as a monster, accursed and evil.

For Jake, the difference named "Jewish" emerges as the main problematic distinction, and for him this difference comes to signify a host of other facets of difference, all figured as shameful and debilitating. Throughout the novel, Jewish identity is opposed to American identity. Pushed by his psychoanalyst to consider the plight of European Jewry, Jake objects: "Why should I think about the Jews of the world? I'm an American. Why should I have to think about the Jews all the time?" (15). To be an American is to be a non-Jew; to be a Jew is not to be an American.

All immigrants are subject to being seen as other, different. Jews, however, have been figured for millennia as the quintessential other in the Western world, serving for the emerging and continuing self-definition of Christianity as the paradigmatic outsider. Over and over, Jews are figured in the West as strange, crude, backwards, ugly, tribal, sexual, pathological, grasping, dirty, and evil, in a (so far) never-ending litany of fear and hatred. This ideology has translated into centuries of pogroms, ghettoization, forced conversion, torture, and restrictive legislation, culminating, at precisely the time that Jake struggles with issues of Jewish difference and identity, in the Shoah in Europe, and blatant discrimination, exclusion, and quotas in the U.S.

What it means to be a Jew in the mid- to late- twentieth century is certainly a matter of contention. For Jake, the move from Eastern Europe to "America" looms in his family's recent past. Driven to a reexamination of his self-image by persistent depression and shame, he is faced with the necessity of constructing Jewish identity anew, coming to
an understanding of Jewish identity that departs from the Old World ways of his parents, yet retains enough of the tradition to be recognizable. Layers of difference accrue around this problem: He must construct an expression of Jewishness that is different from that of his parents, yet is enough the same as to be identifiable, intelligible. He must translate the Yiddish ghetto culture of his parents into something that works in the vexed pluralism of an anti-Semitic yet potentially welcoming American idiom, an identity that can hold at one moment both the sameness of “American” and “Jew” and their difference. This new/old identity must also differ from the old one, in that he must be able to embrace it without shame, to feel good about his identity.

Among the complex images of Jewish identity that abound in Western cultural productions, some figurations of Jews offer the possibility of recuperating for liberatory purposes the very tropes that have been used to oppress Jewish people. One could view this move as freeing the identity of “Jew” from its dependence on rigid delineations of difference and separation, thawing the frozen monolith of identity. In this “postmodern” moment with its valorization of the position of the other, some critics figure the Jewish difference as a trope of the contemporary human condition -- displaced, rootless, always the other, always negotiating two or more cultures and languages. For example, Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his article “Heidegger and ‘the jews,’” writes that “‘the jews’ are the irremissible in the West’s movement of remission and pardon . . . They are what cannot be domesticated . . . ‘the jews,’ never at home wherever they are, cannot be integrated, converted, or expelled.”25 “The jews” serve as the trope of otherness, the always strange identity within but exiled from civilization. This identity is even more strangely exiled
from itself, however, as Lyotard uses 'the jews' to signify this disembodied trope, while
“Jews” refers to actual Jewish people. Lyotard then goes on to identify with “the jews,”
while leaving out of his analysis the strengths and problems of actual Jews. Susan E.
Shapiro criticizes Lyotard's use of the abstraction “the jews,” pointing out that his
discourse serves his purpose of locating himself outside of a culture in which he
participates, while rendering invisible Jewish people themselves. Shapiro writes, “Actual,
living Jews in their/our complex and contradictory identities as Jews, still have no place in
the Europe of Lyotard's text.” Michael Weingrad also critiques Lyotard's formulation
of these disembodied “jews” as the postmodern man, taking him to task for his
“fetishizing of Jewish exile.” Although Jake would not have had access to Lyotard's
writings, it is doubtful that exposure to these ideas would have helped him in his struggle.
To so loose the category “Jew” from its historical moorings will not solve Jake’s identity
problems. For him, it will not suffice to dehistoricize Jewish identity and abstract its
expression into the figure of the paradigmatic postmodern subject. While Jake needs to
make sense of his position as the other in Western culture, he also needs to construct a
working sense of himself as a Jewish person, a person who does not just appropriate or
theorize about, but rather embodies a Jewish identity in history, expressing both his
difference from gentile people and his difference from other Jews.

This curious attempt to assert that discourse about Jews does not refer to actual
Jewish people marks much anti-Semitic writing. Paul de Man, writing in 1941 with more
immediately sinister implications, attempts to dissociate his discussion of Jews in
European literature from the political fate of actual Jews. Trying to define the themes and
forms of Flemish literature, de Man writes, “In keeping, despite Semitic interference in all aspects of European life, an intact originality and character, [our civilization] has shown that its profound nature was healthy. In addition, one can thus see that a solution to the Jewish problem that would aim toward the creation of a Jewish colony far from Europe would not entail, for the literary life of the West, any deplorable consequences.” As Barbara Johnson points out, de Man’s apparent lack of personal anti-Semitism does not excuse this literary critical statement; his reluctance to send any of the Jews of his acquaintance to that distant Jewish colony does not negate his complicity in the horrific violence towards actual Jews that anti-Semitic attitudes and propaganda including his own enabled. While stereotypical, abstracted, and negative portrayals of Jews certainly do not accurately describe actual Jews, these portrayals do work to create a situation in which anti-Jewish violence or discrimination is possible, and in which Jews must in some way incorporate these stereotypes into our own self-images.

It is in this climate of North American and European anti-Semitism that Jake says “I hate being a Jew” (11). To Jake, being a Jew means being trapped, dirty, guilty, and different from other people, from “Americans.” He feels trapped in his house with his dirty, ignorant, uncommunicative family, trapped in the overdetermined identity of greenhorn Jew, and trapped in his attempt to pass as a gentile. Sander L. Gilman writes that “Self-hatred arises when the mirages of stereotypes are confused with realities within the world, when the desire for acceptance forces the acknowledgment of one’s difference.” Unable to look at the historical forces that produce his and his family’s differences, Jake identifies with the worst of his culture’s stereotypes, interpreting the
particularities of his family’s history and characteristics through the lens of static hierarchical identities, which place him and his family firmly on the side of the evil, the wrong and the sick. In order to break free of the trap which is his life, Jake must learn to see difference as a fluid process, always changing, always moving in relation to other differences.

Jake seeks help in this task in two places: the process of psychoanalysis, and the companionship and guidance of his younger sister, Debby. Debby, who has already undergone psychoanalysis, convinces Jake to go to her psychiatrist for help. She tells him that the psychiatrist is "like a vessel through which all these parts of you pass. The parts that are all confused, that -- well, that can’t get together and are making you feel so rotten. They have to get together and work together, or else you’ll just feel more and more rotten" (3). Although Debby’s explanation of the psychoanalytic process is simplistic and naive, it is appropriate that Jake should seek a solution to his “Jewish problem” in psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis is perhaps uniquely equipped to deal with problems of difference and identity, and with Jewish identity in particular, arising as it does out of just these problems. In The Ordeal of Civility John Murray Cuddihy argues that the intellectual accomplishments of Freud, Marx, and Lévi-Strauss arose out of their struggle as Jews dealing with the “culture shock” of emancipation into modern Europe. He writes that the ideologies produced by these thinkers covertly resist the norms and manners of the dominant Gentile society, serving to preserve the integrity of their Eastern European identities against the requirements of assimilation. In Freud’s work, according to
Cuddihy, the unconscious stands in for the unassimilated Jew, coarse, unruly, and expressive, whose demeanor must be tempered and restrained in order to assume a place in bourgeois Western European civil society. "The importunate 'Yid,' released from ghetto and shtetl," Cuddihy contends, "is the model for Freud's coarse, importunate 'id.'"

This intellectual creation, then, expresses Freud's ambivalence about assimilation by installing the id/Yid into the personality system of everyone; "the social outsider which was Jewry became the psychological underside of gentility," thus converting Gentiles into "honorary Jews," and installing a "scientific" system that explained and covered up Jewish difference.

Gilman also locates the genesis of psychoanalysis in Freud's struggle with anti-Semitism and assimilation. He argues that anti-Semitic accusations that Jews can never achieve real competence in the languages of the Gentile world, because they possess a "hidden Jewish language," infiltrate and corrupt the language productions of male Jewish writers themselves. The logic of anti-Semitism, which must see Jews as profoundly different, insists that Jews speak an entirely different language, even or perhaps especially in countries such as Germany, where most Jews spoke the national tongue as their first language. When they do speak or write a "non-Jewish" language, the logic proceeds, they will do so differently and inadequately, betraying their Jewish, different natures. Positing language as the primary site of Jewish self-hatred, Gilman argues that Freud created a new language, the language of psychoanalysis, as a move away from speaking a specifically Jewish language. Cloaking his ideas in the language of a new science was, according to Gilman, a way to make his Jewish difference palatable and respectable.
Although the development of both Gilman and Cuddihy's arguments may be debated on several counts, it is certainly true that psychoanalysis was created in the context of the contradictory and dangerous cultural territory of Jewish difference and identity in anti-Semitic Europe. This analytic system, then, may prove especially useful in dealing with the same problematics which shaped its birth. Dealing as it does with contradictions between inner and outer, conscious and unconscious, psychoanalysis seems particularly well suited to tackle the conflicts and miseries arising from partial integration of Jews into the larger society; Cuddihy cites the observation of the writer Ludwig Lewisohn, who noted in 1929 that "Freudianism functioned as a kind of Diaspora Zionism, that it was 'first of all an effort on the part of the Jewish people to heal itself of the maladies of the soul contracted in the assimilatory process ..."37 Gilman also delineates an association between psychoanalysis and the Jewish people that goes beyond the identity of its originator. Despite Freud's wish to distance his language from that of other Jews, Gilman notes, "by the 1930s, psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytic discourse had been labeled by European anti-Semites as the new language of the Jews, a language that reflected the Jews' preoccupation with the material, the sexual, the perverse."38 He further points out that to the Nazis, "psychoanalyst" and "Jew" were synonymous.39 From very different perspectives and with very different motivations, then, people have seen something different, something specifically Jewish in the language, structures, and processes of psychoanalysis.

But not only Jewish. Although Franz Fanon, working in Algeria under French imperialist rule, preceded Deleuze and Guattari in questioning the universality of the
Oedipus complex and identifying its role in colonial expansionism, he "continued throughout his life to promote psychoanalysis as one of the most powerful instruments available to combat those mental pathologies that are 'the direct product of oppression.'" Here Fanon echoes Lewisohn's conviction cited above, but instead of seeing psychoanalysis as a tool to use in healing the damage caused by anti-Semitism, he identifies it as a method of addressing the psychological consequences of oppression in general.

Beyond the uses of psychoanalysis in treating the symptoms resulting from oppression based on difference, psychoanalytic theory can also provide a taxonomy of human variety, a system of explaining differences between people, and between the parts of a single individual. Eve Sedgwick, while critiquing the "streamlining" of psychoanalytic theory into a reductive system, notes its potential for contributing to an understanding of the complexity of human difference: "Psychoanalytic theory, if only through the almost astrologically lush plurality of its overlapping taxonomies of physical zones, developmental stages, representational mechanisms, and levels of consciousness, seemed to promise to introduce a certain becoming amplitude into discussions of what different people are like . . . ." The system of difference that is psychoanalysis, formed through and within a preexisting social and political system of differences, explains difference, treats the psychological damage done in the name of hierarchical difference, and generates differences of its own.

It is to this particular web of difference, then, that first Debby and then Jake look for help in dealing with the problems of identity and difference in which they feel trapped.
Through psychoanalysis and through their experiences in the world outside the doctor’s office, they come to participate in the knowledge that “difference is not a thing to be recognized but a process always underway.” They realize this, make this insight real, both because of and in spite of the pronouncements of their doctor, and the reader comes to this insight through the development of the novel, again both through and in spite of the master narrative presented in the voice of the psychiatrist and in the didactic leanings of the author.

In the version of the “talking cure” administered by Jake and Debby’s psychiatrist, bringing the hidden into view through language is the sacrament, the path to integration and enlightenment. The doctor tells Jake, “People are afraid when they don’t know the truth. In this room you can talk, you can get the truth out of yourself. Pleasant or unpleasant, it must be the truth. And then you can face it . . . Once you know the truth, there’s very little to be afraid of.” Aside from the irony of the last line, spoken to a Jew in the early- to mid- nineteen-forties, the doctor’s confident pronouncement depends on two assumptions. The doctor assumes that there is such a thing as “truth,” and he assumes that this truth is something that can be indicated, touched, revealed through language. A good patient, Jake also ascribes to these tenets; he learns to talk to the doctor about all his deeply held secrets, and feels relieved and healed by the process. During his third session (the process of psychoanalysis takes place in preternaturally fast motion), Jake weeps with relief at finding himself able to start discussing his “secret stuff” with the doctor. “The words were out of their corners now,” he thinks, feeling that at last he has found a way out of his stifling trap. He learns how to use language to
express the anguish that he has been living, feeling that he is finally beginning to understand the causes of his problems. After a few more sessions, Jake feels that “many of the thousands of words twisting and turning in the air seemed familiar now; they make sense” (50). The words make sense because they are familiar; he has learned to adopt the language of the doctor, to lay that analytic language, with all of its assumptions and power relations, over the complex lived experience of his life. In addition to putting into words the stories of his family and his feelings about them, Jake learns and starts to use the jargon of psychoanalysis: he thinks that his brother Sig has an “inferiority complex” (291), and this labeling allows him to feel that now he really understands his brother. The doctor reinforces Jake’s new understanding, explaining his former hatred of his brother by saying, “you hadn’t really given him words inside yourself . . . any sort of perspective, or identity.” (292). The doctor’s ideology insists that words create understanding, acceptance, and safety. That which is unnamed or misnamed creates danger, anxiety and depression, but finding and saying the right name makes things understandable and workable. Jake comes to feel that his newly acquired knowledge of psychoanalytic terms enables him to successfully negotiate the contradictions of his life: “You know a few new words and phrases now, and you might as well start right in proving you know them. Strength and weakness; those are two of the words. Adjustment, the psychological moment, knowledge banishes fear; you can really work with phrases like that, especially when you know how they’re tied up with you” (326). In the narratives ascribed to Jake, the psychiatrist, and the narrator, language, the right language, magically makes difference understandable, non-threatening. The complex action and development of the novel,
however, belie that transparent unity of language and reality aspired to by some of the novel’s voices; the complex permutations and expressions of difference resist and exceed the simplistic namings of psychoanalysis and political ideology.

Both Jake and the reader must struggle to see beyond the psychiatrist’s pronouncements of his version of the truth, and the author’s often heavy-handed efforts to overdetermine the meaning of the characters’ thoughts and actions. Asserting his power to name and define, the psychiatrist provides Jake with one of the most important terms in the novel: “wasteland.” In an early session, Jake describes the difficult life of his family in general and of his sister Sarah’s sons in particular. “‘They’re going to be wasted!’” Jake tells the doctor. “That’s what gets me. It isn’t enough that all the rest of us were wasted --now those little snots have to go exactly the same way! That’s what I can’t take. Why in hell do their lives have to be wasted, too?” (7). The doctor fastens on the word “wasted,” questioning Jake as to what it means to him, until Jake responds with frustration and impatience: “‘Wasted, wasted,’ he cried. ‘Like garbage. Just throwing things down the drain. You know what the word means, don’t you?’” (7). In his position as authority figure and master narrator, the psychiatrist knows better than Jake what the word means; in fact, he “knows” that it is not quite the right word, and substitutes what he thinks is a better one. In a significant move of linguistic appropriation, the doctor changes Jake’s word from the past participle “wasted” to the noun “wasteland,” changing the description of a process to a thing, a location, a fixed identity. Sinclair’s borrowing of T.S. Eliot’s title sets the reader up to read the story of Jake’s struggle in the context of that canonical
work of modernist poetry, borrowing from it literary legitimacy and at least a sense of belonging to that culture.

Jake is taken aback by the doctor's substitution:

'I never called it wasteland,' he said carefully.

'Could you call it that?' the doctor asked, his voice as careful as Jake’s.

'Wasteland. That’s like a desert, isn’t it? Nothing grows there. It’s all dry.

It’s all -- dead. Is that what you mean?'

'Is that what you mean?' the doctor stressed gently.

Jake looked at him. His throat was dry and scratchy. He felt frightened because he had never said it in words. He had never brought it out into the open, out of the dark and heavy obscurity of his thoughts.

'Land that’s barren,' the doctor said, almost absently. 'Where nothing will grow. When a flower, or even a blade of grass, is put there, something seems to choke it. It dies. Isn’t that what you’d call wasteland, John?'

Jake nodded, thinking of the other thing. (9)

Like the anxious Jews described by Gilman, Jake learns the language of the dominant culture, adopting the doctor’s name for his spiritual problem. The acts of naming, of articulating secrets, and constructing an understanding of Jake’s situation take place within a complex and unequal power relationship with the Gentile psychiatrist.

Debby urges Jake to accept the doctor’s authority in these matters. She tells him, "It’s not magic, Jack. It’s just that you get all those confused terrible thoughts out into the air, then you figure out things you have hidden away, secrets... He’s a doctor, he knows how
to name things, he helps you find out what's the matter. It's not magic, it's that he's a
doctor and he knows what to call all kinds of sickness'" (12). The psychiatrist imposes his
interpretations on Jake over and over, telling him how he should feel about the members
of his family, himself, and his Jewish identity. He imposes, and Jake accepts, simplistic
explanations that all depend on the magical power of naming, the ability of language to fix
meaning in a transparent, stable way.

Much of the narrative appears in the form of Jake's indirect discourse, as he tells
the doctor about his struggles, and many of the chapters end with the voice of the
psychiatrist delivering a report about the progress of his patient, whom he refers to as "S"
for "subject." These reports work as a master narrative, summarizing what Jake has told
the doctor and providing heavy-handed interpretations of the meanings of Jake's
experience. This narrative tactic puts the reader in the same position as Jake; we, like
Jake, are supposed to take the psychiatrist's voice as the voice of authority. The
psychiatrist names the issues at stake, the solutions to Jake's problems, and even gets to
provide the title of the novel: "Wasteland" is his word, not Jake's. However, despite the
doctor's simplistic analyses, the characters' actions and thoughts suggest a more complex
view of the role of identity in resolving problems of difference.

Jake's problems with difference and identity are reflected in his naming of himself.
His older brother Sig changed the family name from Braunowitz to Brown, and when Jake
gets his first job at the newspaper he begins to use the name John. He wants to be seen as
an American, not a Jew, certainly not a poor Russian immigrant Jew: "John Brown, he
printed. . . it was beautiful. It was as American-looking, as anonymous, as any name he
could think of . . . . It was like Indians, or Plymouth Rock, it was like American history. It
hasn’t got potato pancakes in it . . .” (85). His confusion about “Indian” names
notwithstanding, Jake adopts a name that indicates a Gentile identity, which Jake
interprets as anonymous, and the psychiatrist interprets as “Everyman.” Wanting to hide
difference, Jake chooses a name that seems to him to be undistinguished, to indicate that
he is the same as everyone else. Since every individual and every name has a specific
history different from all others, the universal anonymous name is a myth; nevertheless,
Jake and Sig’s strategy may protect them from some of the outward effects of anti-
Semitism. However, although Jake moves through the world as John Brown, seeking to
conceal his Jewish identity, he can never escape from that identity, with all its cultural and
historical differences: “After all, he was a Jew, and it was something inside, in the blood
and in the way one was born of Jews . . . in the bone and in the flesh, something one could
not cut out of himself, or run away from” (70). Jake is constantly afraid of exposure,
constantly subjected to “the fear of not fitting in, of being a Jew among hundreds of
gentiles, the fear that the Anglo-Saxon name would not be enough to carry him, that some
hidden, secret thing of Jewishness would creep out and mark his face, or his speech, or the
way he worked. . . . How, in what abrupt, sudden, secret way, would his Jewishness mark
his work?” (91). He feels that he is marked somehow as a Jew, even if the name, the sign
he wishes to represent him in the world, is resolutely not Jewish. He realizes that he is not
in complete control of people’s knowledge about him; the name he gives himself is never
the only name he has. After eighteen years of working for the newspaper and (he
believes) passing as a gentile, he is “always waiting every day for somebody to say, ‘Hey, I hear you’re a Yid. Hey, I hear you’re really Jakey the Yid’” (94).

Consistent with his practice of trying to uncover the true names of things, the psychiatrist pushes Jake to use his “real name.” One Saturday he opens the therapeutic hour by asking, “‘Tell me, Jake, . . . what do you want to talk about today?’” (127). Until this moment both doctor and patient have always used the name “John,” and Jake reacts to this sudden change with shock and anxiety: “Jake felt a terrific, fisted blow land inside of him. His face grayed as the doctor’s eyes held his own; his lips felt stiff.

After a long pause, he stammered, ‘My name is John, Doctor!’

‘John? Are you sure?’” (127)

Jake cannot be sure what his name is, because he has a number of names, all acquired within the stresses of a difficult personal and cultural history, but, as usual, the doctor is sure, and does not hesitate to impose his version of the truth. By the end of the novel Jake uses the name “Jake Brown” in a number of different situations, and the doctor comments that “in the books of society, he has written his name correctly” (314). The doctor’s confident reliance on the truth of that one name for his “Subject” depends on keeping hidden all the complex differences surrounding and inhering in that name. “Jake” is surely short for the traditionally Jewish name “Jacob,” although this name is never mentioned in the novel. The doctor does not suggest reclaiming the Jewish surname Braunowitz, although that name would mark its bearer as a Jew more clearly than does the first name “Jake.” In addition, throughout the novel the members of Jake’s family, from whom he certainly has no wish to conceal his Jewish identity, call him “Jack,” a variant of
both “John” and “Jake.” In the discourse of the psychiatrist and of Jake himself, the name Jake comes to stand for the (Jewish) distinction that is first concealed and then revealed. In the multiple, many-layered acts of naming and renaming that occur throughout the novel, however, difference accrues to a number of names in a number of different ways. In the overdetermined master narrative of the psychiatrist, which is echoed by Jake himself, the name “Jake” represents Jewish identity; reclaiming it therefore represents accepting and affirming that identity. However, since neither name nor identity are unitary and self-evident, but rather are both constructed out of multiple differences, the act of taking back the name “Jake” fails to resolve all the tangled problems of difference and identity. “Jake” is no more able to create a fixed identity from the character’s specific history than is “John”; each version of the character, in his search for identity through naming, denies the complexity of meanings represented by his chosen name.

The magic of naming also fails with respect to Debby’s struggle to understand and accept her identity. Although she is of course also a Jew, Debby’s main identity is as a lesbian, and this is the primary difference that drives her to seek psychotherapy. Whereas Jake’s primary problematic difference, Jewishness, played an important role in the creation of psychoanalysis, Debby’s difference, lesbianism, is in large part constructed by psychoanalysis, on both the ontogenetic and phylogenetic levels; both Debby’s lesbianism and the twentieth-century category of lesbian in general are constructed through the discourse of psychoanalysis.
Despite all of the importance placed on naming and speaking the “truth” as a way to achieve health and integration, Debby, the professional writer, is never able to name her difference. However, this lack of named identity in no way prevents Debby from achieving personal or professional effectiveness, or from helping Jake overcome his identity problems. The psychiatrist notes that coming to an understanding of Debby’s identity and difference is extremely important to Jake’s process of uncovering his own identity. He reports:

Strongest motif seems his frantic desire for identification within himself.
His feeling for Deborah may be due to this desire. Closeness to her apparent strength and cleanliness and ‘smartness’ may seem to him a way of touching her sharply defined identification, perhaps utilizing some of it for himself. Surely, he thinks, anyone as direct, as single-streamed, as she, must have named herself! . . . Perhaps, he thinks, if he gets close enough to this strong sister of his, perhaps if he starts to understand her, he will himself achieve an identity. (45)

According to the doctor’s prescription, then, Debby’s clearly defined lesbian identity will prove important in Jake’s coming to accept his own identity. Yet Debby cannot name herself, cannot give a word to the main difference that Jake, the doctor, and Debby herself all identify with her. Without using any labels for herself, Debby tells Jake about her process of dealing with her difference:

‘I knew how sick I must be, because every moment of the day I felt ashamed. Not only of my family and our way of living, but of myself. I felt
isolated, part of a tiny minority of people who did not dare lift their eyes to
the level of the rest of the world. . . . Wherever I went, I felt that people
must be looking at me with repugnance and with laughter.’ (153)

Her “sharply defined identification” can never be articulated. She does not identify
who the people are who make up that “tiny minority”; here we see not only the love that
dare not speak its name, but the identity that dare not identify itself. In a conversation in
which Debby tells Jake that “it’s better to say it out loud. Really it is” (154), both Debby
and Jake circle around language that points vaguely to her difference, unable to “say it out
loud.” Wanting to have a word to hold onto, Jake asks about the dimensions of difference
that he perceives in Debby: “‘You mean, your hair? The way you look?’” (156). Debby
answers, “‘the way I am’” (156). She speaks of being ashamed of “‘Of what I was . . . ,
ashamed of being different’” (156), and while it seems that both she and Jake know that
she is talking about her lesbianism, there is no way for the characters or the reader to
know for sure exactly what difference she is talking about, or what her understanding is of
that difference.45

Foucault, in his response to Deleuze’s Difference and Repetition, suggests, “Let us
pervert good sense and allow thought to play outside the ordered table of resemblances.”46
In her refusal to pin herself down to one identity, Debby “perverts good sense,” enacting
what Foucault describes as “pure difference: difference that displaces and repeats itself,
that contracts and expands.”47 Expressed only in these vague general formulations,
Debby’s assertions of difference can be seen as applying to any number of identities and
groups. The phrases “the way I am” or “people like me” have any number of referents, as
there is certainly more than one “way” that Debby “is,” and more than one dimension in which some other people are “like” her. In fact, Debby’s sense of her own otherness is closely tied to her sense of sameness to people whom she sees as also marked by diversity, although in ways different from her. Debby is friends with and writes about African American people; when Jake reads a story of hers, he is taken aback at her choice of characters: “It was about colored people. Why the hell she should write about colored people! And I kept thinking, See, she’s different even in a thing like this!” (31). Debby explains to Jake that “Negroes are very important to people like us” (32), this time including him in her identification with those racially “different” people. To Jake, Debby’s racially integrated, fluidly gendered friends and (possibly) lovers are “as peculiar as she was” (33). He feels that “they were different, too, and she was their friend. It all made me feel twice as hard how different she was” (34). Already uncomfortable with Debby’s unnamed difference, Jake feels that her association with other “different” people makes her even more different.

To Debby, that association is a natural consequence of her own feelings of difference. Diana Fuss writes that “identification is the detour through the other that defines a self,” and Debby’s identification with oppressed peoples is intimately tied up with her definition of self. In effect, she skips the step of naming her identity and creating an identity politics, and goes right into coalition politics, at least on the levels of her social, professional, and artistic life. Debby explains to Jake, “I thought of myself as part of any group that was persecuted or looked down on. Any group of people wounded by the world” (155). She identifies with “all the odd ones, the queer and different ones... after
a while, I knew I had to hang out with them. I was them" (156). When Debby gives blood, she feels like she is giving it “[f]or people like me. There are so many . . . Anybody who is slapped in the face, laughed at” (306). Without naming her difference “lesbian” or “homosexual,” Debby is able to recognize the political nature of her exclusion, and make common cause with other excluded people. Her perception of other “different” people does not lead her to an apolitical view of everybody as different, but rather leads her to identify with, associate with, and fight for justice on behalf of people whom she sees as disadvantaged and oppressed.

Deleuze writes that in representation, “difference must become the element, the ultimate unity; it must therefore refer to other differences which never identify it but rather differentiate it. Each term of a series, being already a difference, must see its own identity swallowed up in difference, each being no more than a difference between differences. Difference must be shown differing.”50 Debby’s difference emerges in the context of other divergencies, layers of difference that define her as other without ever pinning down a specific difference or identity. Rather than narrowing down into a single identity formulated through ever more limiting exclusions, Debby’s difference emerges through multiple identifications; as Judith Butler writes,

Identifications . . . unsettle the ‘I’, they are the sedimentation of the ‘we’ in the constitution of any ‘I’; . . . Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshaled,
consolidated, retrenched, contested, and, on occasion, compelled to give way."

Jake and Debby both feel different, but Debby also feels connected to other people. Jake asks himself, "Does [Debby] feel different from the whole world? As if she’s all alone, in a shameful and different way?" (33). The answer is no, Debby does not feel all alone; instead, she feels different and knows that other people also feel and are different; in fact, she feels connected to "the whole world" because she feels different.

Although Jake cannot call his sister a "lesbian" or a "homosexual," he does label her "queer," prefiguring what a reader in the 1990s will recognize as a linguistic move that both delimits and expands an identity loosely arranged around sexual and gender differences, although in the novel "queer" seems to denote only a negatively valued oddness. Jake refers to Debby, whom he sees as "the symbol of all the strange and distorted aspects of their family" (146), as "that queer girl, this sister whom he could not understand" (286). He worries that his own reputation would be implicated were his friends from work to see him with her, that the friends wouldn’t want “any kind of association with such queerness” (147). The outward signs of Debby’s "queerness" are what Jake calls "her screwy haircut and the way she walked" (30), her butch self-presentation; her emotional and sexual connection with women, of course, is another important component of her queer identity. Debby uses the term "queer" to describe all those different others with whom she so identifies, a sort of generous precursor to the Queer Nation: "there were all the others who were hated and laughed at. The world belonged to all of them, as well as to me. All the odd ones, the queer and different ones"
In the 1980s and 1990s "queer" transmutated from a shamefully derogatory accusation of homosexuality to a positive affirmation of an in-your-face gay identity to a coalitional identity of gender and sexual outlaws to a vague rainbow effect of transgressive cultural stances. Shane Phelan indicates that at least some form of queer nationalism has the potential to function as "the nation of nonidentity, formed not by any shared attribute but by a conscious weaving of threads between tattered fabrics." Debby embodies and anticipates something of this notion of queer identity, and even Jake comes to embrace his own queerness, or at least the queerness of the special photographs that are so close to his heart. Describing his pictures to Debby, he explains, "there was something queer about every picture I took. Like -- well, like it had some of our family in it. Do you know what I mean?" By "queer" Jake means a complex designation of difference very much like the one that Eve Sedgwick, some five decades later, describes: "a lot of the most exciting recent work around 'queer' spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses." "Queer," in Sinclair's novel as well as in contemporary political discourse, marks a difference that already includes and intersects with other differences.

In spite of Sinclair's didacticism, which works like an oversimplified assertion of identity, complex figurations of difference do appear in the novel. Simple one-to-one correspondences of language to identity break down: "Jew" means more than one thing, and Jewish identity cannot be explained or pinned down by one linguistic act; lesbian
identity also operates beyond and apart from the name "lesbian." The naming process of
psychoanalysis only partially helps Jake to come to terms with his differences, while Debby
more successfully negotiates her differences without naming her lesbian identity. While
the play of difference exceeds static identity expressed through an instrumental use of
language, the complex expressions of art and literature have the potential for enacting a
divergent expression of difference, in which, as Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, "difference . . . is
that which undermines the very idea of identity, deferring to infinity the layers whose
totality forms 'I.'" Both the depictions of art within the novel and the characters' acts
that conclude it deploy a nexus of difference that, in the words of Homi Bhabha, "displays
and displaces the binary logic through which identities of difference are often
constructed." Art and literature here have the potential to negotiate sameness and
uniqueness in complex ways, moving beyond the arena in which the two concepts must
battle for dominance.

Jake's photography and Debby's writing both work as examples of forms of
expression that, while expressing and undermining specific identities, simultaneously reach
for delineations of difference and acknowledgment of sameness. The photographs that
Jake takes for himself, pictures that he shows no one and hides in the "morgue" of the
newspaper office, inscribe a complex mapping of difference and identity. These "queer"
pictures are marked by the specifics of identity, although Jake has yet directly to connect
the pictures with his own specifically Jewish identity. The photos that Jake calls "his own"
pictures show something different from a generic American face:
These pictures all had an odd similarity about them, as if the same kind of blood ran through them and provided a tenuous, delicate tie. Each picture was marked somehow, as if a name had been branded into it, with a kind of hunger, a gaunt and unappeased quality which came up from underneath faces, or from the stoop of bodies, or from the way the picture had caught the death of a house. (104)

He photographs “an old,shawled woman in black, whose look of anguish was carved into an earthen, peasant face” (105), and black children in front of a housing project. For the subjects of these pictures he chooses outsiders, people who are in one way or another different from the mainstream of American society. He wants to turn the camera on his own family, turning their difference into art, but he also resists this idea. He explains to the psychiatrist that, since taking his own photographs is the one activity he really feels good about, he can’t involve his family: “I hate to tie that one thing up with my family. It belongs to me, . . . nobody can put a -- a dirty hand on it” (111). He goes on to his main objection: “Nobody can call them Jewish pictures! They’re mine” (111). Jake’s language implies that a contradiction exists between the pictures being “Jewish” and being “mine.” “Mine” means singular, unique, belonging to a very personal inner part of self; paradoxically, art coming from this inner self is universal. In contrast, “Jewish” means belonging to a culture, a group, a people marked by difference. Jewish art would be “different,” just as a Jew is “different,” marked and set apart, specific rather than universal.
Talking with Debby about their creative work, Jake admits that he somehow associates his pictures with his Jewish identity, even though he has so assiduously avoided including explicitly Jewish content in the photos. He tells his sister “I always called them -- Jewish pictures when I was thinking about them. I don’t know why. It was like they went with this house. With Ma and Pa . . . . with the whole bunch of us . . . . there was something queer about every picture I took. Like --well, like it had some of our family in it”(209). He identifies the source of his pictures as the different, queer, Jewish part of himself. Only through this line of difference can he find his way to sameness, to art that expresses the universal through its delineation of specific differences.

Yet the captions that Jake imagines and later chooses for his pictures of his family create a different relationship between the specific and the universal, the Jew and the American. Although he recoils from photographing his family because he feels their Jewishness would somehow tarnish his clean project of picture-taking, he plans that he would caption a picture of his mother and father in the kitchen with the words “Americans, Evening.” He explains to the doctor, “they’re Americans, after all . . . Jews, sure, but here they are in their kitchen in America” (110). This picture and title simultaneously call attention to the parents’ difference, their Jewishness, as they read the Yiddish newspaper, and to their sameness, as they are referred to only as “Americans.” Similarly Jake plans to photograph his mother lighting the Shabbat candles. This picture he would entitle “In America They Pray ” Although the mother here performs an act integral to and emblematic of her “difference,” her Jewishness, again the title stresses the location of this prayer in America, and the nonspecific pronoun “they” leaves the caption
and the picture open to identification by anyone who prays in America. Through art, Jake can transcend the simple either/or, different/same duality; he can show his family, his culture, as both the same and different, both Jewish and American. Difference is no longer so distinctive, and identity is no longer unitary.

Jake captions the photograph he finally takes of his parents “Americans in Kitchen, Evening.” The juxtaposition of image and text constructs the two sides of the equation, American and Jew, as interchangeable rather than opposed. The old Russian Jewish peasants are Americans; naming them as such changes both the definitions of a Jew and of an American. Not only are Jews different, but also Americans are different, as natives, immigrants and refugees all join their stories into an always already fractured story of national identity, which in turn appears and dissolves in relation to global identity.

Similarly, Jake gives his portrait of Debby a caption that calls attention to her difference by not mentioning it. “Young Writer” indicates Debby’s role and profession, while ignoring her sexual and gender differences. As all writers are different from one another along those lines as well as innumerable others, this description is, as Jake asserts, “the truth” (236). The psychiatrist points out that not long ago Jake, had he even taken the picture, might have entitled it “Young Lesbian” or “Portrait of a Degenerate,” also expressions of different truths. By this point in the novel, Jake can see his sister as both lesbian and writer, lesbian and woman. He is seeing with the double vision of the outsider, and creating art that induces that double vision in the viewer.

Just as Jake photographs “queer people,” Debby also brings to life in her writing “the unfortunates, the people who have wandered off into odd alleys... the strange
people, the ones who are despised, or condemned, or last” (208). As she writes about the specifics of these different people’s lives, however, her stories open up to include “everything you’ve got! . . Everything that’s ever touched you. Everybody who’s ever come near you” (210). And she writes not just for those who are “different,” but “for as many people as there are, and she hopes all of them will read the story”(211). From difference, queerness, Debby makes stories that can have meaning for many readers, somehow the same in all of their endlessly multiplying differences.

Sinclair, like her characters Debby and Jake, achieves the expression in art of identity that encompasses both difference and sameness, evoking multiple distinctions that create and undermine identity in the same move. In the climactic scene of Debby and Jake’s blood donation in particular, identity and difference shift together in a complex dance, a process that moves the characters beyond their isolation in their own identities, gets them outside their own skins. Throughout the novel, blood is associated with Jewish identity: When Jake denies his Jewish identity and moves out of his family’s house, he is “without blood of pride or love” (21); ignorant of Jake’s Jewishness, his lover Laura is “unaware of what lay in his blood and in his family” (102). After giving blood, Jake explains to the psychiatrist, “You couldn’t give anything better. Why say, they couldn’t take anything from you -- that you give them on your own -- that’s more valuable. That’s more you” (302). Already fracturing into different meanings, blood figures here as both ethnic Jewish identity and unique individual identity.60

Of course the dominant theme in this scene is the merging of Jake’s Jewish blood and Debby’s Jewish lesbian blood with the blood of “the world.” As the psychiatrist tells
us, "in the giving of blood, not only has S [Subject] been accepted by society, or the world . . . , but his family has been accepted, too" (312). On one level, the blood donation signifies the minority identities of lesbian and Jew being encompassed by the larger American identity. Jake and Debby feel "at one with the world" (309), their distinctiveness dissolving into the larger unity of being, as Jake says, "like any guy in America . . . Nothing different about me" (305). However, distinction reappears and multiplies; Deleuze explains that "things are reduced to the difference which fragments them, and to all the differences which are implicated in it and through which they pass."61 As Debby points out, the Red Cross keeps “Negro and white blood separate” (306); the unity of “everybody” is already fractured, already other than itself. Jake and Debby’s blood will join with the blood of, not “the world,” not “everybody,” but of other white Americans. Debby’s statement that she and Jake are giving blood “[t]o our country, our war” also has multiple meanings, since “our war” could refer to a specifically Jewish war to rescue Jews, as well as a war in which the U.S. is involved. The tension between the collectivities of “America” and “the world” remain unresolved; as Eve Sedgwick notes in her essay “Nationalisms and Sexualities: As Opposed to What?,” national identity functions as the unexamined subtext of many discussions that ostensibly concern other questions.62 Sinclair’s fictional scene dramatically illustrates how Deleuze’s “bloody contradictions” generate effects both inside and outside of ideologies, texts and bodies. Race, ethnicity, nationhood, sexuality, individuality -- all these distinctions flow freely throughout this scene, inscribing in blood and ink the multiple lines of difference that both enable and undermine identity.63
Trying to fix the line between literary criticism and political advocacy, Stanley Fish writes, "a practice only acquires identity (diacritical, not essential, but identity nevertheless) by not being other practices, by presenting itself not as doing everything but as doing one thing in such a way as to have society look to it for specific performance."64 In other words, literary criticism gets its identity from being different from other practices. But as refugees and capital crossing borders complicate and blur national boundaries, as miscegenation mixes the "blood" of different races, and as these (nation, race) and other identities are always already socially constructed myths, so too do critics on the margins redefine literary criticism, which is always already both more and less than one unified practice. Bhabha writes that "the social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation."65 These articulations and negotiations necessarily erode the line between literary criticism and political intervention, and the vitality of literary criticism depends on the complex articulation of difference along all its many margins and centers. My own participation in that practice certainly requires the deferral of foreclosure of difference, as I, like Rael Meyerowitz, seek, in addition to other goals, to "make a little room for myself."66

Criticism too can enact the double move of simultaneously asserting identity and undermining it, drawing lines of difference only to erase them. This essay may have something to say about lesbian and Jewish identities and literatures, and it may have
something to say about the fluid, many-layered worlds of difference in which we all read, breathe, move, live.
the work of writers who are Jews in some of the classes in which I have been a student, neither the writers nor the work has ever been identified as Jewish. At least for myself, then, I want to place Jewish difference alongside other differences of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc.

Although many white people see me as "different," I certainly benefit from white privilege.


Rael Meyerowitz, Transferring to America: Jewish Interpretation of American Dreams (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) 34. Meyerowitz here uses the model of psychoanalytic transference to describe the relations between three second-generation American critics, Harold Bloom, Stanley Cavell, and Sacvan Bercovitch, and the American texts that they interpret.


The Hebrew word for which the English equivalent is holocaust.

For information about expressions of U.S. anti-Semitism in the 1930s and 1940s, see Lewis H. Carlson and George Colburn eds. In Their Place: White America Defines Her Minorities, 1850-1950. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1972) 249-300.


Shapiro 192.

Shapiro points out that the trope of the Jew is always figured as male. 193.


quoted in Barbara Johnson, A World of Difference (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) XV.

Johnson, A World of Difference, xv-xvi.


Cuddihy 18.

Cuddihy 97.

Gilman 1-21.

Gilman 243-270.

Cuddihy 13.

Gilman 269.

Gilman 13.


The fact that Fanon also treated the French soldiers who were torturing Algerians shows that, whatever its origins, the practice of psychoanalysis performs multiple operations, the effects of which cannot always be known or predicted.

Sedgwick, Epistemology 24.

Crosby 140.

For a number of diverse interpretations of the meanings and constructions of Jewish identity, see David Theo Goldberg and Michail Krausz, eds. Jewish Identity (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). With relation to Jewish identity expressed in Wasteland, Jake comes to a Jewish identity that is different from that of his parents, and from that of Dave Adler.

Sinclair’s readers responded in kind to Debby’s vague self-representation, asking in numerous letters where they could go to meet “someone like Debby.” Special Collections, Boston University.

On coalition politics as a move beyond identity politics, see for example Shane Phelan, *Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 139-160.

Deleuze 56.


Shane Phelan states that this use of “queer,” including bisexuals, transgendered people and other sexual minorities as well as lesbians and gay men, denotes a coalitional identity, since the only shared characteristic is dissent from the dominant sex and gender regime, and all other differences, such as sexism and racism, must be negotiated. Phelan 151-154.

This coarse mapping of a progression over time is not meant to deny that “queer” functions in all these ways at once.

Phelan 154.


Ellen Serlen Uffen writes that the “curiously general and impersonal” captions show that Jake still cannot accept “without shame and with pride, his foreign parents, his Jewishness, his family’s ‘failures.’” On the contrary, I believe that his choice of captions shows that Jake is able to embrace the complexities of living in a world of ethnic and sexual differences.

Although Sinclair and Jake would not have known this, blood really is unique to each individual, insofar as white blood cells contain DNA.

Deleuze 67.


Although not explicit in this scene, the gay or queer difference also figures here, since gay men are not now allowed to donate blood, and an openly gay person in the time of the novel would not be permitted to participate in Jake’s other grand assimilationist gesture, joining the armed services.


Homi K. Bhabha 2.

Rael Meyerowitz 34.