



## Shifting Critical Approaches to the Elusive Jewishness of *María* by Jorge Isaacs Naomi Lindstrom

This study examines and evaluates the ways in which critics have dealt with the question of a Jewish thematic current, self-awareness, or perspective in the much-reprinted 1867 novel *María* by the Colombian writer Jorge Isaacs (1837-1895). While scholars have long exhibited an awareness of Isaacs's paternal Jewish descent and at times made observations concerning Jewish references or a Jewish outlook in the novel, it was Doris Sommer's 1989 article "El mal de María: (Con) fusión en un romance nacional," later included in her influential *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (1991), that launched the current discussion over Jewish themes or thought in the novel. This overview first summarizes the pre-1980s debate over Jewish properties of *María*, identifying shifts in critical methodology that either inhibited or stimulated its growth as a question for academic study. This section of the essay is briefer, since Elzbieta Sklodowska's 1983 "*María*, de Jorge Isaacs, ante la crítica" provides a panoramic overview of *María* criticism at the time, and since Jewish themes are not explored as extensively in earlier studies. My essay then focuses more closely on studies from the 1980s onward and offers recommendations for how research on this topic may continue to evolve.

Both in literature and in politics, Jorge Isaacs was a visible public figure, and it was common knowledge that his father was an English-Jamaican Jew who immigrated to Colombia and converted to Catholicism before his marriage. Although raised Catholic, Isaacs could not avoid being aware of his Jewish ancestry, which provided ammunition for his detractors. In Gustavo Faverón Patriau's summary, "La marca del judaísmo del padre persiguió a Isaacs toda su vida. Se convirtió en la señal con que sus enemigos lo estigmatizaron en la arena política" (342n2). Donald McGrady details the antisemitism that Isaacs endured, including an incident in the Colombian congress when an adversary called him a member of the "raza maldita" (*Jorge Isaacs* 18) and a 1880 broadside, *Samuel Belí-Beth*, that lampooned him as a figure of the Wandering Jew (23). Over the decades, biographers and critics have insistently pointed out this figure's Jewish ancestry. For example, Germán Arciniegas opens his guide to Isaacs and his work, *Genio y figura de Jorge Isaacs* (first edition 1967), with a page and half of detailed information about his subject's Jewish forebears (15-16).

In *María*, Isaacs drew upon his Jewish background for thematic material. The narrator and male protagonist Efraín is, like his creator, the son of a non-Jewish mother and a Jamaican Jewish man who has adopted Christianity. Efraín's second cousin María, his great love who dies young of a neurological disorder, was born in Jamaica to Jewish parents. As a small child she was brought to Colombia, converted to Catholicism, and raised by Efraín's parents on their homestead in the beautiful Cauca Valley. Though the family observes no religion other than Catholicism, its Christian identity is complicated, since all of its members except the mother have Jewish ancestry. Efraín's father and María were both born of Jewish mothers and under Jewish law are still Jews despite their Christianity. One might conduct a hair-splitting debate over the propriety of using "Jewish" or "Jewishness" with reference to Efraín and his siblings, given their patrilineal-only descent and Catholic upbringing.<sup>1</sup> However, the family to which they belong is indisputably *converso* and aware of it; this point is explored by Erin Graff Zivin in her commentary, to be discussed later in this essay.

The family's Jewish background is by no means the only ethnic issue that Isaacs thematizes in *María*. The novel's subplots follow the romances between local characters, some of whom the narrator identifies as Black or biracial. Although *María* was published after the 1851-1852 abolition of slavery in Colombia, it takes place in 1850, according to McGrady's calculations (*Jorge Isaacs* 131). Efraín's father is a benevolent slaveowner and the story of Nay and Sinar (Chapters XL-XLIII) illustrates the misery caused by slavery. Efraín, recalling his travels, describes sympathetically the Black communities of the Dagua River. He and other characters often comment on the Blackness or whiteness of various figures in the novel. As will be discussed, in recent years the prominence in *María* of Afrodescendant characters has been considered a possible clue to understanding the Jewishness in the text.

The narrator, his father, and María's father refer explicitly on only a handful of occasions to their Jewish background. According to Efraín, María's Jewish ancestry accounts in part for the irresistible attraction that she exerts upon him. He recalls that, glimpsing her eyes, "pude admirar en ellos la brillantez y hermosura de las mujeres de su raza" (Chapter III, 56). Later he remembers how "su paso ligero y digno revelaba todo el orgullo, no abatido, de nuestra raza" (Chapter IV, 59), identifying himself via the first-person plural possessive pronoun as part of the Jewish "race." The protagonist quickly summarizes the family's Jewish past in Chapter VII. In his account, María's father justified giving her to Efraín's parents to be raised Catholic by declaring Christianity a more consoling religion than Judaism: "tal vez yo haría desdichada a mi hija dejándola judía" (66). Efraín explains his father's belief in omens as "preocupaciones de su raza, de las cuales no había podido prescindir por completo" (Chapter XXII, 127). Indeed, the narrator-protagonist, his father, and María all interpret everyday phenomena as auguries. In addition, Efraín's father is in the habit of addressing María, "cuando se chanceaba con ella," as "judía" (Chapter XXXII, 173). The just-cited passages in which the characters speak explicitly of their Jewish background occupy very little space in a novel of over 200 pages.

Nonetheless, critics have at various times understood the family's Jewish past and *converso* present as factoring in less overt ways into the meaning of *María*. As will be discussed, critical opinion has varied over the decades concerning the degree of importance to accord to this

thematic strand. Some students of *María* simply leave its Jewish content unexplored, while others discount or minimize the importance of this aspect of the work; those who choose to study it disagree on its significance in the understanding of the text.

Ever since the novel's publication, there has been some speculation about how the author's ethnic background might have affected his work, although for some time it was not framed as a topic of scholarly inquiry. I agree fully with Elzbieta Sklodowska's judgment, in her survey of criticism on *María*, that early commentaries on the novel were generally impressionistic and excessively focused upon the biographical Isaacs (617). Some readers searched for a beautiful young Jewish woman who had been Isaacs's inspiration for *María*.<sup>2</sup> Other observers drew attention to *María*'s allusions to the Old Testament, seeing them as markers of the author's ancestry. The flaw in the latter idea is that, while the Old Testament is a version of the Hebrew Bible, it is included in the Christian canon and referenced by Christian writers. In McGrady's disapproving summary, most early critics who detected some Jewish essence in the novel cited either Old Testament references or a vague animating "spirit or style" (128). An example of the latter tendency is Isaac Goldberg's inclusion of Isaacs in his 1925 "Jewish Writers in South-America" on the grounds that the Colombian writer has "dramatized the Jew in the cultural consciousness" (479).

In 1944 Alfonso López Michelson published in the *Revista de Indias* his "Ensayo sobre la influencia semítica en *María*." This article develops the search for Jewish traces in *María* into a full-fledged question for inquiry, but is marred by antisemitism and incoherent argumentation. López Michelson begins by disparaging *María* as a work of literature, stating that while the novel possesses "belleza formal," Isaacs "solo consigue dejarnos la sensación de algo artificial, desprovisto de todo calor humano" (5). As noted above, in the novel Efraín states that Jews are especially superstitious. López Michelson then attributes this stereotypical trait to Isaacs himself and finds *María* permeated with a belief in omens that, in some confusing assertions, he links with Kabbalah as well as with a mystical Jewish notion of predestination.

López Michelson contends that Efraín's family has remained unassimilated into Colombian society and preserves its exceptionality through endogamy. In his overtly hostile analysis, Jewish tribalism is causing members of the family to remain apart from other sectors of national society, who "les son ajenos" (6). This critic characterizes the relations between Efraín and *María* as "amores... casi incestuosos." The possible presence of incest is a perennial issue in the analysis of *María*. Biologically Efraín and *María* are second cousins, and marriage between such partners seems universally accepted. Yet they are members of the same household and call the same people "Mamá" and "Papá."<sup>3</sup> In the opinion of López Michelson, non-Jews would be uneasy with such a pair marrying, but *María* "es lógicamente la esposa indicada en las concepciones racistas del pueblo elegido" given the lack of other potential Jewish brides. Although López Michelson is dealing in abhorrent antisemitic stereotypes, he does bring to the fore one idea that will later be more coherently developed by Sommer in "El mal de *María*" (1989) and Graff Zivin in her 2008 *The Wandering Signifier* (126-28): the family's *converso* background, and especially *María*'s Jewishness, impede its full participation in the future of the Colombian nation.

*María* emerged as a subject for close textual analysis during the mid-twentieth century, just as this critical practice was gaining ascendancy in academic literary studies. Analyses of the formal textual features of *María*, which enjoyed their golden age from the 1950s to the 1980s, deserve recognition for establishing Isaacs's novel as a complex work of literature worthy of scholarly inquiry. Of particular importance was "La romántica *María* de Isaacs," the seminal essay by Enrique Anderson Imbert. In this piece, which first appeared as the introduction to a 1951 edition of the novel and underwent subsequent iterations, the Argentine scholar successfully highlighted several aspects of the novel that would prove fruitful topics of critical discussion. Anderson Imbert was an advocate of "internal" criticism, his favored term for the focus on the text as an entity separate from its creator and the circumstances of its creation. This outlook characterized critical approaches contemporaneous with Anderson Imbert, such as stylistic analysis and New Criticism, as well as the structuralist analysis of the 1960s and 1970s, all of which emphasized detailed scrutiny of the text. It is Anderson Imbert's practice to mention the author and his or her relation to the work, then quickly usher readers back to the text and to literary considerations. This critic is concerned with *María*'s relation to European romanticism, especially the 1801 novel *Atala* by François-René de Chateaubriand, and its fusion of romanticism and *costumbrismo*. He also raises the critical problem of the structural coherence of *María*, which would prove the point of departure for some highly illuminating textual analyses.

Anderson Imbert poses and answers a single question about Jewishness in *María*, specifically that of the heroine: "¿Por qué [Isaacs] la hizo judía? En parte porque él mismo tenía una tradición judía, en parte porque el ideal femenino romántico reclamaba rasgos exóticos y ya andaban por la literatura judías tan bellas y dulces como la Rebecca que Walter Scott inventó en *Ivanhoe*" (83). With this question and answer, the Argentine critic deems *María*'s Jewishness worthy of mention, but is silent about Efraín, perhaps not considering him Jewish. Anderson Imbert's essay is designed to open avenues to future investigations, but his remarks on Jewishness in the novel suggest that it has little to offer as a research topic.

Limited discussion of the novel's Jewish content continued to surface sporadically. For example, in "La estructura dualística de *María*," first published in 1978, Seymour Menton cites "el origen judío de Isaacs" as part of the "explicación de la dualidad" of literary tendencies that co-exist in *María*, though he considers the connection to be "difícil de comprobar" (3). He goes on to state that "Isaacs, si se le juzga por *María*, tiene muy presente su doble cultura" (4). Immediately afterward, this researcher characterizes Isaacs's Jewish background as external to the text. The central purpose of his essay is to demonstrate the unity of the novel, which he ably succeeds in doing, using an approach that Sklodowska identifies as New Criticism (620). Clearly Menton is intrigued by the relation that he senses between *María* and its author's Jewishness and has devoted some thought to it. Yet, having mentioned the question of a Jewish consciousness affecting the composition of *María*, he does not pursue it very far, since his critical methodology does not allow for conjecture or statements based on intuition.

It would appear that the predominant methodologies in midcentury literary criticism, which required that claims be supported by evidence found within the text, were not conducive to prolonged inquiries into the Jewishness of *María*, a research problem that almost necessitates

some imaginative speculation and reference to extratextual considerations. Enjoined by such influential theorists as W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley to avoid “the intentional fallacy,” to cite the title of their essay of 1946, critics shied away from reconstructing the author’s thought. In his 1967 “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes ridiculed biographical approaches and sought to seal off the literary text from its origins, as did Michel Foucault in his 1969 “What Is An Author?” During this formalistic period, critics produced detailed analyses of *María*’s narrative construction, though some, such as the Marxist Jaime Mejía Duque, pursued other agendas (15-21). In 1981, John S. Brushwood in his “Codes of Character Definition: Jorge Isaacs’s *María*” applied Continental narratology, especially the concepts of Gérard Genette, in analyzing the various plot lines running through *María*. Brushwood’s reading updated the critical methodology and terminology while maintaining the focus on narrative construction. Raymond L. Williams, who had been Brushwood’s student, also advanced the understanding of the novel’s formal coherence, especially in his 1986 “The Problem of Unity in Fiction: Narrator and Self in *María*.” Reading these essays from the perspective of the twenty-first century, I am impressed with the light that such painstaking textual analyses shed upon the way that *María* functions as a literary narrative, and especially upon the manner in which its seemingly disparate elements are coordinated. While invaluable in understanding the text, these rigorous analyses are of little direct use to researchers seeking to understand the Jewish currents in Isaacs’s novel.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Donald McGrady was a dominant figure in studies of *María*. This scholar expressed a firm belief that critics should refrain from seeking clues to a Jewish outlook in the Colombian author’s writing. In his 1972 *Jorge Isaacs*, McGrady states baldly: “The whole problem of Hebrew influence in *María* is a fallacious one. The simple fact is that Jorge Isaacs was not a Jew either by heredity or, more importantly, by training. He was only half Jewish by blood, and his upbringing was entirely Christian” (128). The same categorical pronouncements appear in Spanish in the introduction to the scholar’s 1986 critical edition of *María* (“Introducción” 35).

Why is McGrady so opposed to research into the Jewish traces in *María*, stating his views in a way that strikes one as closed-minded? One reason is that this researcher practices and promotes a fact- and logic-based approach to literary studies. He relies on demonstrable findings and amasses data in a positivistic fashion. His strictly evidence-centered methodology precludes the interpretation required to trace a Jewish or *converso* consciousness in *María*.

In addition, McGrady’s implied definition of what constitutes a Jewish influence or outlook is restrictive even for its time and more so by today’s standards. Julia Paulk observes that “our understanding of Jewishness as a literary representation has changed” since McGrady contributed to Isaacs studies (47). Indeed, the concept of Jewishness has broadened not only in literature and other cultural forms but also in personal self-identification. In McGrady’s view, intellectuals without a Jewish education cannot infuse Jewish qualities into their work (*Jorge Isaacs* 128). Since then, it has become increasingly common to recognize an awareness of being Jewish in *conversos* and in secular Jews, however meager their Jewish learning. Indeed, after warning readers against perceiving Jewish influence in *María*, McGrady claims that Isaacs, by making his protagonist half-Jewish like himself, “affirmed that he (like Efraín)



was proud of his ancestry” and “exalted his own ethnic background” as a preemptive move against antisemitism (129). McGrady’s remarks could be read as recognizing Isaacs’s *converso* identity. This researcher’s dicta are, in my view, excessively severe, intended to shut down discussion of a worthwhile research question.

Recent years have seen greater recognition of ways of being and feeling Jewish independent of religious observance and study and, in some cases, outside traditional criteria for Jewish identity. This shift became apparent when the Pew Research Center published its widely discussed *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* (2013), based on survey responses (*Portrait*). The spread of the term “culturally Jewish,” disturbing to those for whom Jewish life should be rooted in observance and study, also reflects this change. In addition, the patrilineal transmission of Jewish identity has been gaining acceptance. It was officially recognized, with a few qualifications, by the Reform movement in 1983, while in general thought there has come to be greater acknowledgment of the Jewishness of patrilineal descendants. All the scholars whose work is discussed below share this expanded concept of Jewishness and identify a Jewish self-awareness in Isaacs and Efraín, despite their patrilineal-only descent and Catholic upbringing.

During the 1980s, as the thematic analysis of literature became more prominent, research into the topic of Jewishness of *María* increased. Sylvia Molloy’s 1984 “Paraíso perdido y economía terrenal en *María*” includes a brief section on this question (46-47). Molloy revisits Efraín’s observations that María’s mysterious allure is specific to Jewish women. She identifies in his statements the “orientalismo tan caro a los románticos” (46), a phrase reminiscent of the contemporary impact of *Orientalism* (1978) by Edward W. Said. For Molloy, the novel’s Jewish thematic current is evident in the characterization of Efraín’s father. Noting that the father is a foreigner as well as a *converso*, Molloy identifies him as an idealized figure of the Wandering Jew. This character’s separation from both his native country and religion conveys the novel’s themes of exile and the impossibility of return. While it only occupies three paragraphs, Molloy’s discussion is significant for making some observations that are more fully developed later by such scholars as Graff Zivin.

In 1991, the conversation about Jewish themes in *María* was refueled by the success of Sommer’s *Foundational Fictions*, which included her just-noted analysis of *María*. As is well known, this critic considers the novels that she analyzes to be allegories of national consolidation, represented in each case by a narrative of heterosexual love between two young people. Though these romances are often doomed, they nonetheless illustrate ways in which the nation may progress toward unification. Sommer’s analysis of *María* has many aspects, including of course its support for the central thesis of *Foundational Fictions*, but here I will focus on the examination of the Jewishness of Isaacs and the Jewish properties of his novel.

In Sommer’s reading, the Jewishness of the family, and particularly of the heroine, provides the key to solving a puzzle concerning *María*. Since Efraín and María are in love, compatible, and have the family’s consent to wed as soon as he completes his studies, her death would seem to make the work “inexplicably sad” (“María’s Disease” 172). After María dies, the family loses its holdings in the Cauca Valley; some force is blighting its fortunes. In this critic’s

analysis, the impediment to the couple settling on the beloved homestead and producing descendants is the fact that María is Jewish. Sommer offers a dual interpretation:

Either María's planter family was too Conservative and white to sustain alliances with abolitionist Liberals and become a hegemonic class, or the family was not conservatively Catholic and white enough. Either the problem is classwide incest, or it is corrupting miscegenation. However I formulate it, the problem is being 'Jewish,' a double bind that becomes Isaacs's vehicle for representing a dead end for the planter class. (173)

The "stain" (188) of Jewishness disqualifies María from thriving as a wife and mother in the conservative, Catholic landed elite, which at any rate appears in decline. Yet there is no place for her in the rising progressive-liberal sector; hence, she must die.

Sommer then gives a further twist to her reading of *María*: via a mechanism of "displacement" (195), the theme of Jewishness really refers to a different ethnic problem, the Black-white tensions that are too sensitive to address openly: "I suggest here that [the characters'] Jewishness is a figure for both sides of the unspeakable racial difference in the plantation society, the difference between black and white" (173). Though in Sommer's analysis the novel abounds in signs of Jewishness, it is really concerned with a different, "unspeakable" theme. The novelty of this reading and the assertive way in which Sommer argues her case constitute the strength of her study, but also leave abundant room for dissent, as discussed in the next section.

Sommer's reading of *María* made its greatest impact by supporting *Foundational Fictions'* thesis about nationalism and Latin American writing. But her analysis is also noteworthy for the range and number of elements cited as evidence of the importance of Jewishness in the novel. As a result, *María* emerges in Sommer's reading as a much more Jewish work of literature than hitherto believed.

This critic finds some of her clues in the text of the novel. These include the name of the male protagonist: while Catholics may bear Old Testament appellations, Sommer refers to Efraín as a "flamboyantly Hebrew name" and an "unabashedly Hebrew name" ("María's Disease" 201) that would have stood out more before the success of *María* popularized it. She also draws attention to the Old Testament allusions, not surprisingly, since readers have been linking this feature of the novel to Isaacs's ethnicity since the nineteenth century.

Sommer draws upon biographical information about Isaacs, signaling another shift in critical approach. While midcentury critics often minimized reliance on biographical evidence, later decades brought a relaxation of this restriction. This development is summarized in the title of *The Return of the Author* (1982) in which the Romanian theorist Eugen Simion argues that background information on authors and their times is a valuable resource; he observes that even anti-author theorists like Barthes draw upon autobiographical matter when writing about their own thought and work. The extratextual evidence in Sommer's analysis includes both Isaacs's biography and his statements concerning his novel. For example, she has

discovered a witness's account that "Isaacs was quite careful to have his María imagined as a Jewish beauty. He went so far as to suggest to a painter that his portrait of the fictional heroine would have been more perfect if it had a Jewish nose" ("María's Disease" 193).

As significant as the biographical arguments is the boldness with which this critic makes statements that are essentially conjectural in nature. During the late twentieth century, the requirement that all claims be proven by specific evidence, either textual or extrinsic, was loosened. A certain degree of speculation became more accepted in literary and cultural studies, a trend particularly noticeable in LGBTQ studies, where a non-specific quality of "queerness" might be attributed to a cultural text. In some passages, Sommer presents the reader with possibilities rather than proving facts, as witness the modal verb in "Isaacs may have felt set apart in the militantly Catholic south by his Jewish prehistory" ("María's Disease" 187). She says of the family doctor that his "profession and surname practically give him away as Jewish" (198). This assertion is extremely dubious since "Mayn" could easily be British, and McGrady identifies this character as the fictional version of an Englishman who lived in the Cauca Valley.<sup>4</sup> Sommer leaves room for doubt by inserting "practically" into the sentence. In a similar spirit, this critic argues that María's devotion to the Virgin Mary, whom she worships above Jesus, indicates her enduring Jewishness (192-93).<sup>5</sup> In another boldly speculative move, Sommer suggests that María's deceased mother, who opposed conversion to Christianity, may be "taking revenge for her child's betrayal of the family's religion" by killing her with hereditary epilepsy (189).<sup>6</sup> Such an approach is far from Menton's methodological stance, according to which Jewish consciousness or self-awareness in *María* may be sensed, but never demonstrated for lack of clear evidence.

In 1997, Sommer returned to the topic with her entry on Isaacs in *Jewish Writers of Latin America: A Dictionary*, edited by Darrell B. Lockhart. This summary is unusual for the author's insistent characterization of both Isaacs and his literary production as Jewish. She opens the entry with an anecdote in which the dying Isaacs, asked by a priest whether he believed in Jesus, answered "He's one of our race" ("Jorge Isaacs" 268). She claims that "As the son of a *converso*, Isaacs would gradually assume and then embrace his Jewish identity, almost as a rebellious response to those who called him Jew as an intended offense" (269). Sommer notes the many references to the Old Testament in Isaacs's 1881 poem "Saulo" and his praise, in an 1892 paean to England, of the British Mandate for Palestine, as well as the Jewishness of the characters in *María*. This critic concludes the entry by quoting the Spanish inscription on the bust of Isaacs at the Hebrew University, which describes him as expressing "el espíritu lírico de su estirpe hebrea" (272). This text goes beyond being an entry in a reference work to become a defense of considering Isaacs a Jewish writer.

The success of *Foundational Fictions* fully rekindled the discussion of Jewish themes and qualities in *María*. Subsequent researchers into this aspect of the novel generally situate their own work in relation to the analysis expounded by Sommer. Their critical postures range from acceptance of Sommer's contentions to modifications of her analysis to polemical opposition. More broadly, students of *María* today often mention the novel's Jewish or *converso* themes even if they prefer not to analyze them. For example, Benigno Trigo, discussing *María* in his 2000 *Subjects of Crisis: Race and Gender as Disease in Latin America*, acknowledges recent discussion of the heroine's Jewishness. He then concludes



that “the very principle of difference seems more important than the origin of María’s race”; observing that this character “is both Jewish and Christian,” he moves away from consideration of her Jewish aspects (57).

In 1997, Florinda F. Goldberg published a study of *María* that relies upon much of the same evidence that Sommer cites, but leads to a different conclusion. She agrees with Sommer that María’s Jewishness is the stain that brings about the sad conclusion. However, Goldberg disagrees that the novel uses Jewishness as a coded way of discussing Black-white conflicts, and does not treat Blackness in the novel. Stating “A mi juicio, es posible una lectura en la cual ‘judío’ puede leerse directamente como ‘judío’” (353), Goldberg argues that the family patriarch initially opposes Efraín’s marriage to María not for the reason that he gives—the likelihood that she will die young—but because she is halachically Jewish and her children would be as well. According to this reading, the father is trying to integrate his family into the landed oligarchy and believes that to achieve this goal the matrilineal transmission of Judaism in the family must be stopped. This analysis is notable for showing how greatly Sommer’s reading influences even critics who disagree with her conclusions.

Faverón Patriau, in his 2004 “Judaísmo y desarraigo en *María*,” challenges Sommer’s analysis of *María*, starting with her decision to categorize it as a foundational novel:

Pienso que otorgarle a esta novela el estatus fundacional entraña una petición de principio que lleva a sobreinterpretaciones destinadas a hacer calzar, en una idea de nación, la historia de una tensión entre, por un lado, la asimilación de la nueva subjetividad del converso en el contexto de un escenario nuevo y, por otro, la permanencia de la subjetividad tradicional judía determinada por la migración, la desterritorialización y la diáspora. (341)

As well as disputing the thesis that *María* is a foundational novel, this scholar objects to Sommer’s highly interpretive approach.

While Faverón Patriau’s wording suggests opposition toward Sommer’s analysis, he is in agreement with one of its main premises: *María* is marked by many signs of Jewishness, which are important in understanding it. Like Sommer, he goes through the novel discovering Jewish allusions and evidence of a Jewish self-awareness. These range from the exile and uprootedness that he views as central Jewish themes in *María* to Jewish aspects of the plot and characters, including some previously cited by Sommer. This critic makes even stronger statements than those advanced by Sommer. While Sommer, as discussed above, leaves room for doubt about the idea that Dr. Mayn is Jewish, Faverón Patriau asserts the “indudable origen judío del nombre del médico” (347). In this instance, I view the quest to confirm Jewishness in *María* as going too far beyond the evidence, especially given McGrady’s plausible argument that Mayn is English (*Jorge Isaacs* 67).

Faverón Patriau revisits issues discussed in previous research, applying his extensive knowledge of contemporary beliefs that would have influenced Isaacs. An example is Efraín’s contention that Jews are more given to superstition and magic than Christians. Unlike López

Michelson, who considers this stereotype true and finds *María* teeming with “Semitic” chiromancy and mysticism, Faverón Patriau demonstrates that the novel reflects widespread nineteenth-century beliefs concerning Jews and Christians. Drawing on the work of Sander Gilman, he states: “No es raro el criterio con que Isaacs fija la diferencia, si tenemos en cuenta que las pseudo ciencias de su siglo estaban arribando ya a conclusiones según las cuales la diferencia radical entre la mentalidad cristiana y la judía residía en que esta última era mística mientras la cristiana era racional” (345). He also takes up the vague Jewishness that Efraín attributes to José, a rustic from the province of Antioquía. Antioqueños were rumored to descend from colonial-era *conversos*; Faverón Patriau states that, while factually shaky, “la creencia era extendida en tiempos de Isaacs y él mismo fue gran promotor de la teoría del origen semita de la población antioqueña.” Efraín promotes the same idea by stating that not only does José look “bíblico,” but so do all old men from Antioquía (352).

The most significantly original feature of Faverón Patriau’s article is his argument that the sad ending of the novel was not occasioned by some quality inherent in María, as many critics believe. Rather the fault lies with Efraín, a sensual, nostalgic dreamer, who lacks the proactive agency of a founder (354). This critical reading focuses on Efraín’s inability to remain in a family homestead to which he is intensely attached: “la fatalidad del desarraigo lo transformará en un desterrado, y la tierra de promisión será apenas escena para el entierro de una extranjera” (356). The longtime Jewish themes of dispersion and exile come to the fore as Efraín leaves behind the Cauca Valley.

In her 2008 *The Wandering Signifier: Rhetoric of Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary*, Graff Zivin pursues the idea that Jewishness in Latin American cultural production is a “wandering signifier,” nearly devoid of inherent significance, that is filled with varying meanings. Her reading of *María* follows from Sommer’s idea that it is the racial otherness of María that prevents her from participating in the Colombian nation as it heads toward consolidation. In Graff Zivin’s reading, Efraín, despite his Hebrew name, “successfully assimilates into a Christian subject” (128), unlike his ill-fated beloved. Efraín’s patrilineal-only Jewish descent allows him to break free of his ancestral past, while María remains bound to it through her mother, from whom she apparently inherited her fatal disease along with her Jewishness. Graff Zivin also considers Efraín’s father inexpungibly Jewish “as evidenced by his failing health.” This critic enriches the discussion of Jewishness in *María* through her exploration of the link between conversion and disease and her characterization of the “converso trauma” (127) experienced by the family in *María*. More broadly, the characters represent those struggling to escape the category of the Other and insert themselves fully into the social mainstream.

In a 2011 article, Julia C. Paulk seeks not to challenge Sommer’s reading of *María* but to reconsider it: “Given that almost twenty years have passed since the publication of *Foundational Fictions*, perhaps we should be inspired by Faverón Patriau’s example to reexamine Sommer’s analyses in order to determine which aspects of her methodology are still useful for us and where further work may be called for” (43). She reviews Sommer’s arguments in detail, mentions other related analyses, and offers her own ideas on the Jewish aspects of *María*. Paulk decries an excessive polarization between figurative readings of the signs of Jewishness in *María*, such as those of Sommer and Graff Zivin, and more literal

interpretations, notably that of Florinda Goldberg, and recommends an understanding of the novel at both allegorical and straightforward levels. More importantly, Paulk views *María* as calling into question nineteenth-century views on race, ethnicity, and nation: “I will demonstrate that Efraín’s nostalgic look at the past offers a critique of the high cost of assimilation to those groups that do not fit in with the nineteenth-century elite’s vision of a homogeneous, whitened national identity” (43).

Paulk seeks to gain a fresh perspective by creating connections to research being carried out in the relatively new field of Latin American Jewish Studies. She cites Marjorie Agosín’s *Taking Root: Narratives of Jewish Women in Latin America*, which, however, is not a research work but a collection of personal statements by Latin American Jewish women. In *Taking Root*, Paulk finds vigorous defenses of plural identities: Edna Aizenberg demands “Why is Latin American identity still so narrowly construed?” (7), while Nora Strejilevich hopes for a society in which an individual may identify diversely. Paulk then looks back at *María* and detects a viewpoint similar to that of the newer writers: “What is suggested by María’s tragedy is a twenty-first century solution: the expansion of the notion of national identity to include those who are understood to be ‘different’ and the allowance for the possibility of inhabiting multiple identities at once” (56).

The most valuable feature of Paulk’s essay is its questioning of the assumption that *María* posits absorption into the dominant group as a requirement for participation in the nation’s future. Yet personal reflections by Latin American Jewish women offer inadequate support for the idea that *María* promotes pluralism of identity. The interpretation that Paulk proposes, though intriguing, still remains to be fully demonstrated.

Over the years, critical interest in the Jewish elements in *María* has waxed and waned. This topic often lay dormant during the mid-twentieth century, but has enjoyed a resurgence since the late 1980s. The significance ascribed to the novel’s often veiled Jewishness has varied greatly, yet no new major findings have surfaced to add to the evidence available to researchers. To give a hypothetical example, no one has discovered an early draft of *María* in which the Jewish themes are more explicit. Critics continue to work with the same primary text and the same information about Isaacs and his milieu, yet they reach very different conclusions.

Driving these changes are shifting critical approaches and a broadening concept of Jewishness. From the novel’s publication until the mid-twentieth century, a biographical outlook was common. As textual analysis emerged and *María* attracted academic literary critics, such influential scholars as Anderson Imbert encouraged readers of *María* to focus on the novel itself and its links to other works. Such a text-centric approach yielded elegant and illuminating analyses. Yet it created little opportunity to discuss Jewish thought in *María*, which is, in Menton’s words, “difícil de comprobar” (3). The focus on the novel’s form, especially the problem of its unity, continued well into the 1980s.

A strict concept of Jewish identity further inhibited research. McGrady gives an extreme example with his, in my view, unreasonably drastic pronouncement that “[t]he whole

problem of Hebrew influence in *María* is a fallacious one” because of the author’s lack of Jewish learning (*Jorge Isaacs* 128).

By the 1980s, scholars of literature became more willing to cite extratextual evidence and to focus on thematic concerns. There was a general weakening of the idea that critics needed to support all claims by proof found in the text. A more interpretative approach, exemplified by *Foundational Fictions*, allows the novel’s Jewishness to be read between its lines. Jewishness became a more elastic concept; in literary studies it was extended to writers and characters who are assimilated or not halachically Jewish. *Converso* identity or consciousness in *María* surfaced as an active topic of academic study.

How might this research problem evolve? Sommer’s study of *María* has had such an impact that, since its appearance, discussions of Jewishness in the novel tend to involve the reappraisal of *Foundational Fictions*. The two discussions should be unlinked. It should not be necessary to reassess Sommer’s main thesis every time that one analyzes the significance of the Jewish or *converso* characters, allusions to Jewish matters, and possible traces of a Jewish perspective or thought in *María*.

In recent years, it has become more common to study the Jewish aspects of literary texts by authors who thematized their Jewish origins either sparsely or not at all, and research in other literatures might offer clues to students of *María*. Scholars have been particularly fascinated by the case of the renowned Prague-based writer Franz Kafka (1883-1924), from a relatively assimilated Jewish family. The idea has been circulating for some time that Kafka’s narratives, though almost devoid of overt Jewish themes, reflect Jewish thought. Walter Benjamin’s 1934 “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death” draws parallels between Kafka’s fiction and Talmudic narrative, Hasidic folk tales, and messianism, although his essay is more a free-ranging meditation than the defense of a specific argument. Later critics reframed the discussion of the Jewishness of Kafka’s narrative as a topic for academic study. In his noted 1973 “Kafka as a Jew,” Walter H. Sokel begins by summarizing the paradox of this writer’s Jewishness: “With a single exception, there are no overt references to Jews and Jewishness in Kafka’s entire oeuvre,” while his nonliterary writings show that “Jewishness and Judaism began to matter very much to him from 1911 on” (837). Sokel then asserts that Kafka’s preoccupation with Jewish thought, religion, and identity shaped his major narratives. By way of illustration, the critic turns to “The Metamorphosis,” whose protagonist is famously transformed into a monstrous vermin, suggesting that one might “read Kafka’s 1915 story as equating Gregor’s conscious self with assimilation and his repressed urge, that erupts in this disgusting form, with authentic Jewishness” (849-50). Though Sokel anticipates that his interpretation will be greeted with “We just won’t buy it” (850), the belief that Jewish currents flow beneath the surface of Kafka’s fiction has gained acceptance in the twenty-first century.

Sokel draws upon his vast knowledge of the biographical Kafka, but his original contribution lies not in his erudition, but in his highly original interpretation of “The Metamorphosis.” The critical problem that he tackles is similar to that faced by students of *María* in that he

analyzes a famous literary narrative whose meaning has been construed in many ways. One would welcome fresh interpretations of Isaacs's novel that bring to the fore the novel's latent Jewish content, but strike out in directions independent of Sommer's reading.

Studies of the literary Jewishness of the Brazilian Clarice Lispector (1920-1977) might also provide leads. Jewish themes do not surface either in Lispector's novels and stories or in her nonfiction, and, following the assimilationist line dominant in Brazil during her career, she avoided commenting on her ethnicity. Since her death, a number of academic critics have sought to identify in her narrative traces of Jewishness. Nelson H. Vieira argues that Lispector's 1977 novel *A hora da estrela* contains "Jewish motifs" (140). Taking as his point of departure the heroine's name, Macabéa, he reads the novel as an ironic reworking of the story of the Maccabees (140-47), concluding that "the novella's midrashic tendencies confirm [Lispector's] debt to her Jewish heritage" (147). Other researchers detect not overt allusions, but rather a subtle current of Jewish hermeneutics or mysticism in this author's narrative. Berta Waldman associates the relativistic view of meaning in the Jewish hermeneutical tradition with the fluid, indeterminate significance of Lispector's literary language.<sup>7</sup> It would be worth reexamining *María* to see whether it reveals any of the elusive traces of Jewish thought that critics have detected coursing beneath the surface of the Brazilian author's narrative. In so doing, one must leave open the possibility that the search may yield no significant results.

As a final suggestion, scholars might examine whether Jewishness is manifested or implied in film and television adaptations of *María*. Starting with the 1918 cinematic version directed in Mexico by Rafael Bermúdez Zatarain, *María* has served as the basis for numerous films and television series, and it would be worth seeing whether these representations of Isaacs's characters reflect a preoccupation with their ethnicity.

While the Jewishness of Isaacs and the characters of *María* has long attracted the attention of critics, particularly in recent decades, the theme is by no means reaching exhaustion. I hope to see this complex critical problem further elucidated in future studies.<sup>8</sup>

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will not try to answer this question, a variant of the endless dispute over “Who is a Jew?,” and will focus instead on tracing and assessing the evolution of research opinion.

<sup>2</sup> Some early devotees of the novel became convinced that a “real” Jewish María came to live in the Isaacs household, but died shortly after arriving. Later authors believed the original María to be María Mercedes Cabal, wife of President Manuel María Mallarino, although she was not Jewish and, born in 1819, was eighteen years older than Isaacs; this belief persists in such sources as Wikipedia ([https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mar%C3%ADa\\_Mercedes\\_Cabal](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mar%C3%ADa_Mercedes_Cabal), accessed 27 September 2020). McGrady (*Jorge Isaacs* 126-27) deems these identifications legendary.

<sup>3</sup> Lee Joan Skinner convincingly argues that while incest is a theme of *María*, it is present in the relation between María and Efraín’s father, who also functions as her father. Skinner makes a strong case when she cites passages in which the patriarch frightens the girl with his flirtatious behavior.

<sup>4</sup> According to McGrady, “Dr. Mayn is known to have been a real person whose complete name was George Henry Maine, an Englishman who served with the Colombian military forces and spent his last years in the Cauca Valley” (*Jorge Isaacs* 67).

<sup>5</sup> The idea that *conversos* feel a special rapport with either Jesus or Mary as fellow Jews has a long history; one may see Zanetti 29.

<sup>6</sup> In the novel, it remains unclear whether the heroine has inherited the form of epilepsy that killed her mother or suffers from another disorder, both of which are asserted at different times. This ambiguity has allowed for considerable critical interpretation. Some scholars view María’s disease psychological in origin; for example, Skinner applies the term and concept “hysteria” (63), citing Freud’s case study of his patient Dora.

<sup>7</sup> For a review of the research into Jewish aspects of Lispector’s work, one may see Lindstrom.

<sup>8</sup> My thanks to Nancy LaGreca for her extremely helpful comments upon this essay.

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