Dear Colleagues,

Below you will find a *draft* of an essay I am completing on the idea of literary history. The essay originated with an invitation to present new work on “twenty-first century Jewish writing and the world” at the University of Illinois. I confess that, prior to that invitation, I hadn’t intended to write on Jewish American literature. Rather, I’ve been chiefly interested in the idea of scale as it applies to our conceptions of race. Most of my work has involved analyses of how the way we talk and write about difference can be compared across histories and geographies of race and racialization, and I am now interested in how unstated and perhaps unconscious suppositions about scale—unstated supposition about spans of time and geography, that is—structure prevailing accounts of academic areas: Jewish Studies, Black Studies, and Latinx Studies.

This essay grows out of that interest, and though I’ve landed on Jewish Studies primarily out of opportunity, one of my on-going if quixotic projects is to foster mutual interest among scholars in Jewish Studies and other fields of Ethnic Studies.

The essay is unforgivably without endnotes. I mean, you may forgive me, but I won’t forgive myself when I scramble to recall what I was reading and citing while writing this. Every time I read it, I find more typos, so expect that. And I am aware that there are some patchy sections, and I hope you will have thoughts for how to firm them up. The essay has been solicited by the journal *American Literary History*, and my hope is that your criticism and suggestions will help me get it in shape for submission in the very near future. Thank you for reading!

Sincerely,

Dean
The Object of Jewish American Literary History

What if, I thought, rather than existing in a universal space, each of us is actually born alone into a luminous blankness, and it’s we who snip it into pieces, assembling staircases and gardens and train stations in our own peculiar fashion, until we have pared our space into a world? (Nicole Krauss, *Forest Dark* 48)

Paring blank space into a world, clipping and trimming endless possibility in order to make or perhaps make visible the particularly real, as the epigraph above suggests—is this not the disciplinary work of literary studies when we arrange texts to produce a literary history? When we write literary history, or more modestly, when we make claims about particular texts as part of specific literary categories, we necessarily if unwittingly engage a mechanism and a metaphysics of creating order out of blankness, mobilizing banner terms and the objects arranged beneath them necessary for that history to materialize. These mechanisms are part of the daily project of disciplinary and professional practice, as most of us know, for instance, from having taught the same text in very different sorts of classes. Place Philip Roth’s *The Ghost Writer* in an introductory literature course, a survey of the American novel, or a course on Jewish American writers, and the shifting context can yield dramatically different accounts of the novel. The novel remains the same, ever resourceful in its capacity to form to so many molds, or even to remain unmolded, yet its status as a literary object changes from course to course. What changes is the context, and your situation within it. In the epigraph above, from Nicole Krauss’s 2017 novel *Forest Dark*, a novelist named Nicole suggests for us an added complication, which is that
this snipping and paring produces not an archipelago, of which the revealed object—a novel, in my borrowing—is a mere island, but a whole world, for which the text is a portal for entry. Place *The Ghost Writer* in a course on Studies in Postmodernism and it becomes one sort of world, place it in a course on Comparative Race Studies and it becomes another sort of world. In Krauss’s novel, her character Nicole is reflecting on her sense that there are other versions of herself and other realities for her beyond the one she inhabits, and while admittedly her multiversal reflections are about her own life, she is also a Jewish writer (by her own categorization), whose work and career are constantly interpolated by Jews who place all of her writing in a Jewish context, and all but demand that she fulfill her obligation to continue writing about and for Jews. Her life and her work are pared down to a specific world by professional and lay-readers, the world of Jewish literary history, of which she is obligated to be a part.

Krauss’s character’s point is plain enough, that a reader inclined toward one kind of literary history will read, arrange, and even solicit the production of texts according to that inclination, and *Forest Dark* allows us to reflect on this readerly activity—the construction of the categorical meaning of literature that passes under the practice literary history. This essay explores assumptions underwriting literary categorization, focusing on Jewish American literary history in particular (mostly), and considers the scalar logic that allows us to link the singular text, with all of its luminous possibility, as Krauss’ character would have it, with the particular world of a given literary category. Scale itself harbors problems of commensurability insofar as scaling between a single object and a set to which the object belongs requires acts of comparison which leap over differences of kind, a problem explored in this essay’s second section through a analogies with problems of commensurability in the discipline of Physics. The third section locates those problems of commensurability in *Forest Dark*, and I read that novel’s direct
confrontation with literary history as exemplary of how literary scholars can foreground multiplicity and possibility, precisely through the foregrounding of their own situated practice as interested agents. Anticipating what I will say about Nicole at this essay’s end, what we turn to, what we turn from, and how we confront multiple possibilities may generate new, more interesting critical arrangements. And to be a little less coy, for all the hand-wringing Jewish literature study engages over its relevance to a wider academic project, I argue that we will solve the problem when we break out of our self-assigned orbit and engage with other worlds—fields, groupings, theoretical constructs—of study. Events since 2016 have made it clear (to those who needed such clarification) that Jews and Jewishness are not part of some teleology of American progress, and neither Jews, nor Jewish Studies, has proprietary claim on stories told about Jews in the U.S. Atavistic anti-Semitism and the increasingly strong tethering of U.S. and Israeli nationalism, have made clear for many Jewish Studies scholars and Jewish activists that Jewishness needs to be allied and coordinated with anti-racist work occurring among Black and Latinx Studies scholars and activists. Deep in the grain of our academic discipline, we might begin that work by rethinking the objects of Jewish American literature in order to see different worlds of Jewish belonging.

Picking up Nicole’s dilemma in *Forest Dark*, while it’s easy enough to determine that a given literary text was written by a Jewish author, there’s more uncertainty when placing that author in a category we would call “Jewish American literature,” and more uncertainty still in constructing a Jewish American literary history. These terms function as resources for comparison, with “Jewish American” the metaphorical third term that bridges differences among objects in the titular category. Practical sense tells us that the assembling of texts under banner categories can strain comparisons, while the categories themselves strain against the very borders
they ostensibly exist to provide. Even a term so expansive as “American” limits the ambit of literature precisely at the point where spatial and historical axes cross, suggesting that Jewish American writers work within recognizable frames of American history, or even generational legacies, thereby limiting the complexity and variegation inhering in “Jewish.” Temporal frames are overdetermined by their diachronic structuring, while the critical subjectivity that arranges literary history in retrospection remains too infrequently investigated.

In his critique of the field of Jewish literature studies, Saul Zarrit considers that there is an unspoken desire for a recognizable, manageable Jewishness, arguing that “‘Jewish American literature’ suggests a possible institutional stability, a *longed-for delineation of a coherent territory or population* now made identifiable within certain boundaries and criteria, however permeable such boundaries or criteria may be. This term announces an ethnic enclave within US literature, constructing an immigrant-made-good history of writers who have arrived safely in American culture” (my emphasis 546). The longed-for delineation would be, as Ben Schreier has argued, a critical desire for institutional and disciplinary legitimacy, and Zarrit’s last line hints at how that legitimacy is produced through historical and generational markers: The 1880’s immigration boom, the pre-war writers, the post-war or second and third-generation writers, and those contemporary writers who are fully Americanized or institutionally established, and who reflect on their Jewishness with fresh invention. Periodizing Jewish American literary history this way can feel like a way of getting a handle on things, effectively saying, “*these Jews experienced this particular set of circumstances,*” but that framing is always in tension with the variegation it would aim to contain.

Exemplifying that variegation existing under the temporal banner of new Jewish writing is the anthology, *The New Diaspora*, which signals its intentionally diverse table of contents with
the subtitle, *The Changing Landscape of American Jewish Fiction*. Every term in the title augurs for something new, with both “Jewish” and “American” mutually modifying one another. “Landscape” is especially key to this collection, which gathers writing by both U.S. and Canadian Jews, and authors are said to descend from a truly diverse range of nations. In this way, the anthology would seem to veer from overdetermined categories, themes, or histories, that comprise the disciplinary arrangement of Jewish writing, but the anthology Introduction suggests that charting a new course is not so easy. The editors declare, on the one hand, that they have left the usual, best-selling Jewish writers out of their table of contents to make way for new writers, and they claim that this new generation departs from the prior generation of Ozick, Roth, Bellow, and Malamud because, in contrast to the hyphenation-anxiety which beset a prior generation, today’s Jewish writers are not burdened by the usual hand-wringing over identity and belonging. On the other hand, the editors claim that “the new population of Jewish writers appears to mirror a broader movement in American literature: writers come from afar to seek sanctuary in America and to find their voices in a country and a language that offers them protection and opportunity” (3). While it’s true enough that arrival and assimilation are not exactly Roth’s and Bellow’s themes, those are indeed the themes of a prior generation of Jewish writers, including Mary Antin, Henry Roth, and Anzia Yezierska, so it is not immediately clear, by the editors own account, that this new generation departs entirely from the expected mold, including the themes and indeed the anxieties of those pre-war writers. The editors explain that although in Jewish writing, “identity remains an issue [. . .] it metamorphoses into something else, ironized, detached from the traditional anxieties about acceptance and exposure” only to mark this new writing with the term that is almost tautologically Jewish in its usage here, observing, as if against expectation, “the startling resemblance of Jewish writing in American to
a *diaspora*” (3, 9, my emphasis). The more things change, the more they stay the same? The editors tell us that the literature collected is “overwhelmingly secular,” but proceed to shore up the diversity of selections by linking them to a “textual tradition that begins with the written Torah and is alive in thought and dialectic, in a unique cast of mind that is at once blunt, fierce, contentious, earthy, pliable, worldly, utopian, and durable . . .” (14, 16). Repeatedly across the Introduction to *The New Diaspora*, the editors move back and forth between celebrating the assembled authors’ multiplicity, diversity, and sheer new-ness, and claiming something familiar, repeating, and recognizably Jewish.

*The New Diaspora* is a genuinely innovative anthology, and the intent here is neither to dismiss the novelty of the table of contents, nor to critique the editors’ framing of the assembled collection. Rather, I am observing that the practice of framing a collection of literature under some identity-based title necessarily requires diachronic reference. The irony in this case is that *The New Diaspora* is resolutely a collection of new writing which would presumably otherwise slip the grip of historicization, but for being harnessed to historical names. In the anthology’s prologue the editors tell an anecdote about enjoying a good lunch an Italian deli—not kosher, they add, but as good a Jewish meal as you can get in Hartford Connecticut, where they were assembled to award the Wallant prize for new Jewish writing. The anthology originates in the editors’ wish to celebrant a decades’ worth of prize-submissions, and the lunch-table anecdote hints at the decidedly unacademic, but I suspect very common, occasion for critical writing, anthology making, and even special journal issuing. It is often our enjoyment of the work at hand and the pleasure of sharing literature and ideas along with our affective relation to them that launches our critical practice. We write and create projects out of love, hope, anger, or frustration with an area, field, period, text, not to mention the ongoing conversations we have
with our colleagues. These affective wellsprings for our practice are themselves organized by the politics of scarcity in the profession along with the ideological formations that frame our work or which speak through it, as Sianne Ngai has made clear, and without wishing to wade into debates on affect studies, it’s safe to say that our contextualized, affective connection to the work is too often understated (appearing in acknowledgements sections and prologues), muted by disciplinary conventions. If in the prior paragraph I seem to charge the editors with a too reductive historicism, I also want to note that “anthology”’s etymology is in the ancient Greek phrase for “flower gathering,” implying aesthetic judgment and selection, but mainly unbounded, affection and admiration. In the case of The New Diaspora, the editors seem to have felt compelled to find the logical principle justifying their selections and their arrangement, but a more productive discussion might include a frank analysis of how the institutional and historical conditions that directed the editors to this particular field, to gather this particular set of “flowers.”

In any case, with literary history, the simplicity of retrospection is belied by the overwhelming chaos of the present moment, now or in any present. No one reading this in 2019 would feel comfortable accepting the categorical lumping of “post 9/11 Jewishness” or even a homogenous “post-Trump Jewishness”; no periodizing of the last twenty years can control the refraction of Jewish responses to religion, nationalism, war, or contemporary American politics, nor the variegation of art, film, and literature produced by and about American Jews, and Nicole’s line in Forest Dark reminds us that the selection and arrangement of writers is so much snipping and paring, the production of a “world” out of infinite possibility, or the arrangement of order out of chaos (48). Indeed, “chaos,” Krauss’s narrator remarks, “is the one truth that narrative must always betray, for in the creation of its delicate structures that reveal many truths
about life, the portion of truth that has to do with incoherence and disorder must be obscured” (67). I am suggesting the same about literary histories, which are themselves delicate structures revealing many truths, while, if not betraying, at least side-stepping the larger truth of all the differences in kind which persist across the grouping, along with the difference from itself inhering in any given literary text. “Chaos” is a useful term going forward for the way it anticipates some of the discussion of Physics below, and chiefly for how it suggests the problems of scale discussed above. “Chaos” and “order” are not in a scalar relation with each other. Order is not a smaller version of chaos, some subset of chaos, or some principle extracted from chaos. They are different totalities, and though they may contain the same matter, their fundamental difference should shift our attention to the mechanisms for perceiving each.

Scale, it turns out, is likewise an instrument of comparison, and critics of scale likewise observe the similarly hasty stabilization of categories based on tautological or ideological category construction. Writing about the logic of scale in comparative literature study, Nirvana Tanoukhi, citing Neil Smith, observes that “a metaphorical space, like ‘postcolonial culture,’ when perceived as an operative counterforce to the ‘world-economy,’ indeed disguises the ‘need to investigate’ the particular spatial relations that shape the landscapes of the post-colonial novel” (613). Tanoukhi’s point is that the aggregating category—postcolonial culture, in her example—moots questions about how the category comes to exist in the first place, especially insofar as liminal categories of culture like “postcolonial” but also like “Jewish” (as we’ll see in a moment) are shot through with contested histories and geographies which are unresolved but nonetheless shored up under banner terms. By calling categories “metaphorical space” Tanoukhi points out the two-handed work of field-categories, which shore up difference under the sign of
the same (“postcolonial,” “Jewish American”) on the way to mapping a difference that depends upon that sleight of hand (“postcolonial” in comparison with “Jewish American”)

Beyond its metaphorical efficacy for literary history, categorical identity has a metaphysical agency insofar as it seems to exist independent from the very category to which it lends its name, part of the category but floating free above it. We scale up from the individual object to a larger categorical grouping because we assume that there is a stable identity that links the two elements—Jewishness determines belonging in “Jewish literature,” and somehow the identity “Jewish” pertains to both the category and its objects. In this way, “Jewish” relays meaning between part and whole while also remaining somehow outside of both. The other metaphysical assumption inherent in the scalar grouping of part and whole is the seemingly self-evident compulsion to scale up in the first place—call it the literary categorial imperative. This imperative to create categories is itself a kind of metaphysics, or ruling truth. The presumption that there must be a broader category, combined with the uncertainty of that category’s limits, sets in motion debates about how to fill it, as with the Introduction to *The New Diaspora*. In the case of Jewish American literary history, even as we argue over what texts and contexts comprise that category, the fact of that category, announced in book titles, anthologies, and special journal issues, obviates contingency: something must be “Jewish American literature” and so there must be a historical formation of texts belonging to that category.

Even the focus on a single text, so long as it is understood to be part of the broader category, activates the sort of metaphorical and metaphysical mechanisms mentioned above. Consider, for example, an essay by Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky, published in *American Literary History* in 2001, which forcefully argues “that America has finally become the legitimate homeland for Jews,” and uses Philip Roth’s late twentieth century novels as evidence. For
Rubin-Dorsky, Roth’s fiction illustrate that “Jews in America have the opportunity and the freedom to create themselves as Jews, first by acknowledging the presence of Jews in history (as in circumcision, a male ceremony for which there should be a parallel ritual exclusively for female babies), and then by expressing their freedom through the reinvention or reconfiguration of Jewishness” (101-2). Rubin-Dorsky’s is the common move in Jewish American literary studies, anchoring Jewish identity in some presumably legitimizing ritual and history (even while parenthetically acknowledging the inadequacy of that anchor), and then dialectically allowing for Jewish reinvention in the near-present. Meanwhile, Rubin-Dorsky’s note of triumphalism is a marker of Jewish exceptionalism, binding Jewishness to the progress narrative, harmonizing with a telos of American exceptionalism. Recent history belies that exception, and the essay reads very much of its moment, published in the spring of 2001—that is, right before 9/11—and presumably written in yet more halcyon days for American Jews, when “Shalom, Haver” could still be found on just-fading D.C. bumper stickers, and American Jews could take real pride in Philip Roth’s Americanness and his Jewishness. The moment may have been a high-water mark for American Jews’ feeling of belonging, and it’s easy to see how discretely selected threads of literature and current events could be wound up into a ball—a whole world Jewish American cultural coherence. Suffice to say, it would be hard to imagine anyone writing that essay in 2019. Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004), with its counter-factual depiction of a Nazified American government run by Charles Lindburgh gave many readers the initial impression that Roth was somehow representing the second Bush administration, while the 2016 election of a real-life authoritarian-minded president and the concomitant increase in anti-Semitic violence, the public flaunting of racial bigotry, and the full-scale hijacking of philo-Zionism by the evangelical right has certainly agitated many American Jews’ comfort in the U.S. Meanwhile,
the variegation of Jewishness that Rubin-Dorsky celebrates now serves as a source of anxiety and even animus for many American Jews. Retrospection allows us to see that in the case of Rubin-Dorsky’s essay, claims for the relationship between the parts and whole of a given category are themselves indices of a desire for that relationship, and inevitably illuminate the present-time epistemic frame wherein they are made.

**Is Schrodinger’s cat black?**

So far, I’ve situated questions of literary history within a critical framework that academics in the various fields of Jewish Studies will recognize, but placing these questions in a wider framework of race-studies demonstrates how “identity” organizes and thematizes the sort of critical frameworks that I am critiquing. Giving up identity’s agency and its tautological self-evidence may allow Jewish literary studies to find common ground with scholarship in other fields dedicated to examining racial formation in the U. S., an especially salient project in the face of the ahistorical recirculation of anti-Semitic tropes, which are themselves bound up in anti-black and anti-Latinx and anti-immigrant racism. Though Jewish literary studies has more or less made the multicultural turn, here I am advocating for an increased attention to the critical horizons across race-studies at large. Among the most bold of recent critiques of the field of Black Studies is Stephen Best’s *None Like US: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life*, which questions the presumptive cultural and affective continuity linking the past of enslavement in the New World with twentieth and twenty-first century black life. Best posits “a frank reappraisal of the critical assumptions that undergird . . . the assumed conjuncture between belonging and a history of subjection” (1). Challenging the dominant critical stance that locates the origins of black cultural production in New World enslavement, Best historicizes Black Studies itself, and
argues that, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, “imperatives for the Negro to ‘dig up his past’ were meant to found [ . . . ] a collective subject” (12). That is, Black Studies was founded on the imperative to produce an archive of the past which would be the resource for its ongoing scholarly work. Recovery of the past and redemption of its traumas comprise the critical and historical agendas of Black Studies, according to Best, but the presumptive continuity between the archival past and the critical present is in fact the present’s own creation. Similar to my critique of a literary-critical categorical imperative, Best “contend[s] that, where the double imperative persists (in which recovery from the slave past rests on a recovery of it), it is not too difficult to see the search for lost or absent black culture as substituting for the recovery of a ‘we’ at the point of our violent origin” (13). That is, the search for the origins of black identity is set in motion by the category of black identity, where “black” is anxiously absent yet somehow directing the critical work all along. Best would return us to the present, site of the affective relation scholars and critics have to the limited and fragmented archive of the past—its gapped surface and not it’s in accessible depth—and to a Blackness that manifests through that relation. That is, Best is orienting scholarly attention to the conditions of its own production.

At the heart of Best’s critique of Black Studies is the claim that black histories and narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially those narratives authored under duress, or those histories that are fragmented or under-sourced, are finally inaccessible to us in the present. Enslavement and its apparatus of terror and control yield a fragmented, oblique archive, and not a firm basis for the establishment of a structure of thought, culture, and critique, according to Best. This thesis of trauma in the archive will be familiar to scholars of Jewish Studies, who have, in various ways, tried to account for the inaccessibility of the Holocaust to those who were not immediate witnesses to it. As Emily Miller Budick has put it, “events that
occurred in the past and that can never be made present to us in any tangible way constitute a particular class of events to which our human sense cannot provide absolute verification. History, therefore, produces a particular form of the philosophical skeptical dilemma,” which she goes on to characterize as the tension between the past as knowledge—mediated through archives, including literature—and the acknowledgement of the past’s failure to fully materialize for the present which much more closely resembles what Best advocates as the proper stance for African American Studies. Much like Best’s critique of what he calls “rumors in the archive,” Miller, too, finds something like Best’s “double-imperative” in critical responses to contemporary literature which “to some degree ghost/write the precursor texts they conjure. They recover through their own authorship the lost texts of the past, for which their own writings come to substitute” (134). Best’s exemplary text is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, along with the raft of criticism which presumes to facilitate that novel’s work of mourning, while Miller Budick texts are those post-Holocaust novels which stage encounters with the lost objects of literary history, including writing by Franz Kafka, Ann Frank, and Bruno Schulz. Jewish literary studies has so elevated a literature of loss by writers including Cynthia Ozick, Philip Roth, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Nicole Krauss, that studies of this archive may conflate its representation of loss with the more difficult encounter with the Holocaust itself.

The danger for scholars, Miller Budick contends, is that “insofar as some of us have chosen the study of the Holocaust as an academic project, the texts may permit us to glimpse how the Holocaust has become for us an idol of sorts or a fetish that blocks rather than expresses mourning,” which she goes on to name as a form of melancholy (125). Consider, too, Best’s similar position with respect to what he regards as the fetishistic allure of the black archive: “Facing up to this fact, I am inspired to craft a historicism that is not melancholic but accepts the
past’s turning away as an ethical condition of my desire for it” (Best 20). Both scholars turn to Stanley Cavell’s work on skepticism for an ethics of limited recognition. For both, this sort of limited recognition reflects less on the object of the past and more on the psychological and moral position of the critic, who seeks but can never receive the past’s acknowledgement of their attention. Both Best and Miller Budick pivot away from the archival past as a source of continuity or as an explanatory basis of the present, and toward the ethical scene of reading itself—Best, famously the essay “Surface Reading,” co-authored with Sharon Marcus, which outlines a mode of reading based on affect and attachment, and Miller Budick, whose book *The Subject of Holocaust Fiction* argues for a scrupulous interrogation of readers’ psychological response to texts. Miller Budick does not critique Jewish Studies with the same breadth of Best’s critique Black Studies, but her work illuminates how literary criticism in the present compulsively desires a relationship to an archive of the past, and produces a suspect continuity out of that desire. More than challenge the prospect of literary history, Best’s and Miller Budick’s redirection of attention to the situated critic helps denaturalize our disciplinary imperatives and dislodge our interpretive practices from those ruling imperatives. Doing so creates critical space for new modalities of reading what are otherwise the proof-texts of literary history, and lays the ground for new and unexpected arrangements of texts and contexts within and across fields.

Writing with a different analytic but toward the same goal is Michelle Wright, whose book, *The Physics of Blackness*, also questions the object of Black Studies, namely, “Blackness as a determinable ‘thing,’ as a ‘what’ or ‘who,’” which is typically stabilized through historicist procedures. In terms that seem appropriate for Jewish studies, Wright argues that the historicist view “gives us a conceptualization [of categorical identity] that exhibits the unnerving qualities
of a mirage: from a distance, it appears clearly cogent, but up close, Blackness evanesces, revealing no one shared quality that justifies such frequent assured use of this signifier” (2). It says a lot about the different cultural, political, and epistemic positions blackness and Jewishness occupy in the academy and beyond that claiming the evanescence of blackness is a disruptive intervention while protean Jewishness is all but taken as a given of Jewish Studies. But this protean, modernist, queer, or even post-Jewish Jewishness, the source and subject of Jewish Cultural Studies, is itself shored up by historicist conventions in accounts in Jewish Studies at large. Where Best acknowledges the past’s “turning away” from his desire for it, Wright suggests that we turn from the past as an epistemic framework. As with Best’s and Miller Budick’s critiques, for Wright, the similarly stabilizing tendencies in Black Studies are a part of what she calls “the Middle Passage Epistemology,” which frames literary history and overly determines critical practice.

Wright draws an analogy between that epistemology’s incommensurability with the up-close evanescence of blackness and quandaries of scale as they appear in Physics. Classical Physics addresses a knowable and empirically verifiable reality—which for Wright corresponds to the middle passage epistemology—while Quantum Physics posits a subatomic field of particles whose material reality is unknowable, and whose coordinates remain uncertain outside of observation. Quantum Physics has discovered that the position and trajectory of a subatomic particle is only fixed when the Physicist observes it, and this problem, known as the Uncertainty Principle, corresponds with Wright’s account of a blackness that is similarly undecidable or variegated right up until it is observed, or placed in an over-determined framework. To specify just a bit more, in the 1920’s, Werner Heisenberg among others was trying to understand exactly why an electron jumped from one position within an atom to another, and further still, why an
electron would release from an atom completely, the phenomenon of radiation in elements like uranium. Heisenberg was especially puzzled because his mathematics convinced him that electrons could be in more than one position at the same time, and that only through observation would a singular reality be resolved, a formula not unlike Nicole Krauss’s reflection on how a singular world is carved out of luminous blank possibility, or even how narrative imposes order on chaos. Albert Einstein among others, rejected Heisenberg’s theory that an electron could be both in and out of an atom, and the Physicist Erwin Schrodinger’s rejoinder reduced Heisenberg’s theory to an absurd conclusion by imagining a cat locked in a box, rigged to a mechanism that would kill it if the electron did indeed release from the atom. According to Heisenberg’s theory, if the electron was both in and out of the atom, the cat would be both alive and dead until an observer opened the box and looked in. If cats and electrons were to belong to the same reality—if the cat was nothing other than the accumulation of a gazillion atoms—then something can’t be right. The smallest elements surely must be recognizably themselves even as they are arranged into greater wholes. How can something be a source of endless possibility and yet also exist as a determined, fixed thing within a larger whole? For Wright, the analogous question is, what scale would determine or overdetermine the possible meanings of “black” for Black Studies—Blackness as a determinable thing, fixed precisely by our observations, or Blackness in motion, indeterminate, interacting with other elements, pluralized by that combination?

Wright would have us recuperate the variegated potentiality of blackness so that critics can “endlessly expand the dimensions of our analyses and intersect with a wider range of identities by deploying an epiphenomenal concept of spacetime that takes into account all the multifarious dimensions of Blackness that exist in any one moment, or ‘now’—not ‘just’ class,
gender, and sexuality, but all collective combinations imagined in that moment” (20 my emphasis). Among the virtues of undecidability, I highlight the potential for “collective combinations imagined in that moment” both for its anticipation of new arrangements of texts, and for the emphasis on the critical faculty and its contexts which materialize to make those new arrangements viable. Wright’s is an argument against periodicity’s sorting of texts based on historical context, and in favor of an a-temporal “super-position,” the term quantum physicists use for the potential of a particle to be in multiple locations at once and which Wright appropriates for the potentiality of the blackness of any given object of Black Studies’ inquiry. Wright’s The Physics of Blackness, along with Best’s and Miller Budick’s critique of historicism, prioritizes the role of the critic-as-observer, who is affectively, ethically, or psychologically situated, and the three critics intervene in the too-easy assumption of a homology between the parts and the whole of a given category. Trauma and mourning, or perhaps even resistance and rebellion have become presumptive themes of the archives of Black and Jewish Studies, at the cost of other possibilities and combinations. Wright in particular insists that we regard the situated critic as the one who determines and therefore limits the luminous possibility of our archive, paring it down to the more determined world of literary history.

The Physics of Jewishness

Wright’s appropriation of the incommensurability harbored in Physics is echoed in the often discussed conundrum posed by the prologue to the 2010 Coen brothers’ film, “A Serious Man,” about Larry Gopnik, a Jewish physicist suffering a mid-life crisis of Job-like proportions. Across the film, Larry’s wife leaves him, he contracts a grave disease, and he becomes trapped in
a bribery scandal partly of his own making. Larry seeks comfort from his present pain in the accumulated wisdom of his religion, Judaism, consulting across the film with three generations of Rabbis, but while the younger two offer scant help, seeming to channel nothing other than their own generation’s zeitgeist (existential irony for Larry’s middle-aged peer, Rabbi Nachter, fizzl-less Buddhism for the junior Rabbi Scott) the senior Rabbi, Marshak, refuses to see him. Larry stands “before the law,” longing for but cut off from ancient insight—yet another blow.

The film is saturated with mid-century Jewish themes, but it’s not entirely clear that the film says anything about Jewishness per se, but for the fact that the main narrative feature is preceded by a short film set in a shtetel during a previous century wherein a Jewish peasant couple, Dora and Velvel, are visited by what may or may not be a dybbuk, or malevolent spirit. In this short prologue, Dora stabs the visitor—whom her husband believes is nothing other than a revered rabbi—and he stumbles, bleeding, out the door. “We are ruined,” cries Velvel, believing his wife has committed murder. “Nonsense” responds the Dora, “blessed is the lord,” believing she has saved her family from the dybbuk’s haunting. Though the Coens have said that the short prologue is merely a mood-setter and that it stands apart from the subsequent feature, its placement as a prologue all but guides a viewer to seek a historical connection between the two films: Are these Larry’s ancestors, and has a curse indeed passed through the generations and into Larry’s life? Or is there some sort of cosmic repetition going on, some fateful Jewish struggle with uncertainty itself? Do the two films, with their repetition of uncertainty, combined with their foregrounding of Jewishness, suggest some theme or commentary about Judaism or Jewish identity? Posing, let alone answering these questions, of course, would require that we overlook several irresolvable problems: the vast difference in the Jewishness of the two films, the geographical lacuna between the European shtetel and the Minneapolis suburb of the second
film, the absence of any evidence of continuity between the two families, and the prevailing uncertainties of both films. Still, the contiguity of the two films suggests continuity; their metonymy suggests a metaphorical resolution; and the gap in history between the two films may prompt us to fill it in with the work of identity—a Jewish constant: combined, they must say something about Jewishness, and the Jewishness of the content of each must say something, somehow, about their combination.

As Shai Ginsburg has observed, the leitmotif of “A Serious Man” is the previously discussed paradox of quantum physics, the uncertainty principle, and we may say that Schrödinger’s thought-experiment correlates with the viewer’s all-but-forced observation that the prologue and the feature film must not only be linked, but surely must say something about Jewishness through that linkage. One contemporaneous response to the Heisenberg-Schrödinger debate, offered by Niels Bohr, is the hypothesis of “complementarity,” the theory that though quantum and classical scales were incommensurate, there was a unifying reality itself, wherein the two complemented each other. Both scales of Physics were necessary for each other, and the distinction of each would be explicable with a better apprehension, still elusive, of the whole of physics. And here is where we part ways with Physics and return to the discipline of literary studies, for while the necessity of a whole pertains to Physics, it does not necessarily pertain to the literary studies. What principle would require us to look for a historical connection between local phenomena and a broader field-action that we might call literary history? It can only be some idea outside of each, which would either be metaphysics or ideology; that is, either a teleology of literary production or a controlling account of cultural materialism. Regarding literary categories predicated on identity, and Jewish American literary history in particular, it is the presumptive Jewishness (or whatever the identity) and all its adjuncts, including history and
geography, which presses the question, what work do we expect that term “Jewish” to do—
metaphysics or ideology?

Stephen Best’s work is about claiming a third option, neither metaphysics nor ideology, but the situated involvement of critics themselves. With “A Serious Man,” we return to the scene of the situated critic, who has been incited to find links among the films precisely due their placement in time and space—screen-time, the space of the theater—and it is easy enough to acknowledge that this context, far from hidden away in need of excavation, is transparently accessible to us. We who view the film are the context of the film’s contiguity. I hope my reader will allow me to side-step the critical controversies that surround Best’s and Marcus’s work and those who write in a similar grain—that is, the debate between new formalist, ANT-based, affect-driven reading vs. symptomatic, suspicious, or Marxist critical practices—given that my focus here is not, in fact, on how to read a given text, but on how to take stock of one’s own situatedness amid the prevailing, at times controlling norms of disciplines and the endless resourcefulness and surprise of literature. Best and Marcus argue for a “minimal critical agency,” or a kind of critical modesty responsive to the way a work acts upon us, but I am stressing both the minimal agency that comes from being situated by surprising contexts and the maximal agency of arranging texts into categories and histories. At times, those contexts are inescapably visible to us, and we are aware of our role as participant in the creation of our categories. Often, though, we so naturalize our contexts that they pass through us transparently, writing through us, framing our work before we are aware it is happening. As the analogy from Physics suggests, or as my citation from Krauss in the epigraph and my original example of Roth’s The Ghost Writer should make clear enough, snipping and paring down possibility into a world of meaning is both an inherently enjoyable creative act, and an unavoidable disciplinary
imperative. The two forms of agency are mutually reinforcing: On the way to fulfilling disciplinary imperatives, we may take pleasure in expertly arranging contexts of our own making, through the construction of syllabi or tables of contents in an anthology of literary history. What if, however, we reverse the polarity of influence, acknowledging the imperative and agency to create these contexts on the one hand, but beginning with our situated context as the as creative act at the center of our attention? Schrodinger would have us behold the cat, Heisenberg, the cat’s observer. To find the connection among the Coen’s two films is to make sense of your own, situated self; to claim Philip Roth’s writing as somehow illustrative of the state of Jewishness—either in relation to other Jews, or as embedded in a larger world of racial formation—is to make sense of your world.

The Subject of Jewish American Literary History

I return now to a literary example which will help us reflect on the operations of contiguity and continuity in the construction of Jewish American literary history, Nicole Krauss’s novel *Forest Dark*, which consistently juxtaposes geography and history, or position and momentum (to carry the Physics forward), as it tracks two protagonists, the Brooklyn-based writer, Nicole, whose life and writing have at least a little in common with Krauss herself, and the aging millionaire-philanthropist Epstein, a recognizable type seeking to squeeze some meaning from the end of his materialist-oriented life. While Nicole contends with literary history, Epstein is enthralled with biblical history, and both filter their relation to history by scrutinizing their own motives, including their affective attachments to the material substrate of their lives. Though each protagonist’s story bears some elements of the others’, including specific locations, allusions to history, or simple motifs, they do not appear in each other’s
stories, and there is no indication that their stories are part of a whole. More symmetrically balanced than the Coen’s juxtaposition of a prologue and feature film in “A Serious Man,” the two stories in Forest Dark similarly provoke problems of narrative holism and continuity, and I argue that Nicole in particular dispatches with the singular and linear claims history (or literary historians) would make on her multiple or perhaps multi-versal selves.

In Forest Dark, space intrudes on time. Speaking in the first person, Nicole begins her portion of the novel by reflecting on an uncanny experience of feeling herself to be in two places at once, an unnerving exstasis which chiefly occurs in and troubles her relation to her domestic space, wherein her marriage is failing and her writing is stalled. In a bid to restart some part of her life, she travels to Israel where her sister lives and where her family vacationed every summer during her childhood. Even her focus in Israel is spatial: Nicole is obsessed with the Hilton where she stays in Tel Aviv, and she constantly takes stock of her own location and even other people’s national origins. Meanwhile, her mysterious handler, Friedman, is a slightly more-sober, less wild-eyed version of the fanatics who occupy Philip Roth’s novels, and who foist an Israel-centered Jewish narrative onto his protagonists. In Forest Dark, Friedman claims to be a professor of Jewish literature, the history of which he traces from King David to the present, an unbroken line which includes Nicole herself. Nicole is aware that she is being interpolated and possibly manipulated, having had similar experiences on prior visits to Israel. She recalls visiting Yad Vashem and being steered into a meeting room by the museum’s directors and given a commemorative, blank book, upon which she was expected to write her next Holocaust novel. So, Jewish history is forced on her, and a specifically Jewish literary history is presumed on her behalf.
Friedman’s particular request of Nicole is even more blatantly determinative, however. He tells Nicole the dramatic story of Franz Kafka’s final days, which, he claims, ended not in Europe but with Kafka’s secret emigration to Israel, his subsequent conspiracy with Max Brod to fake his own death, his continued writing, and his final retreat into the desert in Israel where he lived well into his 80’s as a reclusive and largely ignored botanist. There have been real-life legal battles over who owns Kafka’s remaining manuscripts, with Israeli courts favoring the National Library of Israel over a suit that would have allowed his works to be deposited with the German national library. Among other issues was the question of literary history, and it may not be surprising but is certainly vexing that the Israeli courts determined that Kafka was a fundamentally Jewish writer, and consolidated his legacy under the sign of the nation. As Judith Butler among others has observed, the Israeli claim on Kafka is also a Zionist-nationalist claim on Jewishness, and in terms used in this essay thus far, it signals the closure of possibility and the alignment of a given life and literary corpus with a singular definition of categorical identity not only for Kafka but for all Jews. Krauss addresses this usurpation by amplifying it, with Friedman’s story of an actual Israeli life for Kafka, modeled on archetypes of Zionism, including ulpan, a kibbutz residence, and retirement in the desert. Friedman’s appeal to Nicole is that she can be history’s amanuensis, the one who can prepare the grounds for the public revelation of Kafka’s secret history in Israel, by writing a fictional account of his Israeli life and work, and in the context of the real-world lawsuit, it seems that Nicole’s task is to shore up literary history. Kafka’s writing by itself may not be convincingly Jewish-nationalist, but Nicole’s work—described in Krauss’s novel as always Jewish, and largely well-received in Israel—could provide the retroactive link in a chain of history that would make Kafka more obviously Jewish. The plot takes off when this literary history appears to be sanctioned by state power, as Nicole is abruptly
kidnapped by the army while in the car with Friedman and set up in Kafka’s own desert house, complete with blank paper and a typewriter.

There is a lot going on in this whirlpool of stories swirling around other stories, so it is worth noting how elements of this plot place Krauss’s novel in broader stream of a prior generation’s Jewish writing, where books flow into other books and meditate on the past. Perhaps most striking, there is Philip Roth’s imagined Kafka come to the US to be young Philip’s Hebrew School teacher, in “‘I always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting’; or, Looking at Kafka.” Later, in The Ghost Writer, Roth has Nathan Zukerman imagine a remarkably real-seeming fantasy of Ann Frank surviving Bergen-Belsen and arriving in New England, starting fresh as a writer. Cynthia Ozick would dedicate her short novel The Messiah of Stockholm to Roth, likely for the gift of Bruno Schulz, whose stories Roth brought to publication through Penguin’s “Other Europe” series. In Ozick’s novel, Schulz’s lost manuscript “The Messiah” ends up in the hands of Lars, an obscure Swedish book reviewer, although it’s likely a forgery, as are the Kafka manuscripts that appear on Forest Dark. The drama of Ozick’s novel plays out over contested literary history, as the cabal of forgers attempt to pluck Schulz from obscurity and to launch his work into wide-spread, public fame, relying on Lars to herald “The Messiah’s” return, a role similar to Nicole’s in Krauss’s novel. Returning to Roth, we recall the forged journals of Leon Klinghoffer, foisted on Philip in Operation Shylock. Krauss’s Forest Dark is like a warehouse of recent Jewish inter-textuality.

Indeed, Krauss’s prior novel, Great House, contains just such a warehouse of memory, as well as similar themes of sentimental history and made-up identities, and a key common element between the two novels is how each regards history’s materials as objects of intense cathexis and dubious authenticity. This element might be enough for a critic to write a literary history linking
Krauss to Roth and Ozick, but *Forest Dark* in particular finally subordinates its historicity, if simply by the structure of Nicole’s story, which starts and ends as a domestic drama. She eventually makes it out of the desert house, out of a hospital where she recovers from a virus and exposure, and finally to her home, where all her domestic troubles await her. And though she once again feels a sense of doubleness upon returning home, that double presence bears none of the historical trouble that it does for Philip in *Operation Shylock*. Indeed, where Roth’s Philip duels with his handler and the pack of forgeries, deceptions, and conspiracies right up until that novel’s close, Nicole seems to lose interest in Friedman—about whom we never learn after Nicole’s kidnapping—and in Kafka, as well as her place in Friedman’s Jewish literary history. Different from Ozick’s Lars, who has to live in the traumatic aftermath of the exposure of the fraudulent “Messiah,” Nicole comes home to confront the same self that agitated her before she left.

At the risk of straining the prior comparison with Physics, *Forest Dark*’s two stories read like dueling Physics analogies, with Nicole’s story layered by uncertainty and undecidability, and Epstein’s with a faith in the stabilized, self-evident facts of history and his place in it. Put another way, Nicole’s story is about position, or space, or even geography. Facts are uncertain and truths evanescent; everything about Israel in this story, including Kafka’s legacy, Friedman’s literary history, even the generic innocence of the Hilton where Nicole stays, is and isn’t what it seems. Only an overarching faith in literary history, including the veracity of the Kafka story, would shore up and fix the preceding uncertainty, but Nicole turns from it all, back to her multiple selves at the novel’s end. Meanwhile, in the other plot, Epstein’s story, told in the third-person, is about velocity, momentum, or continuity, though for all of Epstein’s confidence in history, his final location at the end of the novel remains uncertain. Put another way, while
Epstein takes history seriously, it is not entirely clear that the novel takes his seriousness seriously. Late in life, with both parents dead and bearing his own cancer diagnosis, he feels the compulsion to divest himself of the millions he’s made over the course of his career as an attorney. Ostensibly seeking to establish a fitting memorial for his parents, Epstein’s aim in Israel is to connect himself to the past and produce a legacy for the future, with both projects seeming mystical and just a little bit foolish. It is to Krauss’s credit that she writes of his seeking with real empathy, but it’s clear that for Epstein as much as for Nicole, “history” is a swindle. Early on, Epstein is taken in by Krausner, a recognizable baal teshuva-type who is organizing Jews of the Davidic line to join his movement. This comes to a head—a crown, even—near the novel’s end when Epstein is cast in a low-budget historical film about King David, as David himself. The casting comes about as the tail-end of a shaggy dog story which results in Epstein’s meeting Krausner’s daughter, who she tells him that she is directing an independent film on King David and invites him to watch the filming. The moment telegraphs how obsessed everyone is with Jewish history, for it occurs right after Epstein has returned from scouting locations to plant his two million-dollar memorial forest, which comes off as a ludicrous subordination of geography to history. Yael hands him a certificate on behalf of her father commemorating Epstein’s Davidic ancestry, and though she’s ironic about her father, Yael speaks earnestly about her own Davidic project, her independent film. Spontaneously, if predictably, Epstein decides to fund the remainder of Yael’s film-making, whereupon he finds himself on set and belatedly cast as David himself.

In the middle of the desert, with a storm closing in, with no reason given, Epstein walks off the set, apparently to his death by exposure. A fellow actor, presumably looking for him, holds up his phone and texts, “where are you?,” a near-obvious allusion to Heisenberg’s
uncertainty principle: you can know an object’s position, or spatial location; or you can know the momentum, or let us say, the movement of Epstein into history. But you can’t know both at once. Observation is the end of multiple possibilities. Epstein drops out of place, perhaps because having planted his forest, he no longer needs presence to be present, and enters into history through his mysterious passing. Moreover, Epstein passes out of the novel, which returns to Nicole’s story and back to her vexed sense of being in two places at once.

I’ve taken time with this extended summary to show the novel’s two-handed engagement with literary history. On the one hand, the novel’s apparent recycling of literary plots, character-types, and similar-seeming objects, such as lost manuscripts, is evidence of Krauss’s engagement with a prior generation of Jewish American writers. I suggest we think of this as the production of an autologous literary history, to borrow from the sciences once more: a novel using its own constitutive elements to replicate a thematic pattern and thereby locate itself in a literary history of its own creation. It’s as if Krauss is showing readers that there is only one story for Jewish writers to tell. Not only Roth and Ozick, but David Grossman (See Under Love) and Krauss herself (History of Love) write over and over about the literary losses of European Jewish literature, with dead authors and missing or forged texts melancholically rupturing forth into the present. In this literary history, contemporary writers don’t so much invent new stories as become the vessels for the history of trauma and its aftermath. This is well-known to academic criticism, which itself has made something of a cottage industry out of theorizing trauma and repetition in post-war Jewish literature.

On the other hand, within the novel, history and its advocates are untrustworthy. Nicole’s handler Friedman, whose literary history would connect David to Kafka, melts into thin air and out of the plot. Epstein’s handler Krausner uses history for his vaguely outlined schemes,
while Yael’s Davidic film production devolves into farce. Epstein himself dons the fake crown of David, but this sign of history bears no significance: Epstein disappears, his family never knows about his late-life Davidic quest, and his end remains a mystery. This may be Krauss’s metaphor for the individual’s perception of his own historical grandeur: an ersatz Davidic crown sitting askance atop the head of a man fated to disappear into the desert. Even Yael’s film appears doomed, as a minor subplot suggests, when Epstein’s plan to finance the film with the sale of an early-modern diptych is thwarted when the painting is stolen. What the novel leaves us with instead of the gravity of history is the non-appearance of the past in the space of the present, or the lack of the past’s acknowledgement, to paraphrase Best and Miller Budick, and to borrow from STEM one final time, the novel’s two plots are asymptotic, with Epstein’s linear plot and Nicole’s circular return coming close but never quite meeting each other. Indeed, all of the lines of history in the novel fade out, while the curve of Nicole’s return to Brooklyn literally doubles back on itself: she’s right back where she started. Nicole’s relation to Epstein’s synchronous seeking, sustained by the proximity of the two stories in the book the reader holds in hand, is finally non-existent. Two objects are only a part of the same set when seen from a particular point of view. Literary history is the consolidation of that point of view. Critique, including the questioning of the contingencies of value which frame our perspectives, should be after more possible views. Though for a long time, the variegation of Jewishness existing in Jewish literature study was limited by narrow axes of a progressive history—arrival, assimilation, institutionalization—and binary geography—diaspora and Israel—these axes should no longer coordinate and plot our critical projects.

When you open the cover of the book, is literary history alive or dead? The answer is determined by observation. In Physics, the paradox of scale was eventually shored up by the
mathematics of superposition, the idea that observable, material reality is the sum total of all possible positions of atomic arrangement. Transferring the analogy, literary history is not simply determined by observation, but by the capacity of the observer to take into account all that its objects could be, as Michelle Wright argues on behalf of African American literature. One kind of literary history has separated out Jewishness as an exceptional identity in America, but that perception of exceptionality is unsustainable, at least since 2016. Whatever metaphysical work “Jewish” has done for Jewish Studies, resituating Jewishness in synchronic relation to racial formation in the U.S. will yield dramatically different, cross-categorical literary arrangements.

\[\text{Here reference various anthologies and critical works and how others have taken on this problem}\]