CHAPTER SEVEN

“WE’RE NOT JEWS”

Imagining Jewish History and Jewish Bodies in Contemporary Multicultural Literature

MULTICULTURALISM AND THE JEWS

By the end of the twentieth century a new frontier had come into being on which Jews were imagined to have a special function. That new frontier was called multiculturalism and it defined itself quite literally in terms of real or perceived boundaries. It was, according to contemporary self-defined multicultural thinkers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, the space where “this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool.”¹ Contemporary multicultural theory provides a further rehabilitation of notions of continually crossing ideas of race at the frontier. The Canadian filmmaker Christine Welsh effects a similar, necessary rehabilitation of the anxiety about being Métis, of mixed race: the Métis becomes one type on the Canadian frontier.² By positing the “cosmic race” as “healing the split at the foundation of our lives,” she removes the stigmata of illness from those at the borderlands.

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And yet the multicultural is also the antithesis of hybridity. It can just as frequently be the reification and commodification of ethnic identity. It may stress the boundaries and borders between ethnic, cultural, religious, or class groups. If the Métis is hybrid, then hip-hop is multicultural. (And “world music” can be both!) While multiculturalism can allow for and indeed celebrate the merging of cultures so as to eliminate boundaries, one of its strongest claims (in the new global culture that is both hybrid and multicultural) is its insistence that each of us has a “culture” in a concrete ethnic or class sense, and that the products of these cultures can be displayed, sold, consumed, and exchanged across borders. More importantly, central to both models of multiculturalism is that culture is the basis for our identities. Biological difference, the difference of the older and some of the present views of race is displaced onto a symbolic cultural level. But at the same moment, this cultural heritage is commodified and thus made available for all consumers.

In such a world, how do writers who self-consciously see themselves as multicultural members of a clearly delineated group (ethnic, social, religious), or see themselves as inherently hybrid of such groups, imagine minorities such as Jews? Recently there has been an explosion of studies on this topic, contrasting African American images of Jews and Jewish American images of Blacks. And yet this multicultural theme seems to have its limits in emphasizing the boundaries between the groups rather than the possibility of hybridity (to be found, for example, in the intertwined history of jazz and klezmer in the United States). But is multiculturalism an American problem? What groups count as multicultural? What happens when this project is extended beyond the Blacks-Jews paradigm and beyond the borders of the United States? What happens when other groups are brought into the discussion of multiculturalism? And what happens when it crosses national, even linguistic, boundaries? What happens when a writer