

## Canadian Jewish Studies Études juives canadiennes



### Adriana M. Brodsky and Laura Arnold Leibman, eds., *Jews Across the Americas: A Sourcebook, 1492-Present*

Joanna Zofia Spyra

Volume 40, printemps 2025

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1118245ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40427>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

#### Éditeur(s)

Association for Canadian Jewish Studies / Association d'études juives canadiennes

#### ISSN

1198-3493 (imprimé)  
1916-0925 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

#### Citer ce compte rendu

Spyra, J. (2025). Compte rendu de [Adriana M. Brodsky and Laura Arnold Leibman, eds., *Jews Across the Americas: A Sourcebook, 1492-Present*]. *Canadian Jewish Studies / Études juives canadiennes*, 40, 177–179.  
<https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40427>

© Joanna Zofia Spyra, 2025



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

**Adriana M. Brodsky and Laura Arnold Leibman, eds.,  
*Jews Across the Americas: A Sourcebook, 1492–Present*  
 (New York: NYU Press, 2023), 552 pp.,  
 ISBN: 978-1-4798-1932-4.**

*Jews Across the Americas* is an ambitious and expansive volume that spans over five hundred pages, offering a multifaceted exploration of Jewish life across North America, South America, and the Caribbean. Organized into five chronological sections, the collection covers Jewish experiences from the early colonial period to the present, featuring 113 primary sources contributed by eighty-one scholars and curated by two editors. A concise contextual introduction and guiding questions accompany each document. The book serves as a teaching resource, equipping instructors with a ready-made toolkit to facilitate classroom discussions, draw comparative insights, and integrate interdisciplinary perspectives into their curricula.

One of the anthology's most significant strengths is its hemispheric approach, which challenges the common tendency to equate Jewish American history solely with the United States or to frame it primarily as an Ashkenazi experience. The introduction to the volume directly references Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's idea of "the danger of a single story," highlighting the value of diverse Jewish experiences and various meanings of Jewishness throughout the Americas (1, 8). In doing so, it calls for moving beyond oversimplified portrayals and encourages a critical reassessment of one-dimensional narratives. Thematically, the volume delves into a wide range of topics, including the concept of a "moving center" in Jewish history, antisemitism, the formation of transregional Jewish identities, Jewish religious and cultural practices, Jewish gender and sexuality, and the broader question of Jewish belonging.

The richness of the volume is reflected in its diverse selection of sources. These include legal and official documents such as edicts, governmental orders, and petitions; religious artifacts like *ketubot* (marriage contracts), Judaica objects, and photographs of *mikva'ot* (ritual baths) and synagogues; visual works, including paintings, portraits, photographs, posters, comics, and graphic novels; texts, such as literary excerpts, letters, and newspaper pages; and other items such as maps, calendar, recipes or song lyrics. Many of these documents are true gems, offering rare insights into lesser-known aspects of Jewish life across the Americas. As a result, this volume surpasses its initial function as a mere sourcebook. It evolves into an engaging and frequently unexpected reading experience, making it a compelling exploration in its own right. As a historian specializing in the twentieth century, I was particularly struck by sources from earlier periods—materials I rarely engage with in my usual research and teaching. For instance, I was intrigued by a late sixteenth-century confession of sodomy by a male convert in colonial Brazil—an account that offers a unique glimpse into the intersection of sexuality, conversion, and legal structures of

the time (20–22). Equally fascinating were the ornately carved gravestones from an early eighteenth-century cemetery in Curaçao, which reveal the artistic, religious, and communal expressions of the Jewish diaspora in the Caribbean (55–57).

One of the key issues raised in the book is how regionalism shapes representations of Jewish history, highlighting disparities in depiction across locations. While some places appear as more unified historical entities, others are fragmented into distinct regions and expressions. This variation is not merely a matter of geographic scale but also reflects uneven historiographical development, gaps in available archival sources, and the broader politics of historical visibility. Materials from Canada are one such example of how Jewish history is represented through a polyphony of narratives rather than a singular, integrated framework. These include the “gender-bending” story of a Sephardic runaway, Esther Brandeau/Jacques La Fargue, in early seventeenth-century New France, an uncommon account of a specifically Jewish protagonist in this historical context (70–72); the 1831 petition for Jewish civil rights in Lower Canada, a legal milestone that nonetheless remains peripheral in many broader accounts of Jewish emancipation (174–176); an article from the Montreal-based Yiddish newspaper *Der Keneder Adler*, which explores gendered economic dynamics within the kosher meat industry, highlighting how women were key enforcers of religious dietary laws while shaping communal commerce (347–350); or the unusual use of tintype photography by Kali Spritzer, a contemporary Jewish photographer based on the traditional lands of the Tsleil–Waututh, Skwxwú7mesh, and Musqueam peoples in British Columbia, whose work engages with the layered histories of Jewish and Indigenous presence in Canada (495–500). These less conventional historical sources urge readers to reconsider how Jewish history is framed, narrated, and remembered.

*Jews Across the Americas* stands out for the considerable editorial effort required by co-editors Adriana Brodsky and Laura Arnold Leibman to bring together a diverse and large group of scholars. The breadth of contributors reflects a collective recognition of the volume's importance, relevance, and practical value. The volume serves both as a resource for designing specialized courses from scratch and has the potential to facilitate the integration of Jewish topics into existing syllabi. Beyond its educational utility, the collection raises critical questions about the role of such courses in higher education. It prompts reflection on the demand for these subjects, the student interest, and the institutional willingness to incorporate Jewish studies into broader academic programs.

The book extends beyond the printed page with an accompanying website that offers additional resources, including original-language versions of translated materials, a glossary, and even flashcards to test knowledge on the topics covered. This digital extension is significant, as any products inspired by this volume could be easily inte-

grated into the website. An important suggestion for expanding the resource's utility would be a brief list of recommended readings with each source. While the website already offers a selection of secondary literature organized by region and theme, providing tailored reading suggestions alongside each primary source would create a more immediate and practical tool for instructors. Many Jewish studies scholars are trained within specific national traditions, disciplines, or time periods, which can present challenges when engaging with materials outside of their focus. A curated set of readings could help bridge this gap and offer a more accessible entry point into unfamiliar areas of Jewish history and culture. The anthology is organized chronologically, which is a common structure in university settings, as many courses tend to follow a linear, time-based approach to help students understand historical progression. However, it might also be beneficial to explore thematic courses that span longer periods, focusing on specific themes, ideas, or movements that transcend chronological boundaries. Another consideration is how the materials could be adapted for non-English-speaking contexts, both within and beyond the Americas. This could further enhance the impact of the volume's content. Additionally, a fascinating follow-up would be a roundtable discussion, either written or recorded, among contributors. In this forum, scholars could share their experiences teaching the material and address the challenges they have faced and the successes they have achieved in the classroom.

*Jews Across the Americas* is an important collaborative project that provides a rich platform of teaching resources and fosters further research and dialogue. It encourages critical discussions on the future of Jewish studies and has the potential to inspire future anthologies and curricula, ensuring a lasting impact on the field.

**Joanna Zofia Spyra**

University of Bergen / University of Huddersfield