

Towards an Enlightened Jewish Consciousness: Jewish-Buddhists and the Blurred Borders of Religious Identity

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Abstract

Amongst the many religious affiliations that present prominently in the United States, Jewish-Buddhism is a notable pluralistic identity that traces back to the nineteenth century. Despite making up a small portion of the US population, a considerable number of American Buddhists are Jews. The terms 'JewBu,' 'JUBU,' and 'Jewish-Buddhist' have been used to refer to Jews who associate with Buddhism on varying levels, from those who incorporate some Buddhist practices into their Jewish devotion to Jews who identify as both Jewish and Buddhist concurrently. This paper explores the facets of Jewish-American history and culture that factor into Jewish-Buddhist syncretism and multi-religious belonging in the United States. In particular, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* methodology provides a lens into the phenomenon of boundary-crossing that—while dissimilar to her mestiza subject matter in many ways—brings to light what American Jews with affinities for Buddhism experience when the borders of identities are blurred or mixed. The paper examines Jewish perspectives on Buddhism's application to and compatibility with Judaism, showcasing a range of both positive and negative reactions to Buddhism's popularity within the community. Through the application of Anzaldúa's concept of blurred

identity borders to the American JewBu community, I suggest that the historical context and lived experience of American Jews render their relationship with Jewish faith and practice adaptive and open to Buddhism, despite the pushback from other perspectives within the community. For many Jewish-Buddhists, the utilization of Buddhist practices and consideration of Buddhist dharma strengthens their relationships with Judaism and helps them contextualize Jewish past and present.

Introduction

The lines dividing the different religious faiths that individuals and communities identify with are often treated as rigid and thoroughly defined, much in the same way other facets of identity, such as ethnicity and gender, are handled. Despite this, as cultures interact, merge, and transform, the boundaries between perceived identities become fuzzy, reflective of the indeterminate nature of identity. Identities—both self-applied and externally applied by others—are treated as more finite than the constantly changing people to which they are applied. Though some people may experience a strong sense of belonging in an identity-defined community, others are situated between communities, oftentimes feeling as though they do not fully belong within one group identity.

The United States is often termed a cultural melting pot; the categories of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and religion converge in many combinations and presentations, marking intersectionality an inevitable part of many people's experience. These classifications are treated as more cut-and-dry than they truly are, which leads to perceived discrepancies when an individual does not or cannot remain within the constraints of classifications too singularly fixed with rigid demands. In discussions of religion, religious identities have sometimes been imagined as “static, isolated, and unified,” and the “hybrid traditions with diverse expressions emerge and claim authenticity” that emerge when the traditions change and interact with one another go unrecognized.¹

Many religious traditions—especially those that are monotheistic—are exclusivist and hold that their religion is the one true path to their ideological end goal, and that it is only through being a part of said religion that one can attain that. In contrast to inclusivism, which allows those unaffiliated with the religion to have access to desired religious goals, exclusivism holds that one must devote oneself fully to a single religion. Traditions that share a potential to complement and work harmoniously with one another in ideology and/or practice are placed at odds. Despite these defined cultural boundaries, individuals

¹ Thomas A. Tweed, “Who Is a Buddhist?: Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (University of California Press, 2002), 18, ProQuest Ebook Central.

and communities transcend these borders, whether by being born into a home or community that already claims multiple identities, or through a conscious decision to embrace multiple co-existing identities. This embrace signifies *interstitiality*—the occupation of gaps in identities that creates new hybridities and challenges the established borders and existing expectations.² In multicultural hubs like the United States’ larger cities, the interactions and melding between religious cultures form new hybridities through camaraderie, marriage, and cohabitation. As interaction and diplomatic relations between Asian and European cultures expanded into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Asian religious tradition and ideology captivated Western European audiences. American Jewish immigrants, whose political and social experiences were steeped in liberal Protestant culture, became fascinated with Buddhism.

The correlation between American Jews and Buddhist practice has not gone unnoticed in the spheres of religion, culture, and scholarship. While Jews make up just two to three percent of the United States’ population, statistics on American Buddhist communities’ demographics consistently reflect Jewish involvement as disproportionate to the national population.³ In this paper, I explore the historical and cultural facets of American Jewish identity that propel the embrace of Buddhist practice and reason amongst Jews and discuss opposing Jewish perspectives on multireligious belonging. Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* methodology provides a pivotal lens to discuss the different ways in which identities merge and blend. In particular, Anzaldúa’s scholarship on intersectionality illuminates why some Jews are attracted to Buddhism, given the historical contexts and complexities of Jewish American culture and practice. She recognizes religion as an integral part of one’s identity, and while her work with religion primarily focuses on the *mestiza* experience, it is her emphasis on the ever-present borders in identity that is instrumental in analyzing the coalescence of Buddhist principles and Jewish practice. Specifically, I apply Anzaldúa’s concepts of *Nepantilism*; the *nos/otras* (us/them) dichotomy; the *Coyolxauhqui* imperative; and the *Conocimiento* (spiritual knowledge) as harnessed at the junctures of where identities intersect with Jewish-Buddhist *syncretism*.⁴ By these means, I highlight how this intersection can foster a newfound sense of belonging and heal cultural and spiritual wounds—impacts that speak to multireligious understanding more broadly.

² For more on the concept of “interstitial spaces,” see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

³ Emily Sigalow, *American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvh8r33b>.

⁴ Religious syncretism is the blending of separate religious cultures and practices into a new combined practice.

The Jew, the Bu, and the JewBu

The term “JUBU” was popularized by Rodger Kamenetz’s *The Jew in the Lotus*. This 1998 memoir brought the historic dialogue held between a group of select rabbis and the XIV Dalai Lama in 1990 to mainstream attention and launched the intersection of Judaism and Buddhism into the public’s consciousness. Since Kamenetz’s book, the labels “JUBU,” “JewBu,” “BuJew,” and “Jewish(-)Buddhists” have been adopted by practitioners and scholars alike to refer to Jewish individuals who have some sort of affinity for Buddhist teachings and practice. Considering the varying levels of engagement these terms encompass, there is no single agreed-upon threshold at which a person crosses over to being a Jewish-Buddhist. If a Jew incorporates Vipassanā meditation into their religious observance, are they a JewBu? Does a person have to take refuge before a monastic teacher to be considered a true Buddhist? What religious authorities can speak on the matter? While searching for answers to this quandary, several other questions become evident: Can a person be both Jewish and Buddhist? Is a person’s relationship with Judaism exclusive, leaving no room for cooperation with other religions’ truths? Are Buddhist teachings incongruous with Judaism?

Buddhologist B. Alan Wallace identifies three types of adoptive practitioners of Buddhism:

- (1) members of an audience for Buddhist teachings, who may participate occasionally in Buddhist meditation retreats, initiations, or other group practices;
- (2) those who enter into a student relationship with a Buddhist teacher; and (3)
- those who have a self-conscious sense of converting to Buddhism and who thereafter refer to themselves not simply as having an interest in Buddhism or as studying Buddhism, but as being Buddhist.⁵

For the purposes of this paper, a JewBu is anyone who, a) self-identifies as such, or b) recognizes a substantial influence Buddhism has had on their own Jewish faith or practice. The latter category, as scholar Thomas A. Tweed terms them, are the *sympathizers* or *night-stand Buddhists*—those who have some sympathy for Buddhism, but do not embrace it wholly and exclusively, nor identify themselves as Buddhist.⁶ Though there are many scholars and strict adherents to either Buddhist or Jewish practice who may object to the JewBu self-identifier, its consideration is instrumental in “uncover[ing] much about the status and meaning of the religion” in tandem with historically and culturally conscious

⁵ B. Alan Wallace, “The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (University of California Press, 2002), 34, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁶ Tweed, “Who Is a Buddhist?,” 20-21.

analysis.⁷ For a large portion of JewBus, their embrace of Buddhism does not equate to fully dropping Judaism, but instead integrating Buddhist aspects into Judaism—or even using Buddhism as a guide to fostering a connection with their own Jewish spirituality. In this study, employing Jewish-Buddhist as an overarching classification for this range of JewBu syncretism accounts for the complexity of religious identity.

This paper considers several scholarly approaches to analyzing Jewish-Buddhist connection. Socio-anthropological religious studies scholar Mira Niculescu asserts that “it is more accurate to address this phenomenon in terms of an inner dialogue rather than of multi-religious belonging,” the latter referring to the dominant approach of 2000s scholarship.⁸ In the discussion of Jewish-Buddhism and crossing identity borders, I maintain that it is worth addressing both the multireligious connection between traditions and the inner dialogue of individuals. The exploration of religious syncretism within a society and within one’s personal faith and spirituality coincides with a larger discussion of confronting rigid boundary lines that restrict and suppress both cultural unity and self-understanding.

Immigration, Adversity, and Acculturation

American Buddhism is marked by the concentration of Buddhist traditions from across Asia in one country: Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna concepts and traditions coexist and, in some of the large cities with large numbers of Asian immigrants, melded. Mahāyāna Zen Buddhism and the Vajrayāna Tibetan Buddhism gained special prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century, and continue to be popular forms of Buddhism in the United States. Buddhism made its earliest way to the United States as Buddhists from China, Japan, Tibet, and other parts of Asia immigrated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, beginning with the arrival of Chinese to the West Coast in 1848. Japanese immigrants followed suit shortly after, and Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist missionaries established the Buddhist Mission of North America, set on promoting ethnic solidarity as Buddhists in a majority-Christian nation and disseminating the Buddha Dharma to Japanese Americans and others throughout the continent.⁹ Contending with the racial discrimination and opposition from the influential voices of white Protestant nativists and assimilationists, many types of Buddhists, including Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists, “...blended

⁷ Tweed, “Who Is a Buddhist?,” 27.

⁸ Mira Niculescu, “I the Jew, I the Buddhist: Multi-Religious Belonging As Inner Dialogue,” *Cross Currents* 62, no. 3 (2012), 350, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2012.00246.x>.

⁹ Richard Hughes Seager, “American Buddhism in the Making,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (University of California Press, 2002), 107-108, ProQuest Ebook Central. Also known as Shin or True Pure Land Buddhism, Jōdo Shinshū was founded by Shinran Shonin, and it is a Japanese form of the Pure Land branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

external aspects of Buddhist spaces, symbols, and practices with Anglo-Protestant Christian markers and US national social customs, thus crafting a bicultural vision of Buddhism as an American ethnic religion.”¹⁰ Buddhists *sanghas* (practicing communities) were organized to mirror American churches through adaptations, such as selecting Sundays for meetings.

Conditions for Asian immigrants became increasingly hostile in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, as anti-Asian sentiments were widely propagated, and legislation such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration Act of 1924 banned further Chinese and other Asian immigration. During the Second World War, Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 led to the expulsion of over a hundred thousand Japanese Americans from their neighborhoods and placed them in internment camps.¹¹ Xenophobic, anti-Japanese sentiments were widely propagated by the government and popular media, labeling Japanese Buddhists as “ultranationalist terrorists” and members of an infiltrative “enemy race.”¹² In light of the rampant racial profiling and detainment sweeping through the nation, Japanese-American Buddhist leaders took circumspect measures to further reconfigure their organizations to appear as unthreatening to American ideals as possible. They transferred leadership from the Issei, or first-generation immigrants, to the Nisei, or next generation; changed the institutional headquarters’ name from North American Buddhist Mission to the more palatable Buddhist *Churches* of America (BCA); and created an official English-language policy.¹³ Despite these calculated efforts though, Buddhists continued to face persecution.

After the war, Buddhist practitioners offered their repackaged ideology and methodology to cater to the postwar, predominantly Protestant American audience and their post-Enlightenment, Christian sensibilities. Buddhism became permissible and even alluring to Americans once “the practical and this-worldly elements... became emphasized,” and the shamanistic components were set aside.¹⁴ Nisei priests such as Rev. T. Terakawa appealed to the patriotic nation by promoting Buddhism’s congruence with America’s founding principles of democracy and religious tolerance.¹⁵ As the mid-twentieth century rolled around, Buddhism’s popularity continued to grow amongst liberal

¹⁰ Michael K. Masatsugu, “‘Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence’: Japanese Americans, Dharma Bums, and the Making of American Buddhism during the Early Cold War Years,” *Pacific Historical Review* 77, no. 3 (2008), 430, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/phr.2008.77.3.423>.

¹¹ Seager, “American Buddhism in the Making,” 108.

¹² Masatsugu, “Beyond This World,” 432.

¹³ Masatsugu, “Beyond This World,” 432-3.

¹⁴ Martin Baumann and Charles S. Prebish, “Introduction: Paying Homage to the Buddha in the West,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (University of California Press, 2002), 3, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁵ Masatsugu, “Beyond This World,” 433-4.

and counterculture groups who saw it as “the rational religion of modern times.”¹⁶ By the 1950s, convert Buddhist scholars, artists, writers, and other creatives latched onto Jōdo Shinshū and Zen Buddhism—popularized by Japanese author Suzuki—and proliferated their experience of American Buddhism. A concentration of beatnik-aligned, popular figures who utilized Buddhist practices and concepts of life’s inherent suffering and impermanence in their works prospered in the Bay Area. Their influence spread to the other corners of the nation in the “Zen Boom,” with some well-known beatniks that promoted this spiritual exploration being Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Allen Ginsberg. Notably, only Watts became a Buddhist practitioner, while the others embraced Buddhism primarily as a spiritual opposition to the contemporary products of the Christian-American worldview that was informed by “Cold War institutions, organizations, and domestic prescriptions for security.”¹⁷ Instead of weeding out the *reds* in their neighborhoods, they turned their focus to weeding out their own earthly attachments. Many of the individuals that Cold War America’s rampant social conservatism alienated were drawn to the messages of detachment that Buddhist practitioners and their followers shared.

Orientalism was a substantial and initially unconscious component of the counterculture’s embrace of Buddhism as an alternative to the white, Christian mainstream. Buddhism was viewed as a foil to Cold War domestic ideology, with the “racialized figure of the ‘Oriental’” upstaging the authentic historical and cultural origins of the religion.¹⁸ While Asian-Americans were othered and discriminated against on the fronts of both race and religion, white members of counterculture movements that could more easily integrate into the “occident” were drawn to the exciting, exotic, imported facets of the “orient” to their degree of comfort. As a result, several discourses held amongst American Buddhists stemmed from orientalist interaction with the tradition. Some of the traditional Asian practices that were adapted by Asian immigrants to be more palatable to Americans were met with criticism from American convert Buddhists for too closely resembling the Christian traditions from which they sought to separate.¹⁹ For example, Jōdo Shinshū—with its emphasis on recognizing the Amida Buddha’s compassion on the path to enlightenment—fell out of fashion due to the parallels convert Buddhists drew to Christian devotion.

¹⁶ Sigalow, *American JewBu*, 21.

¹⁷ Masatsugu, “Beyond This World,” 439.

¹⁸ Masatsugu, “Beyond This World,” 441. The academic dichotomy of the “Western”/occidental world of European influence versus the “Eastern”/oriental world of Asian influence is increasingly recognized as unhelpful and imprecise, while also rooted in a Eurocentric worldview that perpetuates binaries that do not really exist. For these reasons, I do not include the terms in my own analysis, but some of my quotes still include this mode of distinguishing and classifying cultures.

¹⁹ Masatsugu, “Beyond This World,” 446.

As Buddhism’s popularity continued to rise into the sixties and seventies, it became commonly associated with the American Left as a staple of the countercultural movements. The Beats—diverging from the prior transcendentalist approaches to spirituality—incorporated Buddhism and numerous other religious influences into the effort of “maintaining a more sanguine view of the problems of human existence and the possibility of social progress.”²⁰ Through this widespread adoption, Buddhist influence permeated a sector of American society that saw Jewish representation in relatively large numbers. While these decades were marked by a trend of growing Buddhist influence across the counterculture and social activist spheres—in which Jews took part—instances of American-Jewish fascination with and interaction with Buddhism date back to the early Ashkenazi immigrants of the nineteenth century.

Jewish immigrants

The first Jews to arrive in the New World were a group of twenty-three Sephardic Jews, descended from Spanish and Portuguese exiles, who made landfall in New Amsterdam in the seventeenth century.²¹ The second wave of Jews came during the first half of the nineteenth century, when Central European Jews—mainly German and known as Ashkenazi Jews—immigrated to the United States and settled in some of the larger cities on the East Coast.²² Beginning in the 1880s, a third wave of Jews from Eastern Europe arrived in America, and by 1930, around four million Jews resided in the United States—eighty percent of whom were of Eastern European descent.²³ A common thread of cause for immigrating to the United States amongst these waves of immigration was religious persecution in some form. From the exile of Sephardic Jews, to the discrimination and economic hardship in Germany, to the pogroms in Russia, Jews came to the United States, in part, to escape prejudice and persecution. Other reasons for immigrating to America were to escape political instability and to chase the advertised American dream by settling in the land of opportunity.

The third wave of Jews from Eastern Europe had little in common with the previous two waves, but what may have unified them most was the shared experience of antisemitism.

²⁰ Stephen Prothero, “On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement As Spiritual Protest,” *Harvard Theological Review* 84, no. 2 (1991), 221, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1509800>.

²¹ Richard L. Zweigenhaft and G. William Domhoff, *Jews in the Protestant Establishment* (Praeger Publishers, 1982), 9. Sephardic Jews (name derived from the Hebrew *Sefarad* for Spain) are those who originated from the Spanish center of Judaism during the early medieval period.

²² Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, *Jews in the Protestant Establishment*, 10. At this time, “Germany” was not yet a unified nation, but to refer to Jews from the area that would become Germany—but was at the time several smaller entities—the label “German” will suffice.

²³ Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, *Jews in the Protestant Establishment*, 11. A fuller history of Jewish immigration to the United States falls outside the scope of this paper.

Despite the fact that antisemitism affected all Jews, the American Jews already established in the country cast judgments on the Eastern European Jews on whom they pinned blame for the uptick in antisemitism that coincided with their arrival.²⁴ There were distinct cultural disconnects between the different Jewish immigrant groups that called into question what being a Jew and a part of the Jewish community looked like in the United States.

A defining marker of the American religious and social climate at the start of the nineteenth century was the Second Great Awakening, which sparked renewed religious fervor amongst evangelical Christians. As the country went through dramatic social and economic changes due to expansive urbanization, booming industrialization, and sweeping immigration, many Protestants felt that their American values were under threat. An increase in religious diversity was inevitable as immigrants from across Europe and Asia came to the United States, and there was a growing fear of national secularization among the Protestant majority. In the post-Civil War era, paranoia around secularization presented itself in numerous ways that impacted Jews, including attempts to amend the Constitution, enact Sunday laws, and retain Protestant teachings in the newly established public schools across the nation.²⁵ Antisemitism reached new heights amidst the flurry of American social developments that followed World War I, as the first Red Scare, the Ku Klux Klan's revival, and the Great Depression all led to the targeting of Jews in the United States.²⁶ Faced with "Bolshevist Jew" accusations, fatal threats from the Klan, and scapegoating for the great economic collapse, many Jews opted to lay low in political and social spheres as the rights of other immigrant groups—such as Asian—were jeopardized.

Moving into the latter half of the century, once the full extent of the Holocaust's atrocities came to light for the United States and the rest of the world, overt antisemitism became less publicly tolerated. As more economic and social opportunities opened up for Jews, though, their position in American society shifted. As David Biale notes on this shift, "...as anti-Semitism and formal discrimination waned in the post-World War II years and as Jews became economically successful, they found themselves for the first time in modern history as doubly marginal: marginal to the majority culture, but also marginal among minorities."²⁷ Therefore, Jewish Americans found themselves in a liminal space of cultural

²⁴ Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, *Jews in the Protestant Establishment*, 12-3.

²⁵ Despite the fact that the Constitution itself confirms the United States is not a Christian nation, many Protestants maintained that it was and pushed for a Christianized Constitution. For a detailed discussion on these facets of the Christian agenda, see Naomi W. Cohen, *Jews in Christian America: The Pursuit of Religious Equality* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

²⁶ Naomi W. Cohen, *Jews in Christian America: The Pursuit of Religious Equality* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 93.

²⁷ David Biale, "The Melting Pot and Beyond: Jews and the Politics of American Identity," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susan Heschel (University of California Press, 1998), 27, <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft5199n9tq/>.

and social alienation, and as they navigated their uncertain, newfound position in society, some Jews were drawn to newfound spiritual insights to help navigate this uncertain world.

Jewish-Buddhist interactions

Public Jewish-Buddhist interactions in the United States can be traced back to the nineteenth century, coinciding with the Reform Judaism movement that aimed to update and modernize the religious community. As Emily Sigalow asserts, “the social position of liberal Jewish Americans” as “financially successful, urban, and well established in the US social order... propelled them into their encounter with Buddhism” during the last quarter of the century.²⁸ At the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions, Charles Strauss became the first public Jewish convert to Buddhism in the United States in a ceremony initiated by Anagarika Dharmapala—a largely influential figure in the Buddhist modernist movement who introduced Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism to the US.²⁹ Notably, Strauss did not feel a strong connection to Judaism’s traditions, but he nonetheless came from a Jewish immigrant household. Theravāda Buddhism was the religion that resonated with him, and he spent the rest of his life promoting it as a progressive religion fit for the modern liberal. Strauss’s 1923 book, *The Buddha and His Doctrine*, underscored this image of Buddhism by ascribing the Orientalist idea that it was Buddhism in its earliest and purest form.³⁰ He refuted common criticisms of Buddhism as nihilistic and atheistic through his analysis of the Buddha’s teachings, pointing to its explanations of the world as realistic and optimistic. Emphasizing how the Buddha “stood firmly on the foundation of reality, and always insisted that things ought to be looked at as they really are,” Strauss argued that Buddhism and science were in agreement.³¹

The romanticization of Buddhism as a rational religion compatible with science was prevalent amongst Jews in favor of embracing the dharma. Jewish newspaper accounts from the time demonstrate an interest in the perceived scientific nature of Buddhism. This is evident in the writer Jesse Linnell Greenbaum’s coverage of Buddhism in *The American Hebrew*, in which he applies scientific concepts to Buddhist ideas of karma and rebirth, and goes as far as to insinuate that it takes an intelligent people to truly grasp the Buddha’s teachings.³²

²⁸ Sigalow, *American JewBu*, 19.

²⁹ Sigalow, *American JewBu*, 25.

³⁰ Charles T. Strauss, *The Buddha and His Doctrine* (William Rider & Son, 1923), 25, [https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.\\$b245951](https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.$b245951).

³¹ Strauss, *The Buddha and His Doctrine*, 43-4.

³² Jesse Linnell Greenbaum, “Eastern Religion a Science,” *American Hebrew*, July 25, 1890, quoted in Sigalow, *American JewBu*, 29.

Buddhism as the ideal, rational religion was also prevalent in positive perceptions of the religion amongst Jews during the late nineteenth century. Romanticization worked hand in hand with Orientalism as many interested Jews embraced an idealized and exoticized perception of Buddhism based on a faulty understanding of the aesthetics and culture that the ideology and practices came from. As *The Jewish Criterion* explained the phenomenon of Jewish romanticization of Asian culture, "...fashion [had] set the pace, the desire for novelty [had] sanctioned it, and the taste for the oriental [had] encouraged the dipping into the fountains of Eastern culture."³³ As Buddhism's popularity amongst the Reformists continued to grow, Jewish affection for Buddhism was *not* ubiquitous. Numerous Jewish opponents to Buddhism shared vocal critiques of the religion as nihilistic and of little substance or value. Many of the critiques asserted against Buddhism at the time had racist and xenophobic overtones, as Orientalism was applied in a different way to support anti-Asian sentiments. Many American Jews feared that Asian immigrants posed a great threat to the "[W]hite and Judeo-Christian complexion of US society," a sentiment that reveals why some Jews came to identify with White, Christian America and thereby wished to preserve it.³⁴ While Jews were staunchly against the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act—which jeopardized both Jewish and Asian immigration—they were less vocal about the legislation that targeted Asian immigrants specifically, largely remaining silent. A considerable portion of the Jewish-American community demonstrated where their borderlines were drawn, opting to side with White, Christian nativists over other immigrant groups from overseas.

The nineteenth-century encounters between Judaism and Buddhism "[cast] light on how American Jews like Strauss participated in the selective appropriation and recontextualization of Buddhism..." which notably led to "a distancing of Buddhism from Asian cultural systems and ethnic identities, effectively '[W]hitening' Buddhism in order to reconcile it with the dominant cultural forces of the West."³⁵ By the mid-twentieth century, Jews understood social progressivism as favorable to their own self-preservation in the United States, and were, as a result, overrepresented on the left side of the political spectrum. The 1950s Zen Boom brought Zen meditative practices to the forefront of spiritual exploration in Beat circles. Tibetan Buddhism started to gain traction in the 1960s and 70s, as Chogyam Trungpa founded the Naropa Institute, where he taught Buddhist dharma with a New York accent and utilized Yiddish terms—such as referring to the

³³ *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh), November 27, 1896, quoted in Sigalow, *American JewBu*, 30.

³⁴ Sigalow, *American JewBu*, 32. For more on how Jews became "White" in America, see also Biale, 26-29.

³⁵ Sigalow, *American JewBu*, 37.

Buddhist concept of suffering as *tzuris* (troubles).³⁶ His appeals to Jewish American culture through language and cultural references drew numerous Jews to his teachings and helped insight meditation become a popular practice in interested sections of the community.

Other experimental mixings emerged in the 1970s as well, including a new religious spiritual movement—Jewish Renewal—which sought to “reinvigorate and reinterpret ‘traditional Judaism’ in innovative and often controversial ways,” combining the Jewish mystic tradition of Kabbalah with Eastern European Orthodox Hasidism and countercultural interests.³⁷ The founder, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, openly integrated aspects of other spiritual traditions, such as Buddhism. Through welcoming with open arms the spiritual experiences Jews had traversed, and identifying the many lessons to be learned from other spiritual traditions, Schachter-Shalomi helped cultivate “a new Jewish-Buddhist syncretism that incorporated Buddhist techniques and practices into Jewish worship...”³⁸ Examples like Jewish Renewal mark the increasingly blurred boundaries between Jewish and Buddhist practice, opening up new avenues of dialogue between the traditions. While these new inventive Jewish practices and dialogues gained traction, they faced a fair deal of pushback from other Jewish sects, as will be discussed later in this paper.

In the 1990s, meditation and mindfulness practices entered mainstream American culture and mainstream Jewish life as scientific applications of Vipassanā meditation gained traction. A few American Jews led the way in the application of mindfulness to medicine and psychology—developments that became widely adopted outside of the Jewish community. Still, these developments in scientific fields took root in the Jewish fascination with Buddhist practice.

Throughout the syncretic developments of American Buddhism and Judaism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, new interactions and Jewish perspectives informed by Buddhism emerged and gained prominence both in Jewish communities and beyond them. Religious plurality and exploration became more and more prominent for subsequent generations of Jews. Judaism is an exclusivist ethnoreligious tradition—rich with rules for adherence to a faith that, for a considerable portion of the community, took a back seat to the living cultural aspects of American Judaism. The dividing lines blurred between Jewish immigrants and their descendants and the American Buddhism that developed concurrently in an effort to disseminate and adapt to the turbulent social and political

³⁶ Yonatan N. Gez, “The Phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists in Light of the History of Jewish Suffering,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 15, no. 1 (2011), 48-9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/nr.2011.15.1.44>.

³⁷ Celia Rothenberg, “Jewish Yoga: Experiencing Flexible, Sacred, and Jewish Bodies,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 10, no. 2 (2006), 58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/nr.2006.10.2.57>.

³⁸ Sigalow, *American JewBu*, 82.

climate of the United States. Positioned in the liminal space between cultures, these Borderland Jewish-Buddhists represent a rejection of the rigid identity dichotomies that have been ascribed to religious traditions, and the blurred lines they walk upon are worth delving into deeper.

Crossing Boundaries and Blurring Borders

Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa's work on intersectionality and blurred borders, informed by her own experience as a *mestiza*—a mixed Spanish and Indigenous American woman—necessarily nuances explorations of religious traditions by highlighting the borders that are present in all situations and facets of identity. Her approach is inherently interdisciplinary as she identifies the interconnected relationships between capitalism, imperialism, nationalism, racism, sexism, and religion. All of these facets of human society are important to consider when discussing religious intersectionality, as religions do not exist in a vacuum. They are responses to the environment and identities surrounding them, making the study of religion a multidisciplinary exercise in itself. In her writing, Anzaldúa speaks of the performance of *nepantla*, which she explains as an Aztec term that signifies an in-between state, being “torn between ways,” or a state of transition.³⁹ Located between two extremes, *nepantleras* position themselves “in the crack between these [social] worlds.”⁴⁰ This feeling resonates with many American Jews who are situated between orthodoxy and reformism, and between theistic devotion to Jewish tradition and ethnic Jewish identity divorced from observant faith.

Anzaldúa's Borderlands concept was originally applied to the Chicano ethnic identity, concerning the lasting impacts of colonization on Mexican-Americans as they navigate the complexities of their mixed-race identities. She draws largely from her experiences as a queer woman of Indigenous and Mexican heritage, highlighting racial difference as a key component of the inability to assimilate and blend with the ruling majority due to skin color. It is worth acknowledging that this racial component that Anzaldúa stresses in her work on *mestiza* othering does not factor into most American Jewish adverse experiences in society.⁴¹ Jewish struggles to assimilate generally do not stem from an inability to assimilate along racial lines. The large movements of Eastern European Jewish immigration to the United States in the late nineteenth century coincided with a solidifying

³⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed. (Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 100.

⁴⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. Analouse Keating (Duke University Press, 2015), 148, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1220hmq>.

⁴¹ For some American Jews though, such as African Americans who embrace Judaism, the racial component does stand prominent in their identity, being unable to blend into the category of Whiteness. For further reading, see Edith Bruder, “From Diaspora to Religious Pluralism: African American Judaism in the 20th-Century United States,” *Religions* 16, no. 3 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16030386>.

Black/White binary.⁴² Although they still faced discrimination, Ashkenazi Jews were able to cross over the color line in a way that other ethnic groups were not; their shift in status from non-White to White benefited them and increased their ability to assimilate.

Another important distinction to make between Anzaldúa's original concepts as they relate to Chicano identity and their application to Jewish Americans is that Jews have not been colonized within the past 2,000 years. Instead, the Jewish people's condition has been diasporic and frequently marginalized as a result of an inability to assimilate across religious and cultural lines. The diasporic condition of Jewish people has its own unique impacts on identity, as does the colonized condition of Chicanos. Scholar Yonatan N. Gez explains that "[t]hroughout history, the chronicle of suffering in the shade of triumphant Christianity and Islam propelled some Jews to yield and to forsake their ancestral tradition, sometimes voluntarily, other times under pressure and threat."⁴³ Encapsulating the drive that some American Jews experience in their outreach for external supplementations to their faith and practice, Michael Galchinsky describes how, "[a]lienated from both 'homelands,'"—in reference to both the United States and Israel—"American Jews have felt they had no choice but to create an existence unlike any their forebears ever knew."⁴⁴ Finding no perfect fit for a place to call "home," many American Jews roam the Borderlands that Anzaldúa lays out, and while traversing the liminal in-betweenness, many have adopted ideas and practices from the Buddhist influences they were exposed to.

An aspect of cultural and religious identity that Anzaldúa emphasizes is the legacy and history behind the identity. She talks about the Chicano "tradition of long walks," referring to the extensive history of dislocation, migration, and resettlement that characterizes Mexican American history as impacted by colonization.⁴⁵ Jewish history, as it spans over millennia, is largely marked by dislocation, migration, and resettlement across repeated instances of persecution and exile, and these continuous occurrences have greatly impacted and influenced the culture carried on from these experiences. As scholar Lucien van Lier stresses, consideration for territories and diasporas is fundamental to understanding "(re)constructions and contestations of religious 'identities' and concepts of religion as they are transformed, adapted, cherished, reinstalled, or defended by

⁴² Bruce D. Haynes, *The Soul of Judaism: Jews of African Descent in America* (New York University Press, 2018), 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv12pnqmk>.

⁴³ Gez, "The Phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists," 56.

⁴⁴ Michael Galchinsky, "Scattered Seeds: A Dialogue of Diasporas," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susan Heschel (University of California Press, 1998), 201, <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft5199n9tq/>. With this mention of Israel, I would like to address that while Zionism is relevant to the topic of Jewish diaspora and identity, it falls outside the scope of this paper. There are a wide variety of uses and applications of the concepts and terms of Jewish diaspora, and in this paper, it is being used to highlight centuries of Jewish people being minorities and not belonging, and the subsequent impact on identity.

⁴⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 33.

movement.”⁴⁶ Wherever Jewish groups ended up, the physical boundaries between the outside majority and the confines of Jewish worship and community marked areas of Jewish space. In discussing Jewish involvement in women’s suffrage in Britain, scholar Carole Renard highlights that “[s]ynagogues in the Diaspora are contained Jewish spaces within overwhelmingly non-Jewish ones; their walls literally delineate a boundary between Jewish life and secular life.”⁴⁷ In the case of nineteenth and twentieth-century American Jews, synagogues and homes marked the boundary between Jewish life and Protestant life.

During these centuries of American Jewish immigration and establishment, as a religious minority in a largely Christian society, Jews aligned themselves with Protestant Liberalist society. Protestant Liberalism was the popular political alignment that best protected Jewish immigrants’ interests, and incorporating themselves in the public political and social spheres of Protestant Liberals allowed Jews to prove themselves as a non-threat. Whilst being surrounded and sometimes overshadowed by Christian culture in the public sphere, Jews struck a balance between upholding Jewish identity and maintaining Jewish communities.

As opposed to viewing the transformation of Judaism in the United States as an assimilation into Christian culture, it may be more apt to view it as syncretism. When considering how Judaism adapted to prosper as one of the many religious minorities in a religiously diverse nation, Emily Sigalow suggests that “[e]xamining religious syncretism in the United States” underscores “the salience of fluidity and heterogeneity in American religion, particularly in the current era of ‘new religious pluralism.’”⁴⁸ Through this lens, Judaism as a lived religion can be understood as one that both influences and is influenced by other cultures, thereby blurring the borders between them. In her 2015 book, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, Anzaldúa agrees with this sentiment through the concept of *nos/otras*—her stylization of the Spanish word *nosotras* (us), with the slash signifying the social identity divide of *nos* (us) and *otras* (others).⁴⁹ In challenging and overcoming the us/them binary, she points to the slash she inserted in *nos/otras* as an existence between recognized relations, or the Borderlands. Her concept, as she explains, is equivocal to the Buddha’s stance on the distinction between self and others as an illusion that causes suffering.⁵⁰ The Jewish demographic in the United States

⁴⁶ Lucien van Liere, “Interpreting ‘Movement’ within Religious Studies: An Introduction to ‘Territories and Diasporas,’” in *Contesting Religious Identities: Transformations, Disseminations and Mediations*, ed. Bob Becking, Anne-Marie Korte, and Lucien van Liere (Brill, 2017), 16, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁴⁷ Carole Renard, “Jewish involvement in the women’s suffrage movement in Britain: navigating multiple identities in the Diaspora,” *Jewish Historical Studies* 48 (2016), 164, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48733408>.

⁴⁸ Sigalow, *American JewBu*, 8.

⁴⁹ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 79.

⁵⁰ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 81.

faced the dramatic developments and shifts in their economic status, societal position, and racial classification, and were thereby tasked with addressing the redrawn lines between “us” and “them.” Palpable in Jewish-American history, the *nos/otras* distinction—for a cultural group that hangs onto an extensive history of persecution and the identity of God’s chosen people—leads to internal and external dissonance.

Another idea Anzaldúa elucidates is her idea of the *Coyolxauhqui* imperative for the ongoing process of making and unmaking—of healing.⁵¹ *Conocimiento* is the name she ascribes to the healing consciousness that can be harnessed during times of internal and external fragmentation and turbulent cultural change, juxtaposed with the self-righteous path of *desconocimiento*.⁵² For many Jewish-Buddhists, Buddhist ideology facilitates a path of healing and making sense of the world, its grief and turmoil included. Many Jews cite the acceptance of suffering as a universal inevitability in life as a teaching that propelled them in processing personal experience and Judaism’s place in American society. Through the syncretic embrace of Buddhism, the wounds of Jewish culture open up new interactions and new understanding—for Jews, for Buddhists, and for scholars as well. While this paper primarily focuses on how Jewish-American practice and alignment have been shaped by interaction with Buddhism, the relationship has functioned mutually, as illustrated by the Dalai Lama’s meeting with Jewish representatives depicted in Kamenetz’s memoir. The Dalai Lama cited Jewish endurance and persistence as a source of inspiration for Tibetan Buddhists in the throes of China’s imposing authority, with the Dalai Lama himself exiled in India for a few decades at that point. Their whole dialogue demonstrates a public airing and healing of wounds through receptive conversation and syncretism.

With the Holocaust still a potent memory to the parents and grandparents of the Beat generation’s youth, Ruth Sonam, a child of parents who fled Nazi Germany as refugees, shares that the concept of suffering’s pertinence in her life opened her up to Buddhism’s teachings.⁵³ The *Coyolxauhqui* imperative works to address the lingering wounds of Jewish persecution and the mass suffering that rose from the gruesome, large-scale atrocity Jews were subjected to. Sonam’s incorporation of Buddhism into her worldview helps contextualize the events that have transpired and the feelings and lasting repercussions that remain.

To reiterate Anzaldúa’s concepts as applied to JewBus in the *Borderlands*: (1) *Nepantla* can signify the in-between states in which Jews are situated within the Jewish community, amongst other marginalized groups, and in the United States at large. (2) The “tradition of

⁵¹ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 19. Coyolxauhqui is an Aztec goddess of the moon who was dismembered by her brother, the sun god.

⁵² Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 19.

⁵³ Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*, 138.

long walks” speaks to Judaism's extensive history of diaspora and relocation, which cemented in-betweenness as an inherent part of Jewish culture. (3) the illusion of a *nos/otras* dichotomy leads to internal and external dissonance for American Jews, which Buddhism addresses. (4) The *Coyolxauhqui* imperative is propelled through the adoption of Buddhist teachings that facilitate the *conocimiento* that (5) heals the wounds left by the aforementioned *nepantla* interstitiality, diasporic past, and *nos/otras* discrepancy.

Jewish Reactions, Responses, and Contemporary Discourse

During the latter half of the twentieth century, as American Buddhism expanded as its own distinct religious and spiritual phenomenon, its popularity in the Jewish community grew remarkably. Expanding further into the 2000s, Jewish practitioners represented a considerable portion of the active voices in the religious communities. That being said—as is the case with nearly any issue one can bring forth concerning Jewish faith and tradition—rabbis and Jews at large are not in unanimous agreement on whether, and how, Judaism and Buddhism can unite. Some Jews are suspicious of any cross-cultural integration of tradition or ideology into Jewish practice, while others warmly embrace the consideration and inclusion of outside perspectives. The next section of the paper explores some of the negative and positive contemporary Jewish perspectives on the intermingling of American Judaism and Buddhism. It includes not only the public responses from Jewish leaders, scholars, and writers that illustrate the social tensions formed from religious pluralism, but also the inner conflicts that Jews who practice Buddhism have expressed in their personal accounts.

Negatives

A primary concern expressed by numerous influential rabbis and other Jewish authorities in response to the rise in popularity of Buddhist practice and spirituality amongst Jews is a perceived threat to Judaism. Syncretism signals, for some, an imminent secularization of Judaism as a whole. The perceived threat of outside religions to Judaism was not new to the rise of Buddhism in the States, though. As Niculescu explains, “Throughout centuries of persecution and diaspora living, the main concern for Judaism, as an ethnic religion maintained by Jewish bodies, has been the risk of extinction.”⁵⁴ Jews by and large view Judaism as an ethnoreligion with longstanding traditions that have stood the trials of time. In fact, preserving the tradition is understood as a responsibility with

⁵⁴ Niculescu, “I the Jew, I the Buddhist,” 354.

which each generation of Jews is tasked. Thus, during the sixties, when Buddhism rose in popularity amongst counterculturalist communities, so did the fear of Jewish extinction, as Buddhism was perceived as a threat to Jewish continuity.

Two common critiques leveled against Buddhism are that it is a godless religion and that it promotes idolatry. Both of these claims often rest upon a lack of understanding of both Buddhist dharma itself and the wide breadth of different Buddhist branches and traditions. A commonly held belief amongst Orthodox Jewish rabbis is that Buddhism, along with many other Asian religions, practices idol worship, which is strictly forbidden in the Noahide Law. Niculescu recognizes this caveat in her analysis of Jewish-Buddhist connections, stressing the deep implications Buddhism's definition has for the Jewish community: "If it is a religion, 'practicing it,' that is, meditating and following Buddhist principles, can be considered a transgression of the prohibition of idolatry or *Avodah zarah*, or the 'worshiping of foreign deities.'"⁵⁵ Case in point: Rabbi Avigdor Miller maintains, "Buddhism, Shintoism, and all other religions of the Far East are forms of idol worship," and that there is no need to search for supplementary religious knowledge from outside sources when the Torah contains the only truth.⁵⁶ From his perspective, Asian religions are treated as a monolith, and there is little consideration for what the individual teachings of Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and the many other Asian spiritual ideologies express and promote. In fact, according to Rabbi Miller, to even digest those teachings would be a religious offense. As Buddhist meditation techniques grew in popularity amongst American Jews in the 1970s through the 1990s, abundant literature on Jewish meditation, "which systematically condemned looking 'outside,' especially to [Asia], for spirituality and meditation," appeared.⁵⁷ The influential Lubavitcher Rebbe denounced transcendental meditation in Jewish practice in a memorandum in 1978, calling instead for a kosher, "scientific meditation," to supplement the popular practices of "oriental movements" that are "cults bordering on, and in some respects actual, *Avodah Zarah*..."⁵⁸ As a result, kosher meditation practices that trace back thousands of years experienced a revival.

⁵⁵ Niculescu, "I the Jew, I the Buddhist," 351.

⁵⁶ Avigdor Miller, *Awake My Glory* (Bais Yisroel of Rugby, 1980), 62, quoted in Harold Kasimow, "Reflections on Jewish and Christian Encounters with Buddhism," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 35 (2015), 22, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁵⁷ Niculescu, "I the Jew, I the Buddhist," 355.

⁵⁸ Rebbe's Memorandum, 1979, as cited in Menachem Kirschenbaum, "'Yoga and Meditation' The Rebbe's Perspective on 'Kosher Yoga,'" *The Avner Institute For the Dissemination and Study of the Rebbe's Legacy* (blog), October 11, 2007, <https://portraitofaleader.blogspot.com/2007/10/needless-to-say-on-my-part-i-will-do.html>. The word 'cult' was commonly applied to Asian religious traditions that gained any sort of traction in the United States—a label often thrown around to refer to any spiritual practice too dissimilar to Judeo-Christian practice.

Rabbi Gutman G. Locks, once spiritual guru and now Hasidic Old City teacher, shares his contentions with Buddhism on his website and YouTube channel. In a video titled “What’s Wrong with Teaching Buddhism?,” he discourages the consideration of any Buddhist principles, reasoning that you cannot praise the good things Buddhists say without inevitably coming to praise the bad things as well.⁵⁹ His perspective is informed by his personal experience with Buddhist practice and his own spiritual journey, as is the case for many other rabbis who speak out against Jewish-Buddhist syncretism.

One issue that such accounts often fail to consider is the diverse range of Buddhist thought and practice, with many forms of Buddhism not worshiping the Buddha or even frowning upon the practice. Still, idolatry is one of the primary critiques maintained by Jews who reject engagement with Buddhism. Some other common concerns reproachful Jews express are that Buddhism deters from a focus on God, decenters the self in a way that contradicts the Jewish religion’s emphasis on chosenness, and contradicts the Jewish imperative to participate in worldly actions for the sake of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). Nonetheless, standing in opposition to these grievances are the more positive stances on Jewish-Buddhist engagement that not only disagree with but, using historical, ethnographic, textual, and experiential evidence, directly contradict the rationale stated previously.

Positives

Though staunch condemnations of Buddhist exploration make up a notable portion of religious leaders’ stances on Buddhism and Jewish-Buddhist syncretism, other rabbis and Jewish community members have been profoundly moved by a personal experience with Buddhism. Many rabbis oppose the interpretation of Buddhist practice as an inherent form of idolatry and an offense to God. As Irving Greenberg asserts: “Any claim that one understanding of God is the *definitive*, superior one is a form of idolatry,” a sentiment with which many other Liberal Orthodox rabbis agree.⁶⁰ Dr. Sandra Lubarsky, author of *Tolerance and Transformation: Jewish Approaches to Religious Pluralism*, stresses that in being faithful to God in the modern world, Jews should remain open to the possibilities of truths that have yet to be revealed: “To believe that there is nothing further for Jews to learn about God’s presence in the world,” she says, “is to maintain a conceit that limits God and

⁵⁹ Gutman Locks, “What’s Wrong with Teaching Buddhism?,” posted January 24, 2020, YouTube video, 2:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjnYluTfHKE>.

⁶⁰ Irving Greenberg, “Grounding Democracy in Reverence for Life: A View from Judaism,” in *Religions in Dialogue: From Theocracy to Democracy*, ed. Alan Race and Ingrid Shafer (Ashgate, 2002), 30, quoted in Kasimow, “Reflections,” 22.

moved toward idolatry of the human mind.”⁶¹ Her chapter on Jewish *veridical pluralism* highlights how the admission of other religious truths does not negate the validity of Jewish truth.⁶² Instead, receptivity to the messages expressed by adherents of other faiths accounts for the shortcomings of human perception and recognizes that God’s communication with humanity is not limited to Jews.⁶³ Therefore, exploring the nature of God through pluralism is productive to the Jewish purpose of serving God.

In direct opposition to the claim that Buddhism is incompatible with Judaism, a religion that revolves around God, Jerome Yehuda Gellman points to Buddhist practices as a useful tool in decentering the self to achieve this end. He points specifically to the practice of self-nullification, “which for the moment leaves God out of the picture,” as an “effective, welcome corrective for a traditional Jew to the dangers inherent in theistic religions,” such as reinforced self-importance, “and can reinforce the worship of God from love, all by weakening an egocentric pull to God.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, he scrutinizes the term “theism” and the concept of Buddhism as a “Godless” religion, acknowledging that “God’s infinite nature may have many voices, including the sound of Buddhist emptiness, which speaks of release from attachment to oneself and to one’s own world.”⁶⁵ Through this admission of the fallibility of language as applied to categorize religion and spirituality, Gellman drives home how Buddhist practice and ideology *can* complement Jewish practice without compromising Jewish devotion.

Rabbi Lew argues that meditation not only offers no threat to Jewish tradition, but also strengthens Jewish prayer and contributes to Judaism’s endurance. Countering the commonly held fear of Buddhism as a threat to Judaism’s survival, Lew explains: “...if Judaism is to survive as something other than a mere ethnicity, it needs to recapture its inner sense, and that’s what meditation brings to this,” revealing “the inner meaning, the essence of all these practices, something that really goes to the core of our existence, something that touches us at the root of our soul, will endure.”⁶⁶ Rather than a threat representing the potential for Judaism’s extinction, Buddhist syncretism may augment the endurance of Jewish faith and practice.

⁶¹ Sandra B. Lubarsky, *Tolerance and Transformation: Jewish Approaches to Religious Pluralism* (Hebrew Union College Press, 1990), 12, <https://doi-org.proxy177.nclive.org/10.2307/j.ctt16rpqr4>.

⁶² Veridical pluralism is the concept of multiple contrasting religious beliefs all holding truth as part of a complex, multi-faceted reality.

⁶³ Lubarsky, *Tolerance*, 12-13.

⁶⁴ Jerome Yehuda Gellman, “Judaism and Buddhism: A Jewish Approach to a Godless Religion,” in *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, ed. Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn (Liverpool University Press, 2012), 314, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1rmkpn>.

⁶⁵ Gellman, “Judaism and Buddhism,” 316.

⁶⁶ “Rabbi Alan Lew,” educational video, produced by Thirteen/WNET New York, September 15, 2006, Religion & Ethics Newsweekly, PBS, 9:06, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2006/09/15/september-15-2006-rabbi-alan-lew/3733/>.

This complementary relationship between Buddhist practice and Jewish devotion shines through the numerous accounts JewBus have divulged on how Buddhism informed their own spiritual connection with God and the Jewish faith. Lubarsky has shared writings on her own life experiences, recounting her adolescence and the influence that Buddhism has on the religious path she took in life. Throughout her time studying Buddhism, she held onto Judaism as well, acknowledging it as an intrinsic part of her personality. Her experience speaks for many American Jewish-Buddhists of her generation:

Buddhism's straightforward declaration that 'life is suffering' spoke what was already known to post-Holocaust Jews, but its path for ending suffering presented a new way of understanding reality and held out hope for healing the self and the world. It offered many Jews a spiritual way that was consonant with their rejection of God and yet nourished their need for moral guidance, interconnectedness, and self-transcendence.⁶⁷

For Lubarsky, Buddhism's philosophy helped her conceptualize and handle the suffering of the world, of her community, and of herself. It functions similarly to the *conocimiento* that Anzaldúa discusses, cultivating an environment for oneself and one's community to heal through an increased awareness and understanding of the world.

Likewise, Buddhism supplies answers to Jewish quandaries for those who seek them from outside sources. In a 2006 *Los Angeles Times* article on the dual devotion of JewBus, Lee Rosenthal—a Jewish veteran faced with difficult life circumstances—explains the appeal of Buddhism to him: "Instead of sugar-coating things, it gave me a plain explanation for why I was suffering – life is painful and difficult... It also said you can't run away from it. Deal with it."⁶⁸ His phrasing reflects a shortcoming of his personal Jewish education that Buddhism is able to supplement, addressing life's suffering in a way that resonates with him. Lubarsky recognizes, in turn, how Buddhism also prompted her to seek new answers from her Jewish faith, such as on the issue of ending suffering.⁶⁹ Thereby, Buddhism not only supplies answers to Jewish questions, but also prompts new interaction with Judaism for individuals who embrace both ideological perspectives.

In his article, "Judaism and Buddhism: A Jewish Approach to a Godless Religion," Gellman provides several examples of Pali sutras—the foundational Buddhist scriptures—that informed and enhanced his spiritual outlook without compromising his relationship with Judaism. In describing Buddhism's impact on his personal spiritual practice, he says,

⁶⁷ Sandra B. Lubarsky, "Enriching Awareness: A Jewish Encounter with Buddhism," in *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha*, ed. Harold Kasimow, John P. Keenan, and Linda Klepinger Keenan (Wisdom Publications, 2003), 67.

⁶⁸ Louis Sahagun, "At One with Dual Devotion: 'JuBus' Blend the Communal Rituals of Judaism with the Quiet Solitude of Buddhism: Most Adherents Are at Peace with the Paradox," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2006, ProQuest Central.

⁶⁹ Lubarsky, "Enriching Awareness," 68.

“I have learned of ways of holiness that I would not have imagined as a Jew. Buddhism has deeply affected my spiritual inwardness even though I neither worship the Buddha nor believe in the cycle of rebirth.”⁷⁰ While studying dharma, he remains just as devoted to Judaism as other practitioners, with Buddhist thought supplementing his Jewish beliefs instead of overriding them.

Brenda Shoshanna, author of the 2004 book *Jewish Dharma: A Guide to the Practice of Judaism and Zen*, recounts her Jewish upbringing and the spiritual journey she took to come to embrace Judaism. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, she was discouraged from asking questions pertaining to faith and felt alienated amongst the different presentations of Judaism in her household. In need of spiritual guidance during her adolescence, she was directed toward Suzuki’s book on Zen Buddhism, and found that it was deeply impactful on her relationship with Judaism. In an interview, she explains how Zen can benefit Jewish practice, and also laments the common misunderstandings of the Torah that breed hate and push people away from their Jewish identities and communities. She recognizes Zen as a practice of acceptance that leaves “room to grow, room to be real,” which in turn opened her up to new understandings of the Torah and Judaism.⁷¹ As Mira Niculescu ties Hobi Bhabha’s concept of interstitiality to accounts like Shoshanna’s, she opts for a bridge as the suitable metaphor for Jewish-Buddhism: “It is a matter of in/out, self/other”—*nos/others*—and boundary dwellers such as Shoshanna “have returned to their Judaism in an inclusive way, bridging the two worlds they refer to, and dwelling in-between.”⁷²

In a similar vein, Nathan Katz accredits Buddhism and Hinduism—and especially the forms of meditation he practiced for years—as what led him to “recapture the light [he] saw emitting from the [Holy] Ark during [his] childhood,” as his experience with Asian spirituality taught him to “respect and treasure [his] own tradition.”⁷³ Sheila Peltz Weinberg recognizes Buddhism as the influence that gave her “a new lens with which to interpret and understand the sacred teachings of [her] people and more deeply apply those teachings to [her] life... To live with more awareness, more compassion, more wisdom, and more love.”⁷⁴ Her personal story about her relationship with Judaism and eventual embrace of Buddhism illustrates the journey many may take as they grapple to find their faith. Across

⁷⁰ Gellman, “Judaism and Buddhism,” 301.

⁷¹ Ross Perlin, “Jews in Buddhism,” Forverts, posted February 15, 2023, YouTube video, 8:52, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoWP1w4X3ws>.

⁷² Mira Niculescu, “Reading In-Betweenness: Jewish Buddhist Autobiographies and the Self-Display of Interstitiality,” *Contemporary Jewry* 37, no. 2 (2017), 341, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-017-9233-6>.

⁷³ Nathan Katz, “From JUBU to OJ,” in *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha*, ed. Harold Kasimow, John P. Keenan, and Linda Klepinger Keenan (Wisdom Publications, 2003), 43.

⁷⁴ Sheila Peltz Weinberg, “The Impact of Buddhism,” in *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha*, ed. Harold Kasimow, John P. Keenan, and Linda Klepinger Keenan (Wisdom Publications, 2003), 111.

many of these examples, the common approaches of Jewish teachings seem incongruent with a Jewish individual's worldview, and acknowledgment of this dissonance highlights an important purpose religious syncretism can fulfill: retrieving those who fall through the cracks of faith due to other facets of their identity feeling incompatible with the messages they were taught. Anzaldúa's theory of the simultaneous insider/outside condition—*nos/otras*—reflects the dissonance some Jews face between the clashes of identities.

JewBus in Practice

Addressing Disconnects in Personal Faith

Through exploring where Buddhist teachings and practice occur while maintaining a connection with Judaism, the intersections of the traditions become evident in this analysis. Turning back to the piece of non-fiction that popularized the “JUBU” nomenclature, *The Jew in the Lotus*, Kamenetz converses with several influential American Jewish-Buddhists on why they converted or what drew them to Buddhism. One feature that American Buddhist traditions such as Tibetan Buddhism offered was the special teacher-student relationship to facilitate explorations of mysticism—a path rendered less accessible in Jewish communities.⁷⁵ Though Judaism has a rich history of mysticism, its practice and emphasis had been minimized in the United States during the community's adaptation in the twentieth century. Hasidism had not only lacked the level of public dissemination that characterized Buddhism's presentation in the United States, but was actively suppressed by nineteenth-century liberal Jewish immigrant communities. American Jews put distance between their adapting practices and the kabbalah and other esoteric traditions, which in turn prompted subsequent generations to search for mysticism across religious boundary lines.

The personal, direct experience facilitated by insight meditation bridged the gap Goldstein observed in his Jewish faith. His account supports Rabbi Lew's stance on meditation as a mode of strengthening the Jewish faith's ability to connect with younger generations beyond mere ethnic ties. The spiritual path that Buddhism offers through accessible, participatory practices fulfills what was lost through Judaism's distance from mysticism over time. As mentioned previously, in response to Buddhist meditation's rise in popularity within the Jewish community, a revival of Jewish, kosher meditative practices—both old and new—took place, with figures like the Lubavitcher Rebbe advocating for its use in lieu of Buddhist practice.

⁷⁵ Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*, 148.

Another aspect of American Jewish practice with which Goldstein expresses discontent is the prevalence of Jewish pride, chauvinism, and particularism that seem to contradict the universalistic prophetic messages Judaism also promotes.⁷⁶ As a result, Goldstein felt alienation from this emphasis on Jews as a chosen people. Thubten Chodron and Allen Ginsberg also convey their distaste for this Jewish particularism in Kamenetz's memoir. In contrast, the Buddhist tenets of self-nullification place a check on these issues. As Gellman's article highlights, Buddhism's techniques and teachings of self-nullification can augment Judaism's "strong tradition of concern for freedom from egocentrism," in spite of the Jewish story of chosenness.⁷⁷ Demonstrated above, Buddhism serves numerous roles and purposes for JewBus; in turn, numerous manifestations of Jewish-Buddhist syncretism have been constructed.

The Range of JewBus

While "JewBu" is a term applied to those who take on both identities in a pluralistic practice of faith, there is a wide variety of ways in which Judaism and Buddhism coincide and interact amongst observing individuals in the United States. The varying extents to which Buddhism is included in Jewish devotion reflect the complexity of cultural identities in general. Many of the Jews who incorporate Buddhist practice into their Jewish practice would not label themselves Buddhist in any sense. Even amongst those who maintain a more positive view of Buddhism and acknowledge the merits and applications it offers to Judaism, there are Jews who believe that the two belief systems ultimately cannot mesh, and that an individual cannot be both Jewish and Buddhist. Rabbi Alan Lew, for example, studied Buddhism for a decade before becoming a rabbi, and promotes meditation as a tool during Jewish prayer, yet he maintains that a person cannot be both Jewish and Buddhist because "your central commitment should be clear."⁷⁸ His experience in Zen practice eventually led him to discover the deep connection to Judaism that had previously gone undetected by his conscience. As a conservative rabbi, he taught meditation in the context of Jewish practice, firmly grounded in Jewish belief.⁷⁹ Many Jews feel an affinity for Buddhist practices such as meditation, while not identifying with it ideologically. Brenda Shoshanna does not consider herself a Buddhist either, viewing Zen as a practice she partakes in while fully identifying as Jewish.

Then, there are those who feel at odds with both identities, feeling that their interreligious practice ultimately distances them from both. As Buddhist priest Alan

⁷⁶ Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*, 150

⁷⁷ Gellman, "Judaism and Buddhism," 312.

⁷⁸ Sahagun, "At One with Dual Devotion."

⁷⁹ Some scholars have pointed to this framing of Buddhist practices as secular/transferable outside of their contexts as part of American Buddhism in general.

Senauke describes his standing, "Because of my Jewishness, I'm faulty as a Buddhist, and because of my Buddhism, I can never really be a practicing Jew."⁸⁰ This demonstrates how combining religious traditions comes with its own hurdles, as religious syncretism often challenges the preestablished boundaries between beliefs and traditions that religious communities uphold. Mira Niculescu maintains that due to these issues, "multi-religious belonging should not necessarily be described as 'identity,' a term that conveys an idea of essentialist ontology, but as fluctuating internal dialogue."⁸¹ Just as Niculescu warns of, identities—as they are rigidly defined—can harm those who are split between them. The reason for discussing crossed identity borders in the first place is to address how rigid classifications have been applied to the complexity of individual personhood and larger communities.

Anzaldúa stresses that "the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms... the straddling of two or more cultures," a sentiment that JewBus take in stride.⁸² Many people thread the line between Jewish and Buddhist identity by embracing a multi-religious belonging. That being said, navigating multi-religious belonging in communities that express rigid boundaries and insulation can be difficult, both due to external conflict and internal disputes. Nonetheless, the Borderlands are, for the reasons outlined in this paper, an inevitability for many American Jews, and the acknowledgement of such can lead to personal solace and breakthroughs in coming to understand and embrace one's own multiple identities.

Conclusion

JewBus are one of many syncretic products of the United States' cultural pluralism, but beyond the melding of cultures that is a trademark of a nation commonly named a "melting pot," the specific conditions and experiences of American Judaism prime not all, but a considerable number of community members for multi-religious exploration. As a result, the melting pot classification comes into question in scholarly discourse. David Biale's chapter on the subject divulges how the term "melting pot" itself was utilized and popularized by Jews who strove to cement their place in American society amidst a lively public discourse on the rapidly changing racial and ethnic landscape. Israel Zangwill's 1908 play, *The Melting Pot*, was a highly influential piece for American immigration discourse, performed at a time when ethnicity was the primary focus of social tensions. In it, Zangwill predicts that America's ethnicities will meld into a new people: Americans. Despite becoming a new amalgamate, Biale points out how Zangwill maintained that

⁸⁰ Sahagun, "At One with Dual Devotion."

⁸¹ Niculescu, "I the Jew, I the Buddhist," 356.

⁸² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 102.

Jewish character will prevail in its influence upon the American identity, pointing to the nation's roots in pilgrimages of those who were "spiritual descendants of the biblical Jews."⁸³

After the Second World War, though, the paradigm shifted focus from ethnicity to race. At the turn of the century, postethnic theories on identities as less static and more fluid than they had been understood previously became more widely accepted and explored. Biale recognizes that, due to the multicultural landscape American Jews are situated within, "[t]he indeterminacy of contemporary Jewish identity is often the cause of much communal hand-wringing," and he holds that "Jews need to begin to analyze what it means to negotiate them and, by so doing, perhaps even learn to embrace them."⁸⁴ Anzaldúa parallels this initiative through her advocacy for recognizing blurred borders and engaging with one's interstitial existence to discover a new self, a new community understanding, and healing.

In generalizing the situation of Jews living with multiple identities in the modern day, rather than characterizing it as a melting pot, "in which a new identity emerges" or a "cultural pluralism model in which only one ethnic identity remains primary," the JewBus discussed in this paper have exemplified retention of "at least two different cultural legacies at once."⁸⁵ All American Jews, at the very least, carry the legacy of Jewish traditions as they span back thousands of years, *and* the legacy of their Sephardic or Ashkenazi immigrant ancestors. Already situated in these Borderlands, rather than widening the gap between ascribed Jewish identity and self-understanding, syncretism with Buddhism can highlight the blurry hybridity of identity and offer experiential and ideological means with which to confront and embrace it. Alluding to two films that portray Jewish protagonists who cross over into other identities, Naomi Seidman contends that, "[j]ust as important to multiculturalism as spokespersons for Jewish identity... is this subterranean tradition of Zeligs and Zebraheads, parenthetical Jews and identifiers with an 'other' identity."⁸⁶ Anzaldúa's statement on the melting pot concept is succinct and transferable to the Jewish American condition that Biale recognizes: "They'd like to think I have melted in the pot. But I haven't, we haven't."⁸⁷

The Borderlands have not disappeared into a culturally homogeneous, all-American mixture. While the socioeconomic positions differ considerably between identity demographics, Jews exist in the *nepantla* of the United States, alongside countless other

⁸³ Biale, "The Melting Pot and Beyond," 21-22.

⁸⁴ Biale, "The Melting Pot and Beyond," 31.

⁸⁵ Biale, "The Melting Pot and Beyond," 32.

⁸⁶ Naomi Seidman, "Fag-Hags and Bu-Jews: Toward a (Jewish) Politics of Vicarious Identity," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susan Heschel (University of California Press, 1998), 256, <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft5199n9tq/>.

⁸⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 108.

marginalized groups and the multiple identities within the Borderlands. Joseph Winters identifies the implication in Anzaldúa's writing that the history and lived reality of a *mestiza/Chicana* "renders her more open to living in-between, living with disconcerting tensions, and engaging the unfamiliar and unknown."⁸⁸ As several of the Jewish-Buddhist accounts in this paper demonstrate, the Jewish history and lived experience of many American Jews contribute to a more flexible and adaptable concept of Jewish practice. The ways in which American Buddhism appeals to Jews shine through the historical and sociological foundations of American Jewish communities, tracing back to the thousands of years preceding the waves of immigration during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The different roles Buddhism plays amongst Jews who adopt aspects of Buddhist practice have been expressed through literature, scholarship, and blog posts, and anywhere else Jews usually express their thoughts on faith and religious identity.

The *nepantla* state is upheld through a collective focus on the diasporic history of Judaism and the *nos/otras* dichotomies that divide Jewish groups from both other sects and other marginalized people, and set apart Jewish individuals from the majority culture externally and their other facets of identity internally. Depending on what Jewish community a person grows up in and the experiences they have with their faith, Judaism can itself be a source of alienation for an individual whose other facets of identity seem to land outside of their community's expectations.⁸⁹ Additionally, some Jews experience dissonance between what they are taught about Judaism and the values they hold, as Gellman highlighted in self-nullification's application to the Jewish religion that values both the break from egocentrism and its status as God's chosen people. JewBus discover the means to conceive of and address the Borderlands and Jewish spiritual dissonance through Buddhism, as demonstrated by the numerous accounts discussed in this paper. Musing in the Borderlands can form a sense of belonging that was previously absent—a conclusion that applies to multireligious belonging more broadly.

Anzaldúa's *Coyolxauhqui* imperative can be and has been initiated and propelled through JewBu syncretism. Buddhist teachings and meditative practices are applied to Jewish devotion in ways that promote individual and community healing amidst American cultural fragmentation. She clarifies that "...while the Coyolxauhqui in her dismembered

⁸⁸ Joseph Winters, "Mestiza Language of Religion: Gloria Anzaldúa," in *Cultural Approaches to Studying Religion: An Introduction to Theories and Methods*, ed. M. Cooper Minister and Sarah J. Bloesch, 2nd ed. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 159.

⁸⁹ Beyond the scope of this paper, there are numerous identity factors amongst Jewish-Buddhists that are worth delving into further, such as the intersections of this branch of American multi-religious belonging and gender, sexuality, class, geography, Blackness, and more. Women and LGBTQ+ Jews often feel excluded and disconnected from Jewish spirituality, and focusing on these groups, especially in tandem with Anzaldúa's theories, would be a valuable contribution to the discussion. See also Seidman, "Fag-Hags and Bu-Jews."

state... embodies fragmentation, she also symbolizes reconstruction in a new order... The Coyolxauhqui process is currently working on each person and their culture as both attempt to become more inclusive, more whole.”⁹⁰ Jewish individuals and communities that invite Buddhist teachings and practices into their devotion often discover new ways of understanding identity bonds and collectiveness both within the religion and with identities outside of Judaism. Additionally, the wounds of both Jewish culture and fragmented Jewish identity can be tended to and healed through Jewish-Buddhist interstitiality, as Buddhism supplies concepts that harmoniously supplement Jewish ideology and practice.

As Michael Galchinsky identifies, only within the past few decades have Jews joined the postcolonial theory discourse. While the onset of postcolonial theory in the sixties and seventies classified Jews as part of the White, colonial power structure, more recent approaches have accounted for the complexity of “Whiteness” and thereby opened discussion to a more nuanced understanding of Jewish race, ethnicity, and societal position.⁹¹ Recent scholarship from the past few decades on Jewish-Buddhism from scholars like Emily Sigalow, Mira Niculescu, and Naomi Seidman reflects this adoption. Through engaging Anzaldúa’s work on blurred identity borders and the healing instigated through an internal embrace of pluralism with the phenomenon of American Jewish-Buddhism, this paper marks another contribution to the growing breadth of Jewish postcolonial analysis from a (Jewish) queer perspective—the product of a *reform convert from an Anglican background with loose attachments to Jewish faith* mother / Jew whose worldview has been heavily shaped by his own study of Buddhist dharma father. As a (Jew) who, through the process of writing this paper, gained insight into (my) self-understanding—of the alienation and disconnect I have felt both within the Jewish community and on the outskirts. Inspired by the JewBu subjects of my research, (I) offer these ideas on how to confront the spiritual dissonance that characterizes my/our history with faith as part of a long history of ancestral inquiry into identity.

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⁹⁰ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 89.

⁹¹ Galchinsky, “Scattered Seeds,” 186.

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