Alternate History: The Case of Nava Semel's *IsraIsland* and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*

Adam Rovner
University of Denver

> What does it matter, Uganda or Israel? To me, it doesn't matter.
> Bar Refaeli, actress and model[1]

Introduction: A Brief History of Alternate History

In the seventeenth century, Pascal famously suggested that had Cleopatra's nose "been shorter, the whole aspect of the world would have been altered" (162). Ever since, Western thinkers have indulged in *what-if* parlor games, imagining what might have happened had history turned out differently. At the root of this pastime is a serious impulse: to reconcile the role of chance with our "search for a usable past."[2] Historians concerned with contingency have long taken an interest in alternate histories; one can find contributions in Edward Gibbon (1899 [1788–1789], Book V: 287–89), G. M. Trevelyan (1907), J. B. Bury (1916), and Arnold Toynbee (1934); more recently, Niall Ferguson (1997) has offered a defense of counterfactuals. Given this provenance, the genre cannot be easily dismissed as a throwaway pop culture curio or as the recent product of a postmodern tinkering with quantum mechanics. In fact, the rise of academic historiography in the early nineteenth century coincides with the appearance of alternate history, suggesting an isomorphism between Leopold von Ranke's imperative to write history "as it essentially was," and the desire to write freely what might have been. The discovery of history's intractability seems to have engendered a concomitant effort to escape it. Perhaps the burgeoning academic historiography that rested on evidentiary documents and objectivity encouraged speculative historiography, which revels in contingency and subjective judgment.

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[1] *Yedioth Aharonot. http://www.mouse.co.il/CM.articles_item,985,209,15893,.aspx* (October 2, 2007).

[2] I refer here to Commager's use (1967) of the phrase, which was in turn inspired by Van Wyck Brooks's 1918 essay "On Creating a Usable Past."

Alternate histories are sometimes referred to as allohistories, uchronias, counterfactuals, parahistories, or *what-ifs*. The genre posits "a changed outcome for a historical event" and uses narrative techniques to speculate on the results (Ransom 60). Allohistories share many features with the tradition of the "spatial stories" of desert-island fiction, the "environmental storytelling" (Jenkins 122–23) of adventure novels and travel writing, and of course, the world-making of utopian and dystopian literature and science fiction.[3] Alternate history may thus be considered imaginary travel literature in which the present is a foreign country.

The classic compendium of twentieth century efforts to imagine divergent historical outcomes in English literature remains J. C. Squire's 1931 anthology, *If It Had Happened Otherwise: Lapses into Imaginary History*. Squire's introduction references Thomas Carlyle's notion that "an Indian on the shores of Lake Ontario could not throw a pebble a few yards without altering the globe's centre of gravity" (Squire vii).[4] Carlyle's meditation on contingency, written in the early 1830s, anticipated the now familiar armchair version of chaos theory in which "the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil could set off a tornado in Texas."[5] Small changes in initial conditions, chaos theory suggests, can ultimately generate grand-scale effects in a dynamic system. Economists, mathematicians, and physicists have all tried to model, chart, and quantify the sensitivity of complex phenomena to infinitesimal variables. Similarly, philosophers, historians, and fiction writers, following Pascal and Carlyle, have pondered the butterfly effect of history, investigating in various ways the peculiar determinism that seems to arise from the contingent minutiae of history. Allohistory fundamentally suggests that history may be about the butterflies, not the tornadoes.

The origins of allohistory are to be found in the Jewish literary imagination, at least arguably so. Benjamin Disraeli's novel *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* (1833), which imagines a powerful Jewish kingdom founded in twelfth century Baghdad, may be considered the first alternate history novel.[6] Even more provocatively, Theodor Herzl himself published an

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[3] See Dannenberg 176 for more on the relationship between counterfactuals and science fiction.

[4] See Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* for the original phrasing (1840: 250).

[5] The title of a paper presented by Edward Lorenz coining the term "the butterfly effect" in 1971 (1993: 14). In Ray Bradbury's early story "A Sound of Thunder" (1952) a time-traveling hunter steps on a single butterfly in the past, thereby altering his present.

[6] Benjamin Disraeli's father Isaac wrote one of the earliest meditations on alternate history in his *Curiosities of Literature* — "Of a History of Events Which Have Not Yet Happened" (1824).

allohistorical short-story, "Bonaparte, the Entrepreneur" ("Der Unterne-hmer Bounaparte")[7] in 1900, two years before his vision of a Jewish utopia in *Altneuland*. Imaginary depictions of the future and alternate accounts of the past appeared frequently in Jewish literature of the fin-de-siècle.[8] In an era that held out the promise of technological and political emancipation, the genre attracted writers who belonged to a persecuted group.

In twentieth century American and British literature, World War II and the fate of Jews under antisemitic regimes has been one of the most frequent subjects for alternate histories. Famous examples include American author Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) and British writer Robert Harris's *Fatherland* (1992), both of which imagine worlds in which the Nazis have been victorious. More celebrated still is Philip Roth's *The Plot against America* (2004), which depicts a fascist take-over of the USA.[9] The root of Jewish sovereign reterritorialization may be found not only in the "actualization of imaginary worlds" (Ezrahi 3), but also in the actualization of imaginary *histories*, utopian or dystopian.

Rewriting History: The Case of Nava Semel

Among examples of allohistory in modern Hebrew literature Nava Semel's *IsraIsland* (*Iy-srael*, 2005) is perhaps the most significant.[10] This novel revises Carlyle's reflection on historical contingency to ask: "What if in 1825 a Jew on the shores of Lake Erie, rather than an Indian on the

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[7] The story features Napoleon as a comic *Luftmensch* and defeated ex-general whose schemes of profiting from a "Warehouse of the Universe" come to naught.

[8] Other Jewish utopias arriving on the scene prior to Herzl's include: Edmund Menachem Eisler's *A Sign of the Future* (*Ein Zukunftsbild*, 1885) and Max Austerberg-Verakoff's *The Jewish State in the Year 2241* (*Das Reich Judaea im Jahre 6000*, 1893). Other literary imaginings of a Zionist future include: A. L. Levinsky's *A Trip to the Land of Israel in 2040* (1892)and Henry Pereira Mendes's *Looking Ahead* (1899). As the latter title indicates, Mendes was influenced by Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), and so too, it seems, was Herzl, who mentions Bellamy (1960: 145). Herzl was also clearly influenced by his colleague Theodor Hertzka's visionary novel, *Freeland: A Social Anticipation* (1890), though it did not deal with the fate of Jews. Herzl mentions Hertzka's book in *Altneuland* (1960: 146) and in his preface to *The Jewish State* (7). See also Elboim-Dror 1993.

[9] Roth may have found inspiration in Sinclair Lewis' speculative novel of fascist takeover *It Can't Happen Here* (1935).

[10] Israeli allohistories that preceded Semel's novel include: Etgar Keret's short story "Patrol" from *Pipelines* (*Tsinoroth*, 1992), and Dorit Ben Tuvim's novella *Nad-ned* from *The Last Hero* (*HaGibor HaAharon*, 1997). More recent examples of related Israeli works are discussed later in this article.

shores of Lake Ontario, cast not a pebble, but instead, the plans for a Jewish state? How would the 'globe's center of gravity' be affected?" One of the novel's three parts imagines what would have happened had playwright and journalist Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785–1851) succeeded in creating his planned "city of refuge for the Jews" on Grand Island, upriver from Lake Erie and today a suburb of Buffalo, New York.[11] At the time, 1825, Noah was an important American Jewish figure, a former diplomat, influential editor, successful dramatist, and political powerbroker. Yet his proto-Zionist scheme met with mockery and resistance from both Jewish and Christian leaders, though it did have a small share of supporters.[12] In recent decades, examinations of Noah's efforts by historians Jonathan Sarna (1981), Abraham Karp (1987), and others suggest that although his vision seems preposterous today, in fact Noah had every reason to believe that a territorial solution to Jewish economic misery and religious persecution would succeed in America. But although Noah willed it, it remained a dream. No one filed on to his ark. The only monument to his plan is a carved cornerstone to an unrealized Jewish micronation called "Ararat." The stone is still displayed behind protective glass in the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. It would take more than seventy years for another playwright and journalist, Theodor Herzl, to publish *The Jewish State* (1896), his proposal for the establishment of a modern Jewish nation in Palestine — or Argentina (1934: 30).

Semel's *IsraIsland* is a postmodern examination of Herzl's and Noah's territorial solutions to Jewish homelessness. The novel was well-received in Israel, where her work is regarded as both cerebral and accessible.[13] Each of the three parts of *IsraIsland* presents a possible world; each features a different protagonist, yet each recombines narrative elements from the other parts. Names of characters, topographical details, and motifs recur in all three parts of the novel. Consequently, the notion of alternate or compossible[14] realities inheres in the text as a thematic and unifying

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[11] The inscription on the cornerstone of Noah's proposed Jewish city-state includes the phrase "city of refuge for the Jews."

[12] See Sarna 64 on the support given by the *Verein* group in Germany.

[13] Semel is less well known abroad, though she did receive the National Jewish Book Award for Children's Literature in 1990 for *Becoming Gershona*, which deals with the legacy of the Holocaust. Her novel in five parts *And the Rat Laughed* (2001; English translation 2008) treats the history and memory of the Holocaust using different genres and from the vantage point of the past, the present, and a distant future. An opera, *The Rat Laughs*, based on this novel premiered at the Tel Aviv Cameri Theatre in 2005.

[14] On Leibniz's "compossible worlds" theory see Russell 77–79.

feature. The novel's peculiar architecture deploys multiple genres in the service of advancing this thematic unity. Both Part One ("Grand Island") and Part Three ("IsraIsland") employ techniques familiar from mystery or detective fiction;[15] both Part Two ("Ararat") and Part Three are demonstrably allohistorical.

In Part One a cynical, Jack Daniel's-drinking Native American police detective named Simon is sent by his irascible boss to track down an Israeli descendant of Mordecai Manuel Noah who has disappeared in New York. The missing Israeli, Liam Emanuel, armed with his historical forbear's land deed to Grand Island, heads there to reclaim his patrimony. "Grand Island" is set in a familiar 2001 and forms the real-world anchor for the allohistorical IsraIsland of Part Three, which takes place in a parallel universe in 2001. In "IsraIsland," a different Simon, who is a gay tabloid photographer, is sent to track down a female presidential candidate, a descendant of Mordecai Manuel Noah, in order to torpedo her candidacy. At the same time, the photographer attempts to solve the mystery of his lover's ambivalent attitude to his birthplace, IsraIsland. The twin mysteries investigated by Simon in Part One are the missing descendant of M. M. Noah and the government's insistence on his being found; the twin mysteries investigated by Simon in Part Three are the skeletons in the closet of a descendant of M. M. Noah, and the suppressed past of a prodigal son of IsraIsland. In addition to the detective structure, Parts One and Three share a first-person, world-weary-yet-inquisitive narrative voice familiar from *film noir* adaptations of pulp fiction. "Ararat," by contrast, is set in 1825 and uses elements of alternate history to imagine a journey to Grand Island undertaken by Mordecai Manuel Noah and Little Dove, a Native American woman who is the rightful caretaker of the island.

Of the three parts, "IsraIsland" is the most explicitly allohistorical, and the most prominent because it shares its title with the novel itself. It takes as its point of departure the success rather than the failure of Mordecai Manuel Noah's planned Ararat colony and his call for settlement. Grand Island is presented as having developed into a flourishing Jewish city-state.

Semel's imaginary American Jewish homeland is an "imitation of Manhattan" (260), replete with a trio of iconic 100-story skyscrapers

[15] I use "IsraIsland" in quotes to distinguish Part Three of the novel (189–275) from the work as a whole. I use no quotes or italics when referring to the diegetic storyworld Semel posits in Part Three.

named Mordecai, Manuel, and Noah (200), and a chain of manmade arti-ficial islands built to cope with its growing population (208).[16] At the time of the narrative, September 2001, IsraIsland is a dense urban metropolis, and ranks as one of the United States (195–96). The state is described as the "shining pendant on America's neck" (202/9),[17] home to a respected university (224), and a sanctuary to Native American refugees (225); fantastically indeed, the city-state boasts remarkably considerate drivers (225). Finally, and to explicitly mark the irony of this possible world, the forgotten playwright and "moonstruck" would-be political leader is not Mordecai Manuel Noah but Theodor Herzl, who has become a laughing stock for trying to found a Jewish state in the desert wastes of Palestine (265). Semel's text rewrites history, representing factual Israel not as *the* "promised land" but as merely the result of chance events — an acciden-tal state.

In his account of alternate histories of World War II, Gavriel Rosen-feld suggests that allohistories tell us more about today and our anxieties for tomorrow than they tell us about the past (10). Indeed, many anxieties regarding today's Israel and its future are on display in Semel's *IsraIs-land*. Though the imaginary micronation is a "success story" (208/14), the factual territory we today call Israel, or as it is referred in the novel, Grand-Palestine, remains a far off, desolate land, "the sleepiest place in the world" (265) with few, if any, Jews (258). Jerusalem is nothing but ruins, a small village (263) whose very name is unrecognizable to the narrator (261). The prosperous real-world Israel of today thus appears in-finitely superior to the backwater of Semel's fictional "Grand-Palestine." On the other hand, the "West Bank" refers not to the contested territory featured on the nightly news, but to an exclusive yacht-filled marina on the shores of IsraIsland (209). A tranquil and self-contained city-state, Is-raIsland appears in contrast to the territorial conflicts that wrack present day, real-world Israel. Semel's novel, like allohistories in general, pres-ents possible worlds and scenarios — "wish landscapes"[18] — that point to reformist, utopian futures, or warn against dystopian nightmares.

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[16] For those familiar with modern day Israel, the three buildings — one triangular, one square, one circular — are an evocation of the contemporary Tel Aviv skyline's Azrieli Cen-ter buildings. Artificial islands may remind the reader of the Palm Islands of Dubai.

[17] Page numbers indicate the Hebrew source, but where a quotation can be drawn from the partial and unpublished translation by Berris I have included it after a slash.

[18] See Bloch's 1959 essay "The Representation of Wish-Landscapers in Painting, Opera, and Poetry" (1988: 278–92). What Bloch seems to mean by this term is that art and literature reveal traces of hope for the future. They record the distance between reality and the hoped for resolution in a utopian "home" [*Heimat*]. See Jack Zipes's introduction to Bloch 1988 (xxxviii–xxxix).

Such wish landscapes accord with the commitments underlying much feminist literature, in particular the tradition of feminist science fiction dating from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's trilogy of utopian novels.[19] Structurally somewhat similar to Semel's novel, Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), one of the founding texts of modern feminist science fiction, imagines four parallel worlds of varying utopian and dystopian degree, each described and narrated by a female character. Indeed, Semel's sensitivity to possible worlds demonstrates longstanding feminist concerns with marginal voice and social reform. Her portrayals of a gay African-American hero, a female Native American protagonist, a Jewish female presidential candidate, and a Jewish female F.B.I. agent all suggest feminist sympathies, though her novel does not overtly problematize gender roles.

Semel's work stems from her study of the nineteenth-century world and of the writings of Mordecai Manuel Noah. In his columns, plays, and addresses, Noah defended the minority rights of Jews, created empowered female and Native American characters for the stage,[20] and promoted the then popular notion that the First Nations were, in fact, the Jewish lost tribes.[21] Semel's novel is thus faithful to the spirit of Noah's own writing, and also carries into contemporary Hebrew literature the tradition in American Hebraist literature of romanticizing Native Americans.[22] Semel's recovery of the forgotten Noah and his history, as well as the marginalized history of American Hebraist literature, writes against the grain of canonicity, against the "great-men" theory championed by Carlyle, and against the official documents recording the views of men in power so valued by Ranke and the positivist historiography he helped inaugurate. Allohistory may thus be particularly fertile ground for a feminist literature that seeks traces of the possible to challenge the actual.

The Dual Structure of Alternate History

To Hebrew readers, the title of the book, *Iy-srael*, implies an absent Israel with a negating particle (*iy-* [ ]), which is homophonic with the Hebrew word for "island," hence its translated English title. And in Semel's fictional world without Israel, Hebrew is a dead language, taught alongside Latin, Greek, and Aramaic (224). Sometimes, as every reader of

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[19] *Moving the Mountain* (1911), *Herland* (1915), and *With Her in Ourland* (1916).

[20] In *She Would Be a Soldier, or the Plains of Chippewa* (1819) — see Sarna 48.

[21] See Noah 1837 for his "proof" of Jewish-Indian kinship.

[22] See Katz for more on Native Americans in Hebraist literature and Weingrad for more on Noah and the depiction of Native Americans.

Poe's "The Purloined Letter" knows, the obvious is ignored at our peril: it bears emphasizing that Semel's novel is written for the most part in idiomatic modern Hebrew, but is understood to be narrated in English. Semel's English-speaking Noah of 1825 discourses in modern Hebrew, somewhat like Poe's French amateur sleuth who converses in English in the author's consummate 1844 detective story.[23] Theorists do not appear to have settled on a term to describe texts such as these that are written in one language, but meant to occur diegetically in another. Perhaps because this complex phenomenon is as old as the Western literary tradition itself, it has escaped extensive theoretical exploration.[24] The game of representing one language as if it were another reminds us, as do "self-voiding texts," that the linguistic foundation that authenticates fictional existence is purely conventional (cf. Doležel 1988: 491). The absence of modern Hebrew from the storyworld of Part Three unsettlingly suggests that the existence of a linguistic foundation that authenticates Israeli culture — that is, modern Hebrew — depends on historical contingencies.

The explicit attention Semel pays to the linguistic *as-if* convention further thematizes the sense of contingency. At one point, Simon considers students at Ararat University learning the extinct Hebrew language (224–25). He addresses his absent lover, musing on what it would be like "[t]o make love in Hebrew, what a bizarre experience" (225). But with literally every word in the source text, Hebrew readers are reminded of the factual existence of the modern Hebrew language, and of the fact that people — both gay and straight — make love in Hebrew. At the same time, attentive readers are reminded of the history of the linguistic engineering that revived Hebrew, and so, of modern spoken Hebrew as the result of *glossopoeia* — "making a language."[25]

Though the twin losses of Israel and Hebrew may make the world of "IsraIsland" seem irredeemably impoverished, on the positive side of the

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[23] Coincidentally, the historical Noah was acquainted with Poe, the latter commenting favorably (1845) on his proto-Zionist friend's "Discourse on the Restoration of the Jews" (to Palestine).

[24] One exception is Sternberg's helpful 1981 typology of this phenomenon in his treatment of the forms and functions of translational mimesis. Another is Hana Wirth-Nesher's (2003; 2006) discussion of related multilingual aspects of Jewish literature within a Jewish American socio-cultural context. I would like to thank David Bellos, Benjamin Harshav, Breon Mitchell, Moshe Ron, Tuviah Shlonsky, and an anonymous reviewer for *Partial Answers* for their thoughts on this matter.

[25] Harshav (114) likens the construction of modern Hebrew to "building a boat under your feet while floating in it."

balance sheet, the Jewish island nation is presented as having served as a safe haven from murderous European antisemitism (208). Though the historical Shoah permeates the novel's consciousness, there was no Holocaust in the allohistorical storyworld of "IsraIsland." Still, the horrified Simon of Part Three dares to imagine "what might have happened had the Jews not had a readymade haven" (208/14). The absence of the Nazi war against the Jews from the alternate history of "IsraIsland" functions as a kind of wish-fulfillment. At the same time, readers cannot forget the true history of the twentieth century, not least because Part One of the novel indicates that the missing descendent of Noah was the son of a Holocaust survivor (72). Precisely because the Holocaust is both present and absent in the novel, readers are coaxed to consider what forms contemporary Jewish identity would have taken had there been no Shoah. The allohistorical vision presented in *IsraIsland* therefore provides a revealing backward glance at modern Jewish history, as well as a reference to ideas that link catastrophe (Shoah) with rebirth (*tekumah*).

We might expect a novel that describes a secure diasporic community in America, one existing quite happily without Israel and without Hebrew, to challenge the fundamental Zionist metanarrative of exile and return. To some extent this is true. Semel's text rewrites history, representing the real-world Israel not as the promised land but as a land premised on contingencies. The novel thus questions the traditional Zionist belief that Israel is the *necessary* outcome of Jewish national aspirations and that its existence is *sufficient* to protect world Jewry from catastrophe. When Semel's narrator notes that the IsraIslanders' political and territorial clout allowed them to forestall genocide (208), the reader is reminded of the factual, historical powerlessness of the Jewish community in the *yishuv* to significantly aid European Jewry during the Shoah. Yet *IsraIsland* is also about violent fates suffered by vulnerable peoples[26]: the narrative keeps returning to motifs of mass atrocity — from the invocation of Israeli gas masks (34) and the ominous setting of the World Trade Center towers in 2001 in Part One, through references to the destruction of Native American culture in Part Two, to remarks about the extermination "of gypsies, disabled, mentally ill and homosexuals" — though not, as it were, Jews — at the hands of Nazis in Part Three (208).

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[26] The thematics of survival is prominent in *IsraIsland*. The historical Noah relished his role as a savior-in-potential of his people and used an image of his biblical namesake's Ark as a kind of personal seal. Semel's novel picks up on this notion of an "ark" and offers a complex symbology of words and images that oppose catastrophe with survival, including a suggestion that territory may be a survival strategy.

At first glance, the novel appears to suggest that world Jewry would be better off had Israel *not* been founded, or at least not where (or when) it was. This notion is not merely post-Zionist, it is negationist or, at the very least, advances the argument of the Territorialists, whose plans to settle Jews in places like East Africa, the so-called "Uganda Plan," were finally defeated at the Seventh Zionist Congress in 1905.[27] Today's pseudo-Territorialists, like Bar Rafaeli quoted in my epigraph, are sometimes dismissed in Israel as "Ugandists." But Semel's novel is ultimately not in sympathy with latter-day Ugandists despite its consideration of the path not taken: the novel's counterfactual storyworld is made possible only thanks to the verifiable ontological status of Israel, thus reifying Zionist ideals as transhistorical.[28] Both linguistically and imaginatively, reading Semel's novel may be described as an experience of *frisson*, simultaneously unnerving and reassuring. Unnerving because it presents possible better outcomes for a Jewish state elsewhere; reassuring because Israelis read the novel in Hebrew and may come to realize that the idle Territorialism currently in fashion is made possible only by political Zionism's real success.

Like some contemporary Israelis, the overwhelmingly Jewish IsraIslanders are subject to bouts of existential and political contrition. Simon's partner, Jacob "Jake" Brandel, is a native IsraIslander who has turned his back on his homeland, his Jewish identity, and the peculiar traditions of IsraIsland's Jews, traditions often alloyed with Native American rites of passage borrowed from the Indians who were given sanctuary by Jewish leaders there during the Trail of Tears (225). Jake has no interest in preserving IsraIsland's Jewish particularity, and in fact rejects it outright. Jake insists: "[T]he continued existence of a separate ethnic entity is a threat in itself, because isolationism perpetuates the sense of persecution and prevents rehabilitation" (209/14). A certain kind of Israeli might use this same language today idly sipping a latte in a branch of Israel's Café Aroma in central Tel Aviv, downtown Toronto, or Manhattan's SoHo.

Thus nothing has changed in Semel's fictional world in terms of the role of *a* Jewish state and its function in defining Jewish identities. The etiology of Jake's malaise is *not* grounded in an intractable territorial

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[27] There is a long history of proposals for Jewish homelands on every continent, stretching from the nineteenth through twentieth centuries; see Binyamini.

[28] Cf. Dannenberg's suggestion that counterfactuals exist from a perspective wherein the ontological status of events is in fact clear (170).

conflict or breast-beating over the nation's policies — since there is no conflict between Israel and the Arab states — but rather in a Jewish anxiety of surplus visibility. The novel thus indicts a peculiar kind of Jewish exceptionalism, implying that Jews are different if only because they fear being different, and hence, recognizable. This critique echoes a Zionist ideology that targets such an anxiety-ridden "diaspora mentality." The paradoxical messages underlying Semel's alternate history help expose a fundamental ambivalence at the root of Zionism itself: the simultaneous desires to be a nation apart and to be a nation like all other nations.

But Semel offers more than a critical oscillation between the poles of Zionism and a speculative neo-Territorialism. "IsraIsland" presents both a veiled account of contemporary Israel and a philosophical account of the historiographic impulse. Her consideration of a counterfactual Jewish history and homeland resonates with echoes from deep within contemporary *factual* Jewish and Israeli experience: like all counterfactuals, her alternate history relies on the reader's knowledge of what the facts really *are* — just as Dannenberg suggests that counterfactuals straddle the borderland of realist and anti-realist fiction (176).

The close of "IsraIsland" provides an example of this doubly-directed strategy, which rekindles questions of determinism and contingency. On a sunny September morning the narrator, Simon, boards a United Airlines flight in Ararat Airport, bound for New York City (271). The Twin Towers shine in the distance and their beauty leads Simon to long to share the view with his distant lover, Jake. Then, suddenly, the plane plummets into a column of fire and smoke that darkens the sky. Simon falls victim to the terrorism of 9/11. His last words are the beginning of the ancient mourners' *kaddish* he has learned from his Jewish partner (272). The destruction of the World Trade Center by Al-Qaeda is the factual anchor of the counterfactual — in Part One the detective (also named Simon) is killed in the destruction of the Twin Towers as well. Here, the Borgesian "forking paths" of our recent history and Semel's allohistorical fiction intersect. As we know, Osama Bin Laden continues to release tapes identifying Israel's treatment of the Palestinians as a precipitating factor in Al-Qaeda's attacks on America, but Semel suggests that terrorism's pursuit of violent spectacle will exploit any historical grievance to justify its ends. The implication of the ending is therefore exculpatory: it is not Israel's existence, not its policies, and not America's support of either that is the proximate cause of terror directed against U.S. citizens.

Each new revelation within the world of IsraIsland is similarly doubly-directed, or in theorist Thomas Pavel's terms, a matter of "dual struc-

ture" (56).[29] The unfolding plot is both suspenseful — what will happen next? — and post-factual — we already know what happened (or rather, what did *not* happen): Mordecai Manuel Noah, not Theodor Herzl, could have been the founding father; American Federalism, not Middle Eastern sovereignty, could have been the result. As she asserts this contingency, Semel also advances a historical determinism: she imagines an essentialized Jewish fear of difference, and, in the novel's conclusion, a preordained conflict between a philosemitic America championing Enlightenment values and Islam as its atavistic adversary. No doubt the competing explorations of contingency and determinism within the novel, like the competing explorations of Zionism and neo-Territorialism, are associated with the uncanny element in the status of the allohistorical genre, which offers both alterity and familiarity, or rather an alterity that depends upon familiarity.

Alternate History, Alternate Values

The dual structure of determinism and contingency underlying Semel's fictional world revels in the discontinuities of history and reveals its contingencies, the *it-could-have-beens*. Allohistory is actually a philosophical genre that unmasks the "existential illusions" we hold about historical necessity (cf. Arendt 243). The tension between contingency and determinism in the counterfactual genre offers a subversive narrative, which "introduces discontinuity into our very being" and which "confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference" (Foucault 154–55). *IsraIsland* does "confirm" the false starts of "lost events," but it also references the "landmark" — verifiable history — from which we take our bearings and from which the novel derives its power. The transformation of history into counterfactuals, or into "counter-memories" (Foucault 160), destabilizes our sense of necessity and causality.[30]

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[29] The structure of the game of make-believe, like that of fiction, is recognizing what is and what is not at the same time (Pavel 54–57). This points to the problem of "transworld identity" in fiction, meaning the difficulties associated with connecting the historical Mordecai M. Noah with the fictional one in Semel's novel. See Doležel (1998: 16–18).

[30] Foucault describes counter-memory as "a transformation of history into a totally different form of time" (160). He connects this back to Nietzsche's genealogical project, which discovers that "truth" is not some essential quality or "the root of what we know and what we are" but really just the narrative we create from "the exteriority of accidents" (146).

Similarly, the search for causality in history is, to paraphrase the historian Friedrich Meinecke, always a "search for values" (see Carr 141). Pace Meinecke, we might then say that the search for causality in alternate history is a search for alternate values. But what values are being sought? Most clearly, these works serve as a call to social reform, similar perhaps to the most influential utopian Zionist text, Herzl's *Altneuland* [1902], and those Jewish utopian works that preceded it. The fact that Semel and some other contemporary Israeli writers reterritorialize Israel by crafting imaginary histories indicates that utopian social reform remains an ongoing trend in Hebrew literature. Examples from the recent spate of depictions of reterritorialized Israels include Amir Gutfreund's fantasia *The World A Moment Later* (2005; English translation 2008), a "secret history" which follows the development of a shadowy micronation within Israel populated by figures marginalized by the Zionist mainstream; Haggai Dagan's novel *The Land is Sailing* (2007), which presents an island Israel drifting through the Mediterranean, torn from its moorings as a result of a massive earthquake;[31] and, to a lesser extent, Agur Schiff's *What You Wished For* (2007), which actualizes an imaginary past in the form of a theme-park in the West Bank featuring Palestinians costumed as Jewish Eastern European *shtetl* dwellers from a previous century. Schiff's novel suggests that contemporary Israeli society is itself a fictional construct, perhaps acknowledging the powerful literary inheritance of Herzl's *Altneuland*.[32]

What these novels seem to share is a nostalgia, a longing backward glance toward a less complicated past, coupled with a clear-eyed recognition that the past was never quite so uncomplicated. These fictional worlds each acknowledge ontological multiplicity and confirm Thomas Pavel's insight that "the nostalgic is homesick for old times when ontological stability was still the rule" (142). Though *IsraIsland* is also premised on ontological multiplicity, it differs from these other contemporary reterritorializations of Israel. Guttfreund's, Schiff's, and to a lesser extent, Dagan's novels are written in essentially ironic modes, whereas Semel's novel is fundamentally earnest despite its playful elements. Semel seems to believe, much as the historical Noah believed, that territory — whether sovereign or part of the American Union — can serve as a bulwark for Jews against the threat of annihilation. But Semel's faith in a territo-

[31] This novel claims inspiration from José Saramago's *The Stone Raft* (1995).

[32] In fact, the figure of Herzl appears in the novel repeatedly in the disturbing dreams of an elderly woman.

rial solution to Jewish vulnerability is complicated: IsraIsland may be a sanctuary for Jews in Part Three (208), but the real Israel referenced in Part One renders Jews vulnerable to war and mass atrocity that recalls the Nazi gas chambers (34). Here, *IsraIsland* reveals traces of Semel's prior literary commitments to themes related to the Holocaust and the traumas of the second-generation.[33]

Lost Tribes: The Case of Michael Chabon

Jewish literature is a transnational phenomenon, and American authors, including Philip Roth and Michael Chabon, have joined their Israeli counterparts recently in looking backward to seek out a stable Jewish existence. Chabon's best-selling alternate history, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007), shares a number of prominent features with Semel's. Its point of departure is the notion that the Alaskan Federal District of Sitka Island became a safe haven for huge numbers of Jewish refugees after the fledgling state of Israel was destroyed by invading Arab armies in 1948 (17). Once interim status is granted to Sitka, the immigrant Jews set up a semi-autonomous micronation. Historically, Harold Ickes, Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior, did propose opening up the then-Alaskan Territory to European Jewish refugees as early as 1939 — this much is verifiable (Binyamini 283–85). The proposal apparently made it to Congress in 1940 before being rejected. But in Chabon's imagination, Ickes was successful, Marilyn Monroe married John F. Kennedy (201), Berlin was obliterated by an atomic bomb (136), and, as in Semel's allohistory, the territory of today's factual Israel is a wasteland, "a wretched place" ruled by Arab strongmen and fanatics who are "united only in their resolve to keep out all but a worn fistful of small-change Jews. . . . Jerusalem is a city of blood and slogans painted on the wall, severed heads on telephone poles" (17). And as this passage suggests, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* imitates a pulpy, hardboiled style. Its plot follows the adventures of an aptly named detective, Landsman, as he searches for the killer or killers of a mysterious man found murdered in Landsman's own flophouse hotel on Sitka Island.

One possible reason for the repeated recourse to islands as the terrain for allohistorical Jewish statehood is that several were in fact suggested

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[33] Much of Semel's oeuvre, including *Hat of Glass* (1985) and *The Rat Laughs* (2001) pits the threats that memory poses for the present against the fear too that forgetting the past may imperil the future.

as Jewish homelands, including Madagascar[34] and Tasmania.[35] Likewise, the metaphor of an island apart suits the assertion of Jews being essentially Other in respect to non-Jews. This concept, termed "allosemitism" by Zygmunt Bauman (1998), may be directly connected to allohistory, and not merely by virtue of sharing a prefix. Jewish tradition accords the children of Israel a special fate, one that is explicitly imagined as Other, and that is, of course, the meaning of *allo-*. So the island *topos* becomes both a penitentiary — a site upon which non-Jews could imagine isolating Jews — and a self-serving, separatist assertion of exceptionalism that Jewish tradition might view reassuringly. For Bauman, antisemitism and its cognate, philosemitism, can only arise when there exists the notion of Jews as essentially Other. This anxiety over Jewish alterity, whether externally enforced or internally professed, finds fictional form in the literalizations of the concept of Jewish insularity by both Semel and Chabon.

The Holocaust is a touchstone of Chabon's novel, as it is of Semel's. But in contrast to Semel's IsraIsland, the Shoah has occurred in Chabon's fictional world.[36] However, the Sitka settlement serves as a sanctuary, and so two million Jews, rather than six million, have perished (29). Israel is an aborted state in Chabon's book, its population massacred by triumphant Arab armies after it declared its independence. As a result, Yiddish, not Hebrew, is the *lingua franca* of Sitka's Jews. The resulting language-play in Chabon's novel includes calling a gun a "sholem" — a Yiddishization of the biblical Hebrew "shalom," meaning in this case "peace," as in the American Western and pulp idiom that refers to a gun as a "peacemaker." Telephones in the novel are termed "shoyfers" — another Yiddishization, for "shofar" — a ram's horn blown in ritual practice to call Jews to assembly. In his essay, "Imaginary Homelands," Chabon (2008a) notes that his discovery of a Yiddish phrasebook from 1958 sparked the creative process that culminated in *The Yiddish Policemen's*

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[34] See Jennings. A trilogy of allohistorical thrillers by Janet Berliner and George Guthridge, *The Madagascar Manifesto* [1992–1997], takes as its point of departure the Madagascar Plan, really a series of plans stretching from the 19th through mid-20th centuries to settle European Jewry on the African island. These novels are collected in one 2002 volume.

[35] See Steinberg 122–45.

[36] Chabon, like Semel, has thematized the Holocaust and survivors in his previous works, such as *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000) and *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection* (2003). The latter also self-consciously appropriates the detective genre, paying homage to Arthur Conan Doyle.

Union. Interest in the tradition of Jewish multilingualism and fascination with macaronic play animated his creation of the "wistful fantasyland" of "Alyeska" (2008a: 80). Nonetheless, as Alvin Rosenfeld has made clear, the novel's prose "hardly resembles Yiddish at all. Rather, much of it echoes the tough, cynical talk of detective fiction" (36).

Along with Yiddish and English, some traces of Esperanto, an artificial, constructed language or "conlang," are put to use. The residue of Esperanto's failed utopian promise lingers in the novel, notably in the name of Landsman's hotel, the Hotel Zamenhof, where the murder mystery begins. In naming the hotel after the Jewish creator of Esperanto, Ludwig (Eliezer) Zamenhof, Chabon indulges in a knowing wink at his own glossopoeia, as well as a nod to the Jewish influence on Esperanto. Hebrew, meanwhile, remains the language of "recent failure and disaster" (286), "extinct except among a few last holdouts meeting annually in lonely halls" (286). A careful reader will recognize that the failure of Hebrew as an ideological project in Chabon's storyworld ironically contrasts with the ontological status of modern Hebrew's success and dominance within real-world Israeli life and letters. The explicit attention Chabon pays to an *as-if* linguistic polysystem thematizes the contingency of possible worlds much the way Semel does throughout *IsraIsland*. Likewise, linguistic representation, in which the diegesis of the source text is understood to occur in another language, is complicated in Chabon's novel in a fashion similar to Semel's.[37]

Sitka Island, like IsraIsland, is dotted with Native Americans, and their traditions mingle with those of the Jewish inhabitants. Adhering to the "buddy cop" narrative formula, the melancholic protagonist, Landsman, is (mis)matched with his more exuberant partner, the half-Tlingit, half-Jewish "shambling giant . . . known in the Sea Monster House of the Raven Moiety of the Longhair Tribe, as Johnny 'the Jew' Bear" (41–42). And while there is something delightfully incongruous about this description that reveals both the gravity and the irreverence of Chabon's novel, for him, as for Semel, Native Americans are a *Doppelgänger* for the Jews, a diasporic people, persecuted, proselytized, and subject to genocide.[38] The presence of American Indians in these novels also serves as an historical surrogate, *mutatis mutandis*, for those Palestinians dispossessed, deliberately or not, by Israel.

[37] Both the authors' narration of alternative linguistic situations serves to highlight the contingency of the "miracle of the revival of modern Hebrew" (Harshav 81–88).

[38] American Indians served similar symbolic purposes in the work of the American Hebraists. See Katz and Weingrad.

The Jews of Chabon's Sitka Island coexist uneasily with their Tlingit neighbors who feel that their tribal lands have been poached. Frequent provocations in Sitka result in mutual suspicion and give rise to conflict and reprisals. The "Synagogue Riots" are mentioned several times; they were ignited when Indians bombed "a prayer house that a group of Jews had built on disputed land" and ended with eleven Native Alaskan deaths, "the lowest moment in the bitter and inglorious history of Tlingit-Jewish relations" (43). By contrast, Semel's IsraIsland becomes a sanctuary not just for Jews, but also for refugees from the Trail of Tears, a notion Mordecai Manuel Noah might have approved of. And as in Semel's novel, the narrative of *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* reaches a climax with an act of terror, though this time committed not by Islamist extremists but by messianic Jewish fanatics and their accomplices who blow up the Dome of the Rock in order to avenge the destruction of Israel some fifty years previously.

While it is possible that Chabon had heard of *IsraIsland* when he composed *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, it is more likely that the similarities between the texts derive from their shared source of inspiration: the vision of Mordecai Manuel Noah. Chabon has acknowledged privately that Noah's efforts to found a Jewish homeland on American soil helped spark his fantasy of a "frozen chosen" people in Alaska (238). In a private e-mail he explained: "I know that the memory of Noah crossed my mind when I was conceiving of the place I would create; perhaps most in the sense that I was going to be the Mordecai Noah of my own Ararat" (2008b). But the fact that both Chabon and Semel structure their Noah-influenced narratives along the lines of detective fiction is linked to the philosophical significance of counterfactuals.

Alternate History as a Philosophical Genre

As Chabon's rumpled protagonist puts it, the detective's job is to solve crimes by "puzzling . . . back through [people's stories] from the final burst of violence to the first mistake" (168).[39] Landsman's observation marks him as at least as good a literary theorist as he is a cop: in 1929 Viktor Shklovsky noted that detective stories are characterized by "temporal transpositions" in which crucial incidents are omitted and are only

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[39] This too is the method used by the detective in Part One of Semel's novel: "First he gathers evidence in reverse order — moving backward in time — and examines each piece independently, as if it wasn't about the ongoing life story of the same person" (28/12).

brought to light after the consequences of these incidents are revealed (1990: 101). Following Shklovsky, Tzvetan Todorov concluded a seminal article on the subject by noting that detective fiction works by "superimposing two temporal stories" — that of the past and that of the present (44, 50).[40] For Todorov, as well as for Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, detective novels are in fact "narrative puzzles" in which a cause is gradually revealed *after* its effects are made readily apparent (Rimmon-Kenan 126; Todorov 44–46).[41] But on the way to achieving their resolution, detective novels are characterized by their use of "retardatory devices" such as "snare[s] (misleading clue[s]), equivocation, blockage, suspended answer[s], and partial answer[s]" (Rimmon-Kenan 126–27); these devices serve to delay the disclosure of the enigma's "definitive solution" (121). The reliance on retardatory and withholding strategies lays bare the fundamental mechanics of the reading process itself: that "uncertainty is at the basis of the dynamics of reading" (128). Allohistory tends to share this principle with the detective-mystery novel; this may largely account for the prevalence of detective topoi in both Chabon's and Semel's texts, not to mention classic counterfactuals that deal with Jewish fate, such as Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) and Harris' *Fatherland* (1992). Whether it is a crime or the past that is being examined, both are enigmas that the detective — and reader — must solve by accumulating and arranging incidental details.[42]

In his 1965 "Philosophical View of the Detective Novel," Ernst Bloch suggests that detective fiction and other entertainment genres preserve "significations which in part are also present in the loftier realms of poetry and philosophy" (1988: 249). For Bloch, the entertainment value and popularity of a genre is a positive indicator of its philosophical import. In detective fiction the "crime has already occurred, outside the narrative" (255), and it is only representable "through a process of reconstruction from investigation and evidence" (249). The detective form, Bloch suggests, allows readers to explore a hermeneutic gap of our contingent existence: that everyone on earth is thrown into a world "not of his or her own choosing" (258). Detective fiction thereby highlights the arbitrary, and in so doing, preserves traces of possible future change. Bloch believes that detective fiction and other popular forms of literary entertainment reveal

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[40] Here Todorov quotes insights made by murder-mystery author George Burton.

[41] On this subject see also Bloch 250, Shklovsky 103, Toker 13.

[42] Another interesting example of a detective novel that seeks to uncover an alternative historical narrative is Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time* (1951).

traces of a utopian longing suppressed by the social impulse to preserve the status quo.[43] Following Bloch, I propose that Semel's and Chabon's allohistories, closely aligned in terms of genre with utopian literature, make use of detective fiction to challenge the consensus of national and ethnic identity and affiliation.

I noted earlier that the genre of allohistory is coeval to modern historiography and may be a response to historiography's emphasis on objectivity and its reliance on evidentiary documents. Likewise, the detective novel (Bloch 246), and the novel in general according to some (Bender 145), only seem to have arisen with the widespread historical establishment of evidentiary proceedings and the dawn of modern historiography.[44] Allohistory has developed as a kind of detective fiction that rebels against historiography's displacement of the contingent. Allohistories testify to historiography's cover-up, exhuming the *it-could-have-been-otherwise* that stubborn factuality buries beneath an *it-must-have-been-so*.

Counterfactual novels such as Semel's and Chabon's treat history as a discontinuity in an effort to (re)construct a history that resists the official record. The formal para-detective structure of Semel's and Chabon's novels demonstrates how allohistories serve as counter-memories that raise fundamental questions about the historiographic impulse. Like the detective form they make use of, alternate histories investigate the corpse of the past that we find when we arrive on the scene of the crime: our present. And like detective fiction, these novels work by superimposing two temporal narratives: the past that could have been *but was not*, and the present that we factually know *is*. These allohistories ask: How did we get here? Why America? Why Israel? Of what importance is a nation state? How should the Holocaust inform contemporary life? And what role should Hebrew or Yiddish multilingualism have in contemporary Jewish life and letters?

Ultimately, these novels dispel the illusion of determinism that the historical perspective creates: this liberation enhances the freedom for thought, for reform, for change. Alternate history may thus be regarded both as political fiction that deals with contemporary society and as philosophical fiction that sways like a pendulum between the poles of

[43] Chabon too is a well-known defender of genre fiction, but on aesthetic and personal rather than ideological grounds. His essay "Imaginary Homelands" (2008a) links the world-making of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* to his rediscovery of genre fiction at a time of personal rededication to his Jewish identity (189–91).

[44] See also Rzepka, especially chapter 2.

contingency and determinism. The genre draws its singular power from its doubly-directed structure of the *what-if* and the *what-is*. And both Semel's and Chabon's work challenge us to judge for ourselves what factual, contemporary Jewish identity *could be*.

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