

Whose experience gets to be a “Jewish experience”?

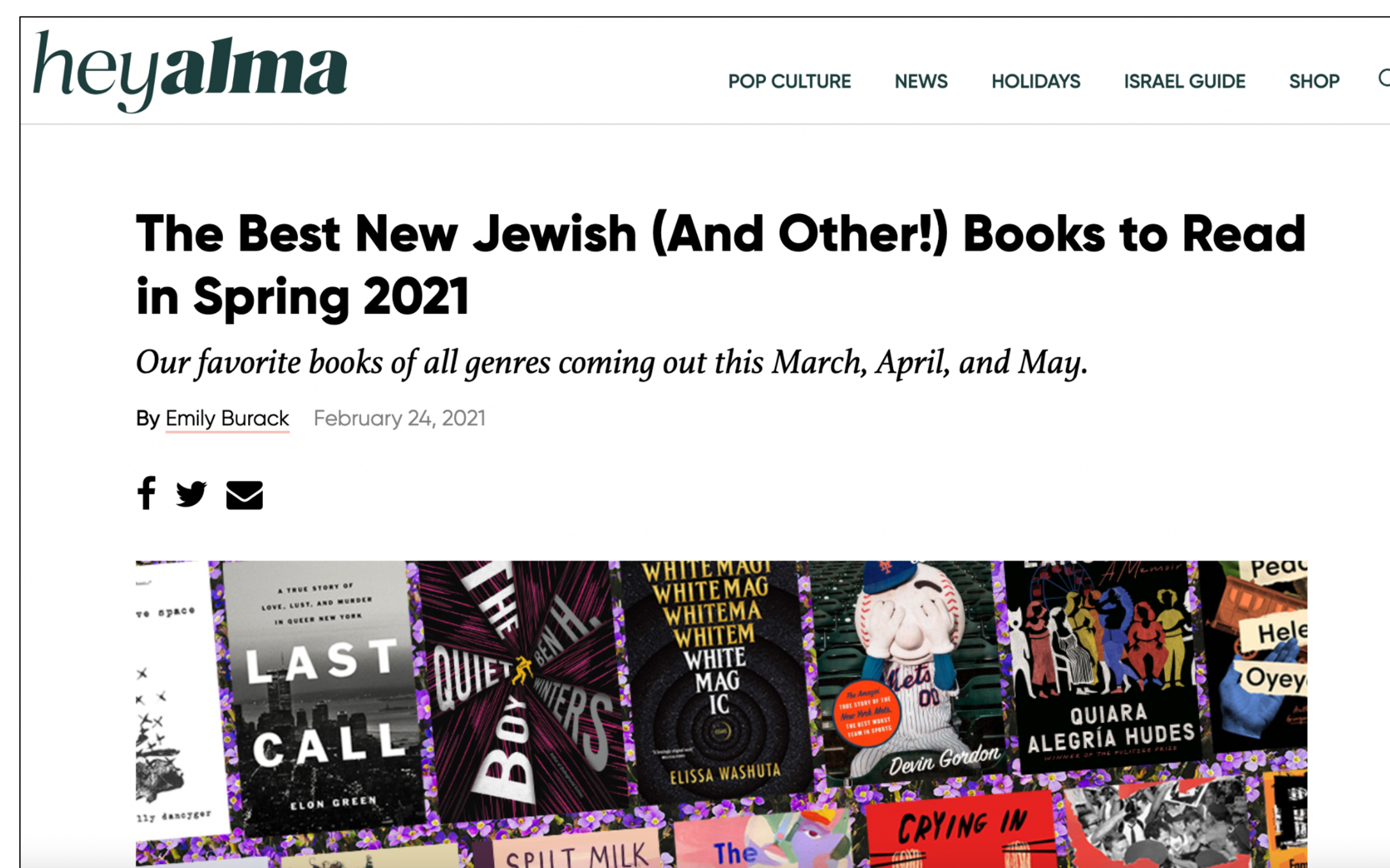
Analyzing the demographic data of contemporary Jewish American Literature

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Abstract

In Jewish American literary and cultural studies, as with similar diasporic cultural groups, scholars and other stakeholders have debated over the definition of “authenticity.” Jewish communities are multiracial, with variable levels of secularity or religiosity, and various degrees of comfort when associating with Jewish identities. Yet the most common depictions of “American Jewry” present a single dominant vision of its Jewish subject: male, Ashkenazi, and from the Northeastern US.

Using tools such as ArcGIS, I compare contemporary representations of Jewishness in literature against American demographics. Utilizing information from published works featuring Jewish characters and authors, and pieces that have been highlighted in Jewish publications, I identify primary locations, and chart them against Jewish population density statistics from Brandeis University. The aim of this analysis is to provide a data-driven analysis in broader discussions of representation and Jewish “authenticity”.



Hey Alma, a Jewish feminist pop culture-focused website, has been publishing monthly and seasonal lists of new Jewish books since 2018

Criteria for “Jewish American Novels”

In order to establish a dataset of contemporary Jewish American literature, I needed to establish what I meant by contemporary, Jewish, American, and literature. I pulled the books for my analysis from *Hey Alma*'s archives, and restricted it to books either mentioned in an article or linked to from an article written in 2021 or later. This restriction was made in the interest of time; ideally, I'd prefer this analysis to include more Jewish publications and more years, but the necessity of manual book entry lowered my capabilities.

In order to merit inclusion on my list, a book also had to meet these criteria:

- Written by an author residing in America, or with years of experience living in America
- Published by an American publisher, or self-published by an American author
- Author must identify as Jewish
- Novel must feature a Jewish protagonist
- Must be a work of fiction
- Must have been published during or after the year 2000

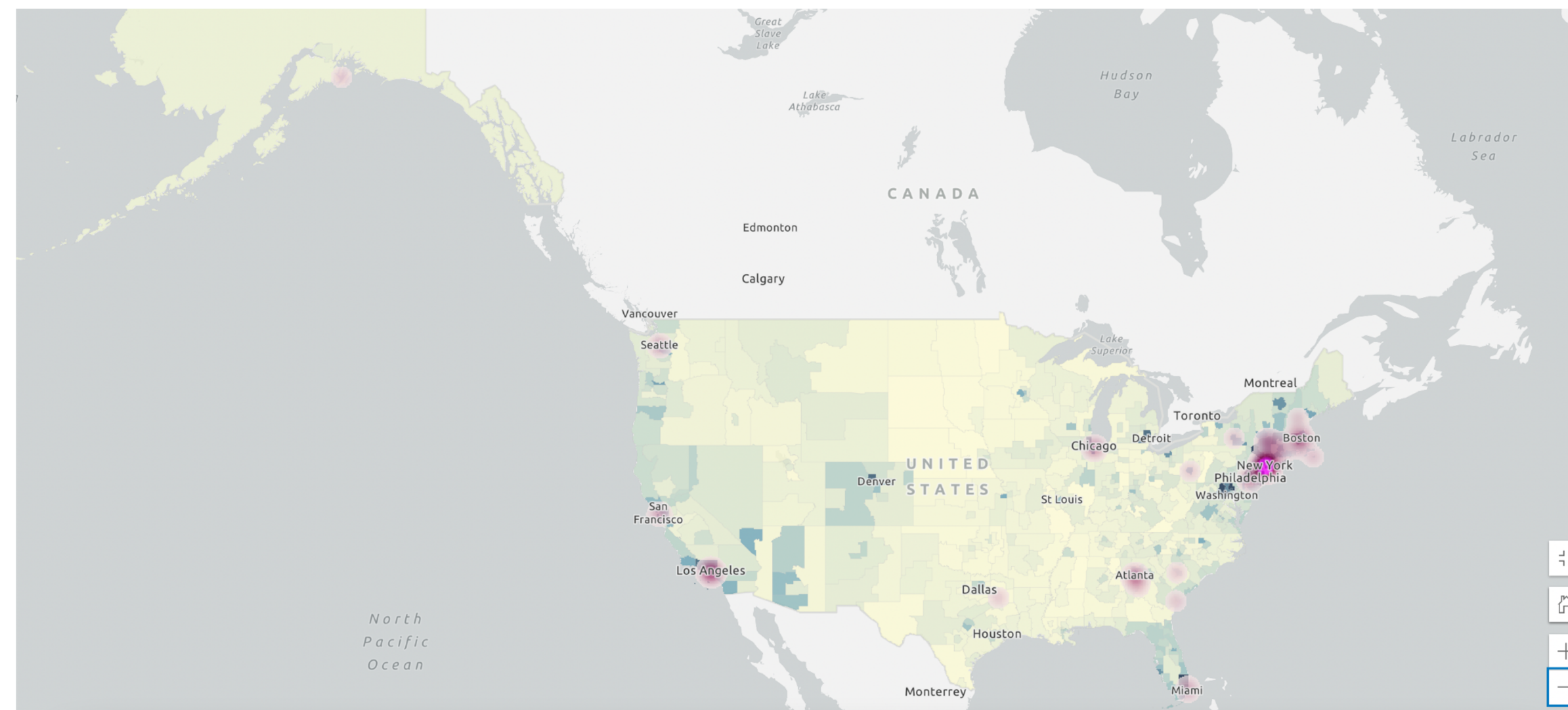
In total, these parameters created a list of 79 contemporary Jewish American novels.



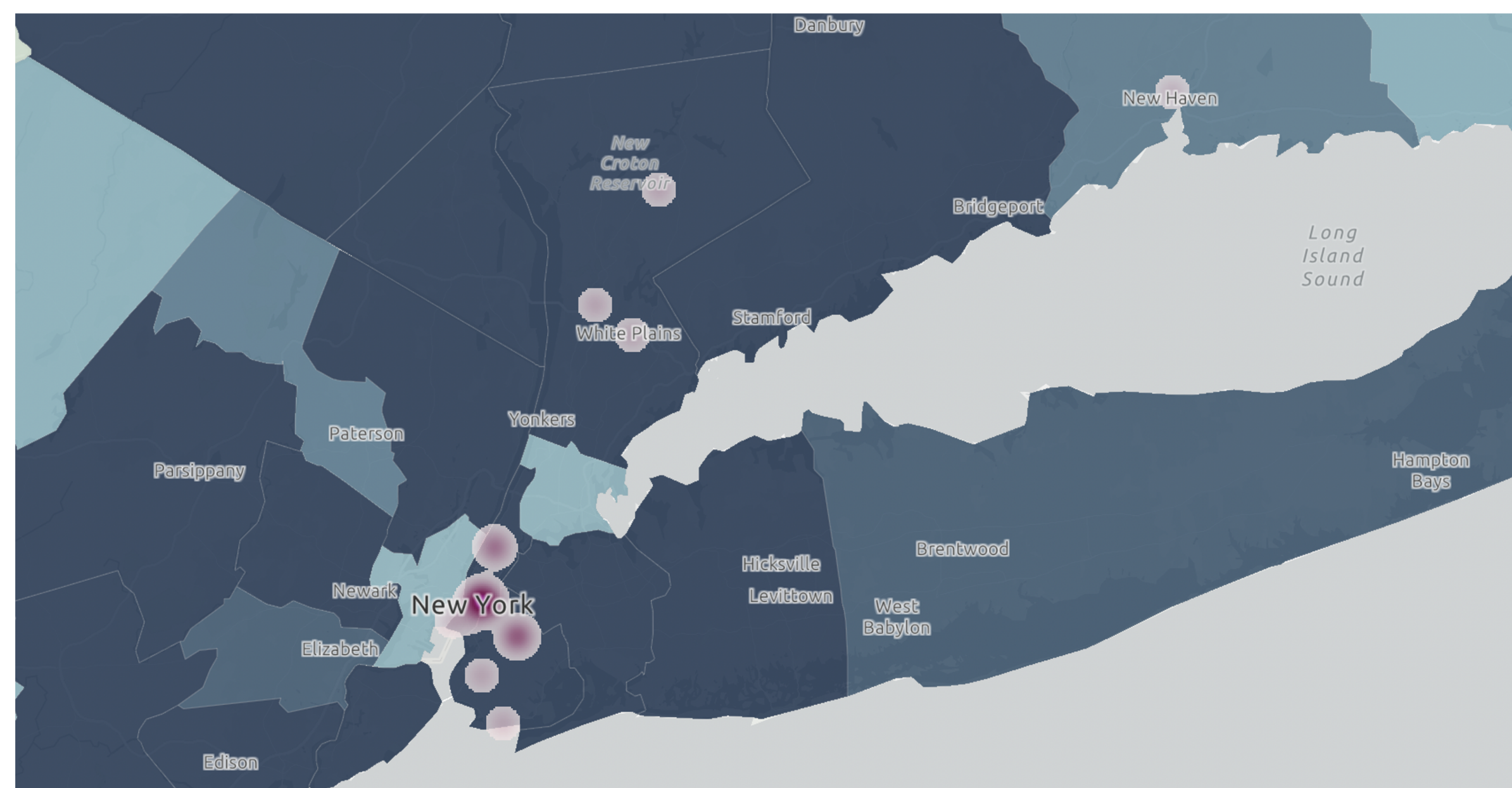
Locations, Data, and Tools

As many of these novels are not fixed to one single location, I established the primary location of each book based off publicly available information: excerpts available on Amazon, advertising copy, relevant Goodreads analyses, and the write-ups on *Hey Alma*'s website. If the material referenced a specific neighbourhood, such as the Lower East Side or Borough Park in New York, I inputted that. If it wasn't neighbourhood specific, I referenced the largest metro area. If it was fictionalized or vague, I tried to establish the closest geographic reference, such as northern Connecticut in *Camp*. I then plotted their coordinates on Google Maps.

The population data came from the American Jewish Population Project, a part of Brandeis University's Steinhardt Social Research Institute. The AJPP uses data synthesis to construct estimates of American Jewish population, breaking it down by state, metro area, and county grouping. It has published four reports, with 2020 as the most recent, and therefore the one I used. I used the county grouping-level data for my map rather than the state or metro-level data, as I felt it would best be able to illustrate the divide between urban and rural regions and provide the clearest points of comparison between the literary heat map and the demographic data.



I used ArcGIS to create this map. The bottom layer represents the county grouping-by-county grouping Jewish population density, as a percentage of the area's total population. The darkest blue spots on the underlying map have an estimated Jewish population of 8% or higher, including the Lower Hudson Valley in New York at an estimated 33% Jewish. The lightest yellow goes all the way down to an estimated 0.1%, in the Eastern Counties of Nebraska. The heat map details the settings of the books from the Alma list. As you can see, there is a massive cluster in the Northeast, particularly around New York City. The preponderance of these New York based stories are based in Manhattan (an estimated 19% Jewish), Brooklyn (25%), and Westchester County (15%).



Who's left out?

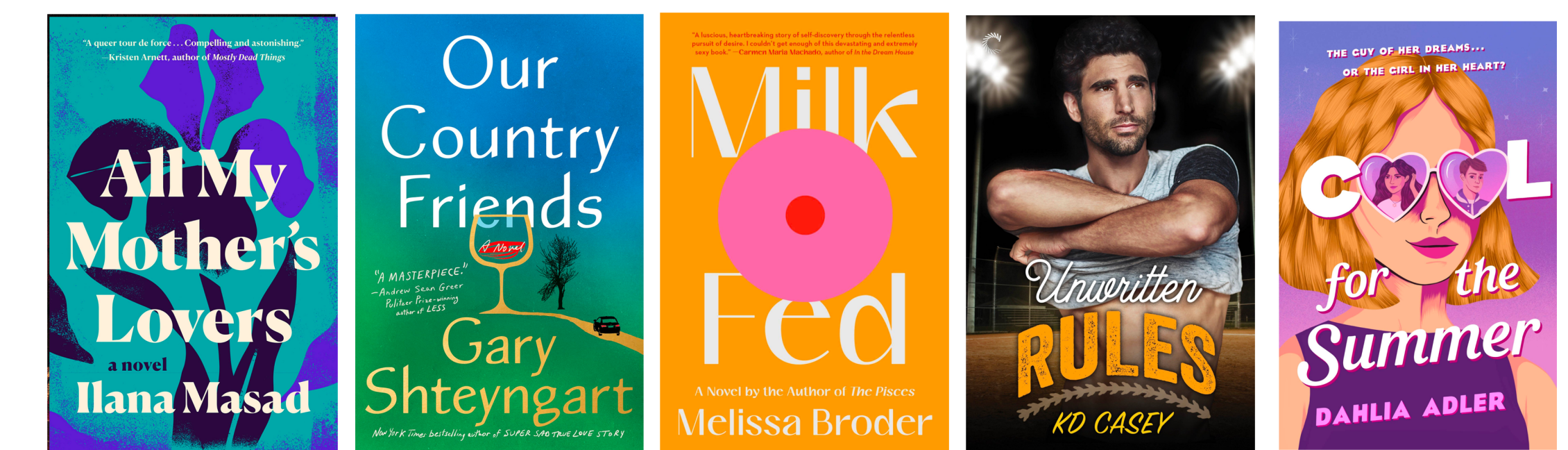
There are wide swathes of America, including some in darker blue, which do not play host to a single work of post-2021 Jewish American highlighted literature yet still play host to Jewish Americans. Not a single story is set in the American midwest outside of Chicago, and the Washington, Baltimore, and Phoenix metro areas are also untouched. The two metro areas with the highest estimated Jewish percentage are the New York-Newark metro (8.5%) and the Miami-Fort Lauderdale Metro (7.9%). The former has 25 out of 79 novels primarily set there; the latter has two.

This table shows the list of the highest density Jewish population county areas (according to Brandeis's definition) without a single post-2021 Jewish American novel primarily set in them. These areas are primarily major city suburbs with large Jewish settlements.

County Group	Total Jewish Population	Percentage Jewish
Lower Hudson Valley, NY	101,400	32.7%
Palm Beach, FL	228,500	18.9%
Nassau, NY	191,700	17.9%
Lakewood, NJ	81,800	17.9%
Jersey City Metro Northeast, NJ	100,500	13.6%

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