

ABSTRACT

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REFIGURING CONTEMPORARY BODIES
OF JEWISH AMERICAN WOMEN'S
ASSIMILATION

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Jewish American assimilation in the United States is considered a finished, and successful, project. This narrative of successful assimilation is used as a foundational example of enculturation in the United States in numerous bodies of study, including whiteness studies, cultural studies, and Jewish studies. The usage of Jewish American male experiences as the basis of this narrative creates the notion that Jewish American women achieved assimilation through their male counterparts. Though this metonymic usage of male experience for all Jewish American experience has largely gone uncontested in scholarship, a plethora of Jewish American women's writing has emerged contemporarily in which this metonymic usage of Jewish male experience for the *entire* story of Jewish American assimilation is being questioned. In these texts, visual and written, ghostly and strange happenings suggest that for some Jewish American women assimilation may be an ongoing project and that new tools of understanding are necessary to understand their stories, so different from the already

sedimented male narratives of the Jewish American assimilation story. In this project, memoir (*Prozac Nation* by Elizabeth Wurtzel), fiction (*Empathy* by Sarah Schulman), and television drama (*The L Word* by Ilene Chaiken) created by Jewish American women writers is examined in order to re-imagine narratives of Jewish American assimilation. With the use of theory from a variety of bodies of study as well as Jewish American women's fiction produced before and after World War II, Jewish American assimilation is illuminated as an ongoing project in which some Jewish American women inhabit the identity of *strangers*. The *strangers* encountered here illuminate not only the failings of assimilation, and its attendant narratives, but also resistances to assimilation and its violence's. Further, the encounter with *strange* characters in the process of assimilating created by Jewish American women imagined to be successfully "Americanized," provides insight into the necessary tools of discipline and normalization in the construction of citizenship and belonging in the United States.

SPEAKING FROM A STRANGE PLACE: REFIGURING CONTEMPORARY
BODIES OF JEWISH AMERICAN WOMEN'S ASSIMILATION

By

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FOR MARVIN ISRAEL KARP
April 18th, 1938-November 6th, 2011

*Without whom this project
would not have been possible. May
you and those who came before you
find peace in the great beyond.*

But children had it worst of all, for although it would seem that they had fewer memories to haunt them, they still had the itch of memory as strong as the elders of the shtetl. Their strings were not even their own, but tied around them by parents and grandparents--strings not fastened to anything, but hanging loosely from the darkness.

Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*

AND FOR CAROLINA GOMEZ MONTOYA

*For sharing the present
with me and for helping me
envision a future in the light
of the past.*

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**Chapter 1. Assimilating the Strange: Jewish American
Assimilation and Its Queer Reminders**

Born into a world already in process, all of us begin—belated. The sense of belatedness is particularly keen for American children of Jews who survived Hitler. They come ‘after’ the destruction of European Jewry. They enter a place with no visible ruins, invisibly scarred by what happened elsewhere, earlier.

Janet Burstein, *Telling the Little Secrets*

My story is the story of the exile of the Jews: a story of discovery, of picking up and discarding, of mending the worn fabric of a life, and sometimes throwing away the sharp shards of identity found in the back of a dark closet.

Lynn Meredith Schrieber, “Meeting in the Middle”

Because my “engagement with the unsayable” is at once systematic and deeply intuitive and is rooted in historical as well as psychological contexts, it seems appropriate not only to offer my readings, but also to document the process by which I came to these troubling conclusions, which have wide interpretive ramifications.

Evelyn Torton Beck, “Kahlo's World Split Open”

As a society, we live with the unbearable by pressuring those who have been traumatized to forget and by rejecting the testimonies of those who are forced by fate to remember. As individuals and as cultures, we impose arbitrary limits on memory and on recovery from trauma; a century, say, for slavery, fifty years, perhaps for the Holocaust.

Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*

Preface

Jews born in the United States after World War II are understood to have inherited white, assimilated, middle-class identities. However, visual and written texts created by contemporary Jewish American women writers, such as Elizabeth Wurtzel, Ilene Chaiken, and Sarah Schulman, establish Jewish American assimilation as incomplete for many, and untenable for some. They create Jewish women characters unable to rid themselves of the markers of their Jewishness, relegated to the status of perpetual *stranger* for their failures. The characters (fictional and autobiographical) I will examine here--Elizabeth Wurtzel, Jenny Schecter, and Anna O--are pushed towards the periphery of identities toward the edge of assimilation¹ as symbols of dangerous *strangers*. This assimilating process, for many Jewish women, is an ongoing project in need of vigilant reiteration in ways that Jewish male assimilation is not, perhaps due to the unequal expectations for feminine and masculine performances of self.

Jewish American women, I argue, must continuously work at assimilating, through employing different performative and performance strategies, including physical and behavioral modification. Further, different time periods and locations have called for (and continue to call for) different strategies of bodily discipline. Jewish American women who are unable to perform an assimilating self are relegated to the position of *strangers*, neither insider nor outsider. The more visible Jewish

¹ This assimilation is referred to as a move into 'whiteness' in most bodies of study that address Jewish assimilation and so that is largely how I will discuss this phenomenon here. However, the absorption of Jewishness into whiteness does not mean you can find Jews in the histories of whiteness, belying some of the problematics of the language usage.

American women have become, the more those who mostly closely resemble a stereotypical idea of “Jewish women” must work to rid themselves of these offending markings. There is of course no definitively “Jewish” body, but through the dissemination of popular culture images of Jewish women, a *perceived* Jewish body emerges, with real consequences for those who have bodies most closely associated with the stereotyped image.

Currently, Jewish Americans are categorized as white, middle-class Americans. Although there was once the “threat” of Jewish Americans being categorized racially as Hebrew, today Jewish Americans are included in the racial category of “white” on the U.S. Census. Eric Goldstein, in *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* writes:

In 1909, Jewish communal leaders became worried over the increasing tendency of government officials to classify Jews racially as ‘Hebrews’...Many Jews feared that the government's adoption of the ‘Hebrew’ classification might be the first step toward their eventual exclusion from the rights of white American citizens. The American Jewish Committee successfully lobbied Congress and the Census Bureau to remove the new racial category from the census forms. (102-103).

The story of Jewish assimilation as told in academic discourses and perpetuated in popular culture establishes that Jewish Americans achieved assimilated status in the post-World War II period. This story is pervasive, despite the plethora of literature written by Jewish American women born post World War II that argues against the

simplistic narratives of completed assimilation.

Jewish scholars' utilizing feminist, queer, and post-structuralist frameworks, such as Michael Rogin and Karen Brodtkin, have exposed the ways that narratives of Jewish assimilation privilege masculine, white, and straight experiences. However, despite the recent interventions to dislodge this metonymic usage of Jewish male experience, there has been no movement to argue against the basic timeline of Jewish assimilation that is used as a foundation for work focusing on Jewish Americans. While all of these interventions ask for additional narratives to be included in the telling of Jewish American life, they do not yet question the ways in which the master narrative of completed Jewish assimilation needs to be augmented in light of these interventions. This lack of re-visioning the timeline and workings of Jewish American assimilation means that all Jewish American and American assimilation work relies on a faulty foundation. In order to have a better understanding of these processes, it is not enough to “add on” women’s stories and queer stories—the very foundational assumptions driving this work must be re-envisioned.

Such a foundational revision requires beginning with the works that have been added on but not fully incorporated as well as the works that have been entirely ignored due to categorical conundrums. Queer, contemporary, third generation Jewish American women writers such as Sarah Schulman and Ilene Chaiken create characters who pay consequences for not being completely assimilated into white middle-class communities despite the notion that they are fully assimilated (and thus undifferentiated from their normalized, unmarked counterparts). In order to deal with the excessive remains of Jewish history (both their own personal inherited familial

history and collective history), characters like Jenny Schecter, on Ilene Chaiken's popular Showtime drama *The L Word*, work to mask, deny, and ameliorate the markings (both physical and psychic) that render them *strange*. By exploring the ways in which these Jewish American women *strangers*, as per Zygmunt Bauman and Shane Phelan's definitions, experience themselves and their surroundings, we are able to see that not all narratives of Jewish American assimilation follow the same familiar post-World War II trajectory.

While Elizabeth Wurtzel (*Prozac Nation*, 2000), Ilene Chaiken (*The L Word*, 2004-2009), and Sarah Schulman (*Empathy*, 1992) are not included in any of the newly formed canons of Jewish American writers, all three address Jewish issues, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly. All three were born after World War II (and thus could be expected to inhabit assimilated identities) and are part of a generation of writers who are only recently beginning to be heard at all, and who have yet to be widely critically engaged, particularly in Jewish Studies. Further, all three write Jewish women who play the part of the *stranger* in all of the communities they inhabit. Elizabeth Wurtzel struggles to enter and maintain residence in an upper-class white world, experiencing almost continuous failure interspersed with interludes of astounding success; Jenny Schecter is ousted from an Orthodox Jewish world and attempts to live as the *stranger* in a queer, white women's world; and Schulman's *Anna O.* plays the *stranger* in her family and attempts to make a home amongst other strangers in the 1980s Lower East Side. These works are important sites of investigation because they begin to argue against the notion that Jewish American assimilation is a finished project by illustrating the ways their main characters must

continuously perform and reiterate an *assimilating* self in order to maintain a place within whiteness.

In these texts Jewishness is sometimes ambiguous, sometimes explicit, but always ambivalent. None of the main characters in the texts I have chosen live in Jewish worlds all of the time, several don't spend any of their time in the presence of other Jews and rarely acknowledge their Jewishness except as colorful anecdotes to amuse non-Jewish audiences. However, all three main characters express a feeling of homelessness, paralysis over loss, and a general feeling of *strangeness*. I propose that these three ambivalently Jewish characters, two queer, all three *strange* and suffering intermittently from depression, tell us what it is like to live in a liminal *stranger* space. In these liminal spaces a confrontation with the ghosts of Jewish history² has not yet been possible because the characters cannot seem to articulate themselves outside of the present story of an assimilation that completed before they were born. Therefore, the psychic matter of *assimilating* is presented as "ghostly matter" and can only be understood by pulling apart the many layers and strands of their narratives (Gordon).

In order to illuminate these palimpsests of ghostly Jewish matters offered by Wurtzel, Chaiken, and Schulman, it is necessary to turn to a myriad of theorists from a variety of disciplines. Using work from Jewish American studies, queer Jewish

² In contemporary Jewish American male writing, a good amount of texts are devoted to excavating the past with little attention paid to the present, such as, Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*. Jewish American women writers, such as Elana Dykewomon and Amy Bloom, have recently published texts devoted to the ghosts of Jewish pasts, but this publications have come far into their writing careers, while Foer's look at the ghosts of Jewish history comes in his first publication.

American studies, queer theory, ethnic white studies, trauma studies, and feminist studies, I show the ways in which the characters examined in this project are constructed as *strangers* and not as assimilated subjects. The mixture of these somewhat disparate bodies of knowledge requires a marriage of terminologies, focuses, and subjects perhaps unfamiliar to one another and, perhaps, to the reader. This necessitates patience, a willingness to see what is contained within the messiness of interdisciplinary work without the desire to tidy up the messiness. For in this messiness, *strangers* emerge, telling us stories in secret languages that knock against the very foundation of assimilation, as it is understood in America.

Foundational Assumptions, Where We Begin

Karen Brodtkin begins her foundational ethnic white studies text, *How Jews Became White and What That Says About Race In America*, with the claim that Jewish Americans have been “shuttled” from one side of the American racial binary to the other in the last hundred years (175). This makes Jewish Americans an interesting case in a country that sees racial identity as a fixed and immutable property. Therefore, Brodtkin asserts, Jewish Americans are a significantly important group to interrogate in order to more fully understand the racial construction of whiteness in the United States. She writes:

The history of Jews in the United States is a history of racial change that provides useful insights on race in America. Prevailing classifications at a particular time have sometimes assigned us to the white race, and at other times have created an off-white race for Jews to inhabit. Those changes in our racial assignment have shaped the ways in which American Jews who grew up in different eras have constructed their ethnoracial identities (Brodtkin 1).

Brodtkin attributes these racial shiftings to three primary occurrences—the GI Bill instituted in the post-WWII era, the movement from blue-collar employment to white-collar employment amongst many Jewish American men, and movement from urban centers to suburban enclaves. She rejects the notion that assimilation was purely reliant on self-driven success, but that rather assimilation was based on the GI Bill which she sees as “the biggest and best affirmative action program in the history of our nation, and it was for Euromales” (27). Brodtkin posits that Jewish Americans

became white when they moved from factory work and other “menial” labor to employment as lawyers, doctors, and accountants (55). Brodtkin’s account, however, assumes that Jewish American women became white because their male counterparts did. In her narrative, queer and unmarried women, who may be considered one and the same despite sexual orientation, are unaccounted for once they are no longer under the guardianship of their fathers. Further, the assumption that straight, married Jewish women’s narratives can be explained through Jewish male assimilation makes invisible the processes of assimilating Jewish women encounter.

In *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Melting Pot*, another foundational text in ethnic white studies, Michael Rogin argues that in addition to the public inclusion programs Brodtkin identifies, early Hollywood usage of blackface also worked as a conduit that shuttled Jewish Americans to the white side of the United States racial binary. He writes, “motion picture blackface, I propose, inherited the function of its [vaudeville] predecessor: by joining structural domination to cultural desire, it turned Europeans into Americans” (12). This worked, he reasons, because “under the conditions of white supremacy in politics and entertainment Jews could speak for blacks but not blacks for Jews” (17). However, he acknowledges that while actors like Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, and George Burns helped propel Jewish American men towards unmarked whiteness, “gender limited female mobility, to be sure, including the right to black up, whereas it (mythically) freed white men” (51). Rogin’s assertion that the parody of “othered” bodies propelled Jewish American men into whiteness relies on similar premises as Brodtkin’s work in which Jewish women are carried along into unmarked whiteness by their Jewish male relatives. While both

Brodkin's and Rogin's accounts are highly useful in understanding some of the workings of Jewish American assimilation, their assumption of "racial uplift" for Jewish women on the backs of Jewish men reveals gaps in understanding of this assimilation in need of explication.

Eric Goldstein's *The Price of Whiteness* builds on Rogin and Brodkin's work while trying to complicate the notion that Jewish Americans gladly, willingly, and consciously assimilated. Like Brodkin, he acknowledges the ambivalent relationship newly immigrated Eastern European Jews had to whiteness, writing that, "far from playing the role of undifferentiated whites, Jews held an uncertain relationship to whiteness from the late nineteenth century until the end of World War II, a period when both Jews and non-Jews spoke of the 'Jewish race' and of 'Hebrew blood'"(Goldstein 1). This history, he says, "is often told as a story of successful adaptation and transformation, but when viewed through Jews' struggle with American racial culture, it is a story of hard choices and conflicting emotions" (4). Further, pushing Brodkin's terminology of "off-whiteness" in relationship to these pre-World War II American Jews, Goldstein proposes that "because white Americans saw Jews as racially different and yet similar to themselves in many ways, the image they attached to them tended to be much more ambivalent than the one fastened on African Americans and other more stable outsiders" (2).

Jews, then, according to Goldstein, inhabited a *stranger* position until after the post-World War II period, in which they became an undifferentiated part of whiteness. And this, he asserts, complicates narratives in which "the 'whitening' of immigrants" is portrayed "as a power play from below" and these narratives (such as

Brodkin's and Rogin's) minimize "the degree to which they were pushed toward whiteness by the needs of the larger, white society" (5). Goldstein's findings are important in considering the necessity for *strangers* to de-ethnicize themselves in order to be fully included in social, economic, and political citizenship in the United States, complicating the idea that all Jewish Americans gladly embraced white, middle-class identities. However, Goldstein joins Brodkin and Rogin in designating World War II as the moment when *all* Jewish Americans became white.

David Biale, Michael Galchinsky and Susannah Herschel in "The Dialectic of Jewish Enlightenment" (included in their edited volume, *Insider. Outsider and Multiculturalism*) write, "one might argue that the Americanization of immigrants has involved a historical process of enlarging the definition of 'whiteness' to include groups like the Jews who were initially considered 'nonwhite'" (2). They posit that in America Jews were able to finally transcend the limitations that they were unable to overcome in Europe (3).³ Though Jewish Americans have found an inclusion in the United States that they had not found elsewhere, Biale, Galchinsky, and Heschel claim Jews still occupy a liminal space. "Precisely because we believe that the Jews constitute a liminal border case, neither insider nor outsider—or, better, both inside and outside—they have the capacity to open up multicultural theory in new and interesting ways that may help it overcome some of the deficiencies that theorists of multiculturalism have begun themselves to see" (Biale, Galchinsky, and Heschel 8). Despite the useful supposition that Jews elucidate the limitations of multicultural

³ Their focus on Ashkenazi Jews is endemic of the whole body of study of Jewish American assimilation. I have chosen to continue this focus because I am mostly concerned here with how Jews in the U.S. are culturally understood, and that remains largely Ashkenazic, despite recent disruptions of this focus.

approaches, Biale, Galchinsky, and Heschel, as well as the other authors in the volume, rely on the aforementioned idea that Jews became white in the post-World War period.

All of these aforementioned studies rely on the basic assumption that much of racial designation is based on skin color as well as the assumption that all Jews have white skin (belying the multitudes of Jews who do not have white skin⁴). However, Nell Irvin Painter, in her exhaustive *The History of White People*, posits that racial designation is a far trickier matter. She writes, “We usually assume definitions of race as color to be straightforward, as though ‘black’ Americans were always dark-skinned. But the long American history of racial adjudication—of deciding who counted legally as black and white--belyes any strong equivalence between race as color and actual color of skin” (ix). This assertion greatly troubles the waters of the basic assumptions about Jewish American assimilation that serve as the foundation of whiteness studies and ethnic whiteness studies.

Further troubling the waters of whiteness studies, David Roediger, in *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past*, seeks not only to unearth the workings of whiteness, but also to utilize whiteness studies as a way to forge alliances between “inbetween people” and people of color in the United States (35). Further, in *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, he seeks to expose the ways in which masculinity and whiteness are co-constitutive. He claims that for women to gain power they had to somehow mimic/perform/don masculine

⁴ Often this binary of white Jews and Jews of color is reduced to the binary of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews (belying the other Jewish cultural sects subsumed in these two categories). However, there are Jews of all colors within each binaried category and so I find this distinction less than useful.

behavior traits in order to gain the benefits associated with whiteness (Roediger 6). While Roediger's work also relies on the basic foundational assumption that Jews became ubiquitously white in the post-World War II era, his work points out the different assimilation possibilities for men and women and how assimilation may be off-limits for those "off-white" women who are unable to properly perform a "white masculine identity."

Jonathan Stratton, in "Not Really White Again: Performing Jewish Difference in Hollywood Films Since the 1980s," augments Brodtkin and Rogin's basic assimilation timeline assertions by claiming that Jewish American women achieved assimilation during the second wave women's movement. He writes, "reworking Brodtkin we can say that in this universalist move (of the women's movement), American Jewish women rebelled as white (American) women. In this way they naturalized their assimilated white positioning, and enacted the universalism at the heart of the unifying American ideology" (151). Stratton augments the supposition that Jewish women became white when Jewish men did after World War II by suggesting Jewish women achieved assimilation from fighting for white women's concerns as their own in the 1970s women's movement. However, this position breaks down with his examination of 1980s resurgence of visible Jewish identity in popular culture. For, if we look at the contemporary portrayal of Jewish men in popular culture in comparison to Jewish women we find distinct, and troubling, differences.

While Jewish men are portrayed as good husbands for *all* women, creating a general trope in Hollywood cinema that Jewish male assimilation is signified by

marrying a non-Jew, Jewish women are portrayed largely by non-Jewish women actresses or as shrewish, “Jewish American Princesses,” included in scripts for a laugh, such as Franny Fine from *The Nanny*. In this schema, Jewish men are signified as included in insider, white status, while Jewish women are rendered either *strange* or invisible. Roediger does acknowledge that “we need to recall the centrality of performance in the practice of assimilation” and that while “identity by consent is fundamentally performative, it depends on the subjective naturalization of culturally agreed-upon signifiers” (159). However, this acknowledgement does not then prompt Stratton to question which Jewish bodies have access to this performance in terms of what will be considered believable “passing.”

Ethnic white studies has surely been important in exposing the workings of whiteness, and “whitening,” through the example of groups who have historically been shuttled from non-white to white, such as Jewish Americans and Irish Americans. Building on the works of James Baldwin, W.E.B. du Bois, Frederick Douglas, and Franz Fanon, theorists like Brodtkin, Rogin, Goldstein, Roediger and Stratton confront the many ways Jewish Americans have disassociated—and been disassociated—from those viewed presently as people of color in the United States. This is a theoretical strategy designed to disrupt and expose a schism they feel has been as artificial as the very making of race itself. However, the reliance on assimilatory tactics that were only available to Jewish men (and supposedly the women who were attached to them) keeps this body of theory from telling all the stories necessary to have a clear picture of the workings of Jewish American assimilation.

Along with the thinkers who have taken up the often problematic whiteness studies, Jewish feminist scholars have also been concerned with augmenting aspects of the Jewish American assimilation “story.” As early as the 1970s, (before whiteness studies came about to center masculine stories as the whole of Jewish American assimilation), Jewish feminist thinkers have been attempting to resuscitate Jewish women’s stories from the caricatured version of the Jewish American woman. Much of this scholarship, though, while working to vindicate and unearth “real” Jewish women’s voices from the appropriations and caricatures still promotes the idea that Jewish American assimilation was completed in post-World War II America.

In *Jewish Women In America* (1976), one of the first interventions in resisting the hegemonic usage of Jewish males in Jewish American narratives, Sonia Michel, Paula Hyman, and Charlotte Baum (all historians by discipline) examine literary works of Jewish American women writers in order to understand Jewish women’s experience of “becoming” American. Their project came about from a desire to resist the negative images of Jewish women (namely the Jewish mother and the Jewish American Princess) that had begun (re)-emerging at the time of their investigation. They claim that after 1930, representations/voices of American Jewish women became one-dimensional parodies and thus “real” Jewish American women’s representation became nonexistent (8).

By telling the “real” stories, sifted from memoirs and fictional narratives, Michel, Hyman, and Baum hoped to deflate the growing influence of the image of the grotesque and monstrous Jewish woman (190). However, like the presumptions of ethnic whiteness studies that would eventually emerge twenty years after their

findings, Baum, Hyman, and Michel accept and promote the idea that Jewish American assimilation was completed in post-World War II America. They do not connect their concerns over the nineteenth and twentieth century emerging caricatures of Jewish women and the possibility that these caricatures of Jewish women demonstrate the Jewish women bodies eligible for assimilation and those ineligible.

Riv Ellen Prell, a foremost thinker in Jewish American women's studies, relies on World War II as the moment of assimilation as well as the notion that Jewish American women became assimilated through Jewish men's assimilation. She writes in *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* that "in the twentieth century, Jews became Americans through their use of stereotypes of one another as men and women and intimates as surely as they did through work, education, and the transformation of Judaism, because acts of differentiation were acts of Americanization" (20). She goes on to write, "Over two generations and fifty years, Jewish men entered and brought their families into the middle class" (112). Here we are asked to believe that despite the stereotypes of Jewish women "being large, noisy, and domineering, altogether too excessive" and "overly intense, prudish, and controlling," and despite "undesirable qualities, whether they were "excessively American" or "excessively Jewish," being most often attributed to females that Jewish American women were carried into an assimilated status by their male counterparts, including the queer and the unmarried (6, 7, 13). Therefore, again we are asked to use male narratives to tell the whole Jewish American story, but we are not asked to reconsider the time, method, and validity of the basic assimilation narrative.

Like Prell, Joyce Antler is concerned with the ways in which the “darker side of Jewish ascension to the American mainstream” has been attributed to Jewish women (7). She argues that while the post-World War II period is “often considered the golden age for American Jewry,” for many women, the pain of being different—being Jewish—tempered the rewards of assimilation” (5). Like Jon Stratton, Antler pins the second wave of feminism (where she contends Jewish women were involved in numbers extremely disproportionate to their actual representation in the American population) as the catalyst that propelled Jewish American women into assimilated status, particularly during the early 1980s when images of Jewish American women became much more positive and affirming. Although Antler questions the accepted timeline for all Jewish American assimilation, she does not contend that assimilation may be an ongoing project, despite the ways in which Jewish woman are often imagined in popular culture as *strange* characters. Further, since Antler’s textual studies focus mostly on popular culture television that is not often produced by Jewish American women there is little consideration of what Jewish American women have to say for themselves, particularly the very generations believed to be born into assimilation, even according to Antler’s timeline.

Evelyn Torton Beck, in her introduction to her 1982 anthology *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, begins to analyze the correlations between female queerness and Jewishness, a precursor to the current studies devoted to analyzing the connections between queer identities and Jewish identities. She exposes the high price of Jewish American assimilation, writing, “Having to hide: a sure sign of danger. Jewish invisibility is a symptom of anti-Semitism as surely as lesbian invisibility is a

symptom of homophobia” (xvii). She posits that regardless of how far from religion a Jewish woman’s family might be (a common assimilation tactic), “being Jewish informs a woman’s consciousness from the time she is young until she grows old” (xvii). This assertion begins a critique of the workings of assimilation and Jewish whiteness, troubling the idea that post-World War II Jews, particularly secular Jews, are nothing but undifferentiated whites. For, as Jon Stratton asserts, to become white is to have Anglo-American culture, an achievement made possible by the assumption, of what, following Brodtkin, we could call prefigurative acquisition (Stratton 145). Therefore, if the post-World War II Jewish woman in question has prefiguratively acquired “white” history, then being Jewish (particularly for the secular) would no longer inform “a woman’s consciousness” the entirety of her life. The fact that Beck suggests these “Jewish issues” continue begins to question whether or not Jewish American assimilation is indeed a finished and completed project for all Jewish Americans.

Further, Beck begins to interrogate the problematics of Jewish invisibility in lesbian communities. She writes, “while most of us have some idea of what is meant by ‘coming out as a lesbian,’ the process of ‘coming out as a Jew,’ especially for a lesbian-feminist, is less easily defined and even less easily put into practice” (xvii). If coming out as Jewish in lesbian circles is difficult to put into practice, then surely it will be difficult to interrogate the process of enculturation for women who fit into this category, leading to a dearth in understanding of Jewish lesbian identity. Further, Beck questions (as Eric Goldstein does) the ubiquitous idea that assimilation was embraced by all Jewish Americans including all of the behavioral modifications

necessary for Jewish women's assimilation. She writes, "some of us value most our Jewish gestures and intonations; our intensity and passion; our blending of the comic with the tragic; our ability to laugh at ourselves; our ability to survive" (xviii).

Here Beck writes against the idea that after World War II there was no longer any "difference" between Jewish Americans and 'white' Americans. Rather she suggests that instead of being indistinguishable from unmarked Americans, "Jews become the repository of the fears and fantasies of the majority... the Jew is said to be loud, pushy, aggressive, devious... the Jewish woman is seen as the temptress, associated with exotic sexual practices... Jewish blood is unclean, impure: Jews are undesirable, degenerate, smelly, suspect, peculiar" (xx). Thirty years after the publication of Beck's important anthology we can see certain Jewish women (speaking only of secular Jews), such as Monica Lewinsky, who are imbued with these characteristics by their public portrayal. From these examples we can see the ways in which certain Jewish bodies must be abjected in order for other Jewish bodies to become seamlessly white, belying that the monolithic story of Jewish American assimilation is not the only story in this enculturation process.

Adrienne Rich, a renowned poet writing from both a Jewish and lesbian perspective, writes in "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" about her experience growing up during the supposed height of Jewish American assimilation. She expresses much of what is imagined to be the pre-assimilation experience of Jews in America—an off-white, in-between experience. She writes:

For these young Jewish women, students in the late 1940s, it was acceptable, perhaps even necessary, to strive to look as gentile as

possible...We—my sister, my mother, and I—were constantly urged to speak quietly in public, to dress without ostentation, to repress all vividness or spontaneity, to assimilate with a world which might see us as too flamboyant...Whatever was unacceptable got left back under the rubric of Jewishness or the “wrong kind” of Jews—uneducated, aggressive, loud...What happens when survival seems to mean closing off one emotional artery after another? (107, 109, 110, 11)

She expresses this “assimilatory” education as being taught about “passing,” (a term usually reserved in American English to refer to people moving from one racial positioning to another).

However, while Adrienne Rich’s account of her enculturation process may be an expected story in the timeline of Jewish American assimilation, Lisa Jervis, a Jewish lesbian writer approximately forty years younger than Rich, tells a story “hidden” by the master story of Jewish American assimilation. In “My Jewish Nose” she writes:

Can it be that for all the strides made against racism and anti-Semitism, Americans still want to expunge their ethnicity from their looks as much as possible? Were these mothers and grandmothers trying to fit their offspring into a more white, gentile mode?...the proximity of white features to the ideal of beauty is no coincidence. I think that anyone who opts for a nose job today (or who pressured her daughter to do so) would say that the reason is to look “better” or “prettier.” But when we scratch the surface of what “prettier” means,

we might as well be saying “whiter” or more “gentile”... Or perhaps the reason is to become more unobtrusive. The stereotypical Jewish woman is loud, pushy--qualities that girls aren't supposed to have. So is it possible that the nose job is supposed to usher in not only physical femininity but a psychological, traditional femininity as well? Ditch the physical and emotional ties to your ethnicity in one simple procedure: Bob your nose, and become feminine in both mind and body. (63-64)

Laura Levitt, Temple University Professor of Religion, Jewish Studies, and Gender, in *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home* interrogates the ways in which coming to consciousness of her own “assimilating” experience became impossible without a map or discourse for the investigation. Jewish male assimilation (and the imagination of Jewish women being carried along) and its attendant disciplining of Jewish women’s bodies and behavior precluded her ability to enunciate herself, having been born at least a decade after the designated moment of full and completed assimilation. Further, even in bodies of work and study where women worked to unearth the hidden stories of *all* forgotten women, “Jewish concerns have often been excluded from feminist studies courses, critical texts, and conferences” (109).

In 2002, Tobin Belzer and Julie Pelc edited an anthology of writing by young Jewish American women’s writing in the hopes of disrupting the “dearth of writing by young women in the quickly growing canon of Jewish women’s literature” and providing a platform for young Jewish women to speak for themselves rather than

being spoken about by more established Jewish thinkers and writers (4). The critical texts that do engage with contemporary Jewish American women's writing tend to engage critically those who focus on explicitly religious themes, allowing them to elide the murkiness of Jewish American assimilation and identity (even the most basic, confounding question of "who counts as a Jew").

For example, Janet Burstein's *Telling the Little Secrets: American Jewish Writing since the 1980s*, addresses the "New Wave" in Jewish American writing in which Burstein contends that writers have taken up the project of listening "to the old secrets" (13). However, she also acknowledges in her preface, that "for the most part, I have included in this study American writers who speak as Jews: whose work owns a Jewish past and looks forward to a Jewish future—a simple solution to a very complicated problem..." (xiv). Therefore, even in this groundbreaking text, Jewish American women who identify as secular (as a majority of Jewish Americans do, including those who have been excluded from Jewish communities due to their sexual orientation) are invisible and are not invited to "listen to the old secrets" or to acknowledge their ghosts. And it seems that these very same writers are the ones who are attempting to wave their arms, often unconsciously, shouting, my voice "cannot be heard over that narrative." And so I take up here Burstein's methodological solution as a challenge to do the very complicated work necessary if we are to fully understand Jewish American assimilation: listening to the liminal, secular writers who have been left out of the Jewish canon due to the ways in which Jewishness is sublimated in their works.

For some Jewish American women, assimilation is not yet a finished project. Further, it is possible that full assimilation may not be available for these Jewish American women, their *strangeness* not easily remediated into unmarked status. This is illustrated through texts (*Fat Emily*, *Sheila Levine Is Dead and Living In New York*) being created since the 1970s by queer and single Jewish American women in which Jewish American female protagonists struggle to fit in by modifying their bodies and body language in order to attach themselves at any cost to a Jewish man in order to remediate their *strangeness*. Contemporary Jewish American women's literature, like *Prozac Nation*, tells a similar tale, although without the ethnic awareness and foundation that fueled the novels produced in the 1970's ethnic revival. In texts like Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* the woes are the same, yet there is an eerie reassertion of Woody Allen narratives in which Jewish American women symbolize the horrors and excesses of Jewish American assimilation and with a complete masking of the process of ongoing *assimilating* ghosting her narrative.

"*Assimilating*" Jewish Americans, as I will establish and illustrate, include those who appear as *strangers* and not necessarily as "outsiders" as were their predecessors who were racially understood as "Hebrew." These *strangers* implement a variety of strategies in order to grapple with, as well as manage, their identities. Some are ultimately successful in ridding themselves of their *strangeness* through a regiment of behavioral reconditioning and body modification, others suffer in their *strange* state unless their *strangeness* is augmented by the appearance of an "othered" body, and still others attempt to make a (content) home in their *strange* neighborhood, moving between the "inside" and the "outside" but never at home anywhere.

It is necessary to establish the ways in which Jewish women's assimilation is highly dependent on behavior and the body, despite ideas that Jewish American women became assimilated simply because Jewish men did. It is also necessary to establish that despite the notion of completed Jewish American assimilation and thus the negation of any behaviors/appearances particular to Jewish women, many Jewish American women's scholars write of the differentiation between white, assimilated American women and Jewish American women.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity is useful here, as well as theories established in one of her more recent works, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, to illustrate the assimilating identities of these *strangers* created by Elizabeth Wurtzel (*Prozac Nation*), Ilene Chaiken (*The L Word*), and Sarah Schulman (*Empathy*). Butler theorizes that sex and gender are culturally constructed and recognizable only through a set sequence of behaviors and performances that are neither consciously purposeful nor "natural". The tools necessary for identity performance are not immutable, and fluctuate in national and community context. In understanding Jewish American women's assimilation, it is useful to consider what behaviors and performances align with assimilation, and in contrast, what behaviors and performances render these characters perpetual *strangers*, particularly when the performance of femininity is highly dependent on the body. As stated earlier, Jewish women, historically and in the present, have been assigned many bodily and behavioral properties that negate their inclusion in white femininity, including loudness, bigness, gesticulating, aggressiveness, noses that are "too large," and others that will be taken up in later chapters. These behaviors and appearances understood to be "unlike" white women

call into question the availability of seamless whiteness for all Jewish American women.

In *Bodies That Matter* Butler writes:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that “performance” is not a singular “act” or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (95)

Further, “there is no ‘I’ that can fully stand apart from the social conditioning moral norms, which, being norms, have a social character that exceeds a purely personal or idiosyncratic meaning” (*Giving an Account of Oneself*, 7).

Judith Butler’s understanding that the available terms for enunciating the self are already predetermined before the self attempts to speak is helpful in understanding how the characters to be excavated in this project become constituted as *strangers* in the shadows of the Jewish American assimilation story. She argues:

When the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when

the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist. The reason for this is that the “I” has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—to a set of norms... The “I” is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence. (Butler, 7-8)

In other words, the story of Jewish American assimilation as a completed (and hyper-successful) project inherently precludes the enunciation of any other story that deviates from this tale of successful completion. For, if this story predates the creations of the three queer Jewish American writers explored here, then this is the lens through which readers will approach their stories as well as the lens through which they will understand and enunciate themselves. The need of this story to constantly reinforce itself means that inevitably, from time to time, cracks appear in the veneer. It is the cracks, then, to which we must attend.

Butler continues, “This work on the self, this act of delimiting, takes place within the context of a set of norms that proceed and exceed the subject. These are invested with power and recalcitrance, setting the limits to what will be considered to be an intelligible formation of the subject within a given historical scheme of things” (17). As we approach the texts explored here, it becomes apparent that the overarching story of Jewish American assimilation renders the characters within the texts both *strange* and unintelligible. They are forced to use the language of mental illness, alienation, and *strangerhood* to make sense of their experiences despite being told, “it's all in their heads.”

Following “Foucault’s account of self-constitution” Butler postulates that “what I can ‘be,’ quite literally, is constrained in advance by a regime of truth that decides what will and will not be a recognizable form of being” (22). For instance, in Elizabeth Wurtzel’s memoir, *Prozac Nation*, her feelings of being in-between a white middle-class identity and *strangerhood* is enunciated through the language of depression because the story of completed Jewish American assimilation forces her (and her critics) to understand herself as a depressed spoiled brat. Only when stringing together the counter story told between the pages in which Wurtzel is a continual *stranger* no matter where she is placed do we begin to see the ways in which she is an *assimilating* subject as opposed to a fully assimilated subject. Therefore, as Butler is careful to point out, “My account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story” (40).

In addition to illuminating a *stranger* identity through an examination of performativity, I will also use Avery Gordon’s theory of ghostly matters to show that these characters are haunted by the unknowable pasts of their predecessors as well as their own histories disinherited by family and cultural training to “disremember.” In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Gordon proposes that it is essential to extend “complex personhood” to those who are trying to speak their lives if we are to acknowledge the ghostly residue that surrounds us all. She writes, “Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society’s problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward” (4). “*Ghostly Matters*,” Gordon simplifies, “is

about haunting, a paradigmatic way in which life is more complicated than those of us who study it have usually granted” (7).

If, as Gordon suggests, life and the narratives that accompany it are far more complex than master narratives (and thus the narratives we have to emote ourselves) suggest, then “how do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly?” (18). “How do we develop a critical language to describe and analyze the affective, historical, and mnemonic structures of such hauntings” (18). Gordon moves on to suggest that this critical language must be developed by taking feelings and intuitions more seriously as tools of unearthing these hauntings, a prospect often scoffed at as unserious business in academia. This endeavor is risky business for a scholar, as she warns:

Doing so is not easy because, among other things, knowing ghosts often shows up not as professional successes, but as failure: the one whose writing/not writing only came together as she came together with the object, with the reality of fictions and the unrealities of the facts; the slightly mad one who kept saying, “There's something in the room with us,” as those bloodless reified categories became animated through wonder and vexation. (Gordon 22)

Further, “To be haunted and to write from that location, to take on the condition of what you study, is not a methodology or a consciousness you can simply adopt or adapt as a set of rules or an identity; it produces its own insights and blindnesses” (Gordon 22).

Because there is no standard methodology for dealing with these hauntings (and Gordon cautions against the development of a standard methodology, as each project must be particular to its context), “to write the history of the present requires grappling with the form ideological interpellation takes—we have *already* understood—and with the difficulty of imagining beyond the limits of what is already understandable is our best hope for retaining what ideology critique traditionally offers while transforming its limitations into what... was called utopian possibility” (Gordon 195). Imagining beyond the limits of what is already understandable, according to Gordon, requires unearthing structures of feeling; “Sensuous knowledge always involves knowing and doing. Everything is in the experience with sensuous knowledge. Everything rests on not being afraid of what is happening to you” (205).

The study of feelings as a critical point of departure in understanding cultural normalizations and constructions has been taken up by a myriad of contemporary theorists, building on, and emerging from, the long-standing and still growing literature in trauma studies. Ann Cvetkovich, in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, writes: “Trauma discourse has allowed me to ask about the connection between girls like me feeling bad and world historical events” (3). This connection between the microcosmic and macrocosmic drives Cvetkovich to “want to place moments of extreme trauma alongside moments of everyday emotional distress that are often the only sign that trauma’s effects are still being felt” (3). This tactic is especially helpful in this project as I seek to unearth the ways in which the daily lives and experiences of the characters I analyze (which often include being traumatized as well as subsequently being pathologized) are related to

the larger workings of Jewish American assimilation and its possible, and as yet unrecorded, failures, as well as the ghosts of traumatic Jewish history.

Cvetkovich, like Gordon, acknowledges the difficulty of excavating these daily “reminders and remainders” of trauma (and traumatic cultural history); “Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting, it often seems to leave behind no records at all... It thus demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma’s ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral” (7). Therefore:

I treat trauma instead as a social and cultural discourse that emerges in response to the demands of grappling with the psychic consequences of historical events... Trauma becomes a central category for looking at the intersections of emotional and social processes with the intersections of memory and history... Moreover, in contrast to the individualist approaches of clinical psychology, I'm concerned with trauma as a collective experience that generates collective responses.
(19)

As I interrogate characters rendered mentally ill, rendered damaged by PTSD, Cvetkovitch reminds that “the parallels with the history of homosexuality serve as a reminder that even if the PTSD diagnosis has certain strategic merits, it is wise to remain vigilant about the hazards of converting a social problem into a medical one” (45). Not only is “affective expression coded by class as much as by categories of race, gender, and sexuality,” but “middle-class norms often dictate what is deemed appropriate” (79). “Over and over I have been guided by the questions, ‘Whose

feelings count?’ in thinking about whose trauma gets recognized in the public sphere” (Cvetkovich 278).

While Cvetkovich’s text focuses on creating an archive of feelings in relation to queer women, Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* devotes itself to examining the ways in which “ugly feelings” are imagined to reside in abjected, othered, ethnicized groups in the U.S. “Whether marked as Irish, Jewish, Italian, Mexican or (most prominently in American literature and visual culture) African-American, the kind of exaggerated emotional expressiveness I call animatedness seems to function as a marker of racial or ethnic otherness in general” (94). Emotions like envy (an “ugly” feeling) are ascribed to those without power in the United States without examining the inevitability of envy in a system of equality. Further, even identities believed to be disavowed from “ugly feelings,” such as the “model minority” positionality, are rife with unexamined “ugly feelings” that might bring us to a greater and deeper understanding of assimilation processes. In the U.S., Ngai writes, “the Asian-American becomes forced into the position of model minority—that is, the person ‘made’ uniform, accountable, and therefore safely ‘disattendable,’ at the cost of having his or her speech acts controlled by another” (93). In similar ways, Jewish Americans have inhabited the position of model minority, giving way in some instances to seamless assimilation, belying that “ugly feelings” must be excised to be normalized and assimilated.

Jackie Orr, in *Panic Diaries: A Genealogy of Panic Disorder* writes:

Paranoia “knows well” the resonant evidence suggesting that everything really is connected—the psyche and the power of the

social, a small white pill and a wildly historical story. This text performs a kind of practiced paranoia by situating panic within a dramatic theater where the mass media, the military, corporate capital, the state, psychiatry, and the social sciences are cast in leading roles as sometimes secret agents of a political power that aims to produce the psychic and emotional structurings of—some very nervous—social subjects (17).

Further:

As in feminist psychoanalytic studies on hysteria that precede and partially prefigure trauma studies, approaching trauma demands attention to the politics of knowledge and the historically situated possibilities and impossibilities of communication. If traumatized or panicked or hysterical bodies mark a symptomatic site of what Foucault calls “subjugated knowledges”—those local, popular, inadequately scientific knowledges “of the psychiatric patient, of the ill person”—then what kind of study would be able to hear such bodies speak? What methods could make sense of such bodies and the largely unwritten archive of their feelings? (19).

One possible strategy to tell these “untellable” stories is through creating palimpsests, texts driven not by one layer but many at one time. The texts examined in this project can be understood as palimpsestic because they employ many layered stories in order to illuminate identity properties seen as disparate. Readers (and critics) unfamiliar with such narrative strategies may attend only to the foremost

narrative, but this does not negate the existence of the layers left unexamined. Sianne Ngai theorizes that:

Collage can be one performative strategy for telling more than one story at a time, bringing together on the same textual surface—and outside the common sense or sensations of linear time—pieces of history, fiction, ethnography, dream, and autobiography in a noticeably constructed, suggestively surreal evocation of social realities...

Effective collage is also affective, opening up emotional, sometimes contagious, not fully conscious forms of feeling (29).

Susan Brison, in *Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory, and Personal Identity*, acknowledges not only the difficulty of speaking trauma, or the ghostly, but the difficulty of gaining listeners in a society that attempts to relegate traumatic remembrance to the closed doors of psychiatric offices and hospitals. She writes:

In order to construct self-narratives, then, we need not only the words with which to tell our stories but also an audience able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them. This aspect of remaking a self in the aftermath of trauma highlights the dependency of the self on others and helps to explain why it is so difficult for survivors to recover when others are unwilling to listen to what they endured. (22)

What happens if no one is willing to listen because no one believes that you have suffered trauma? The *strangers* I will address in the next few chapters all suffer from a myriad of traumas—those that are inherited and submerged and those suffered in

their own skin. However, the story of successful Jewish American assimilation has in some ways made their traumatic narratives unreadable as they are established incorrectly as insiders, rather than as the *strangers* that they are. *Strangers*, according to Zygmunt Bauman (*Modernity and Ambivalence*) are neither friends nor enemies. While friends and enemies stand in opposition to one another, *strangers* trouble this opposition “resisting and disorganizing it, *without ever* constituting a third term” (55).

Bauman sees *strangers* as:

the true hybrids, the monsters—not just *unclassified*, but *unclassifiable*... they question the very principle of the opposition, the plausibility of dichotomy it suggests and feasibility of separation it demands. They unmask the brittle artificiality of division. They destroy the world. They stretch the temporary inconvenience of “not knowing how to go on” into a terminal paralysis. They must be tabooed, disarmed, suppressed, exiled physically or mentally—or the world may perish... The stranger disturbs the resonance between physical and psychical distance; he is physically close while remaining spiritually remote. (59-60)

Strangers, then, inhabit a peripheral space, a neither-here-nor-there space that is particularly troubling to identity politics. After all, if we establish ourselves directly in relation to the “other,” then how do we respond in relation to the *stranger*? Further, how do we respond to someone who one minute looks “like us,” and in the next moment emerges as someone unrecognizable? I will show in subsequent chapters that the *stranger* is necessarily exiled in order to re-establish the insider/outsider

relationship. Additionally, the *stranger* proves useful as a warning signal to others who may veer dangerously close to the edge of *strangerhood*.

Shane Phelan (*Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians and Dilemmas of Citizenship*) uses Bauman's theory of the stranger to ground her work on queer citizenship in the United States, a country in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender folks are denied full citizenship. Rather than using the popular term "other" to describe this secondary citizenship, Phelan finds *stranger* to be more accurate because in contrast with women and minorities, queer citizens have varying abilities to pass depending on their location and their other identity markers (Phelan does not often acknowledge the overlap in identity that many queer Americans inhabit). The *stranger*, as Bauman finds, is potentially more dangerous to the "insider" or full citizen because he or she can emulate the "insider" with the possibility of not being recognized as an impostor while the "other" has his/her difference marked on his/her body.

Sara Ahmed, in *Strange Encounters* and her other works, builds on these ideas of the *stranger*. She establishes that the body itself is key in determining the *stranger* and that the *stranger* is not the knowable, per se, but the knowable and the unknowable, simultaneously. She writes, "Through strange encounters, the figure of the 'stranger' is produced, not as that which we fail to recognize, but as that which we have already recognized as 'a stranger'" (4). Further, "the stranger is some-body we know as not knowing, rather than some-body we simply don't know" (55). For Ahmed, "The neighbor who is also a stranger—who only passes as a neighbor—is hence the danger that may always threaten the community from within" (26).

Therefore, while the “other” may be highly knowable and understood to be immutable (despite theories in all disciplines that dispute this claim), the *stranger* is constituted with different tools, though no less honed, and like the “other,” is identified through the body, despite the suggestion linguistically that the *stranger* is simply unknowable.

Ahmed contends that “the surprising nature of encounters can be understood in relation to the structural possibility that *we may not be able to read the bodies of others*” (8). “I will argue that there are techniques that allow us to differentiate between those who are strangers and those who belong in a given space (such as neighbors or fellow inhabitants). Such techniques involve ways of reading the bodies of others we come to face” (21). In this way, “social encounters involve rules and procedures for 'dealing with' the bodies that are read as strange” (24).

Strangers, according to Ahmed, Phelan, and Bauman, are in many ways more threatening than the “other” because they are perceived to be shape-shifters, able to fool the listener and the viewer. For this reason, “the histories of determination of ‘strange bodies’ as an impossible object that establishes the domain of the privileged subject (his bodily world), also produces such bodies as dangerous, uncontrollable, dirty, engulfing, and overreaching space itself” (Ahmed 53). To further stem the threat of the stranger, “the over-representation of strange bodies as grotesque already positions the bodies of those that are not yet subjects, as out of place precisely in their refusal to be contained by place” (Ahmed 54). Further, “the strange body is constructed through a process of incorporation and expulsion--a movement between

inside and outside, which renders that the stranger's body has already touched the surface of the skin that appears to contain the body-at-home” (Ahmed 54).

Importantly, while Ahmed finds the term “stranger” useful, she cautions that all strangers are not equivalent and should not be deemed as such (52). This assertion is useful as I begin my examination, as I want to be careful to denote that though I term the characters I will analyze *strangers*, I am aware of the difference between their *strangeness* and the *strangeness* of those examined in texts like Moustafa Bayoumi's *How Does it Feel to be a Problem: Being Young and Arab in America* (2009). In *How Does it Feel to be a Problem*, Bayoumi interrogates the *stranger* position inhabited by many Arab-Americans in the contemporary U.S. and the dire consequences attached to this position, including being imprisoned in the ever-growing body of detention centers throughout the U.S. I by no means conflate this dangerous identity of *stranger* with the problematic *stranger* position inhabited by the characters analyzed in this study. While their *stranger* designations help us to uncover the failures of the story of successful Jewish American assimilation, these characters are subject to the disciplines of psychiatry and not the disciplines of prison, which is a very important distinction.

In Jewish and Queer studies, there is a growing body of work devoted to Queer Jews, a body of work taken up by many lesbian Jewish writers in the late 1970s and early 1980s and only now being picked up again by theorists mainly focusing on Jewish queer men's experiences, with some women thrown in), in itself a body of work devoted to those deemed *strangers* by both queer and Jewish communities. Marla Brettschneider in *The Family Flamboyant: Race Politics, Queer*

Families, Jewish Lives takes up this seeming conundrum of an identity. She writes, “We flutter out the door on our way to a party. The neighbors sneer, ‘Why must they be so flamboyant?’ ... I come out as ‘Jewish’ in a Women’s Studies class and assign one book by a Jewish author. A student writes: ‘Does she have to flaunt the Jewish thing so much?’” (ix). Here, Brettschneider is a *stranger* in both situations, albeit for different identity markers, and is highly known and unknowable simultaneously.

Brettschneider contends that “among the few academics trained as political or critical theorists who have turned their attention to Jewish concerns, there are still too few drawing on the growing wealth of feminist, class-based, critical race, and queer scholarship and theory (let alone their mutually constitutive characters)” (11). She attempts to bring these bodies of work together in order to begin to elucidate the ways in which all identities work together to produce a subject, in this case a *strange* one. She writes, “come with me on my encounter. It is an effort to acquaint us with the strange, and to estrange us from that which we may be too close. It is a queer encounter, a queer encounter of the Jewish kind--where the strangeness of queers and Jews is both highlighted and undone, the familiar sometimes made bizarre, the bizarre occasionally made plain” (13).

Detailing her and her partner’s quest to adopt she describes how “we faced as much resistance to our adoption plans because we are Jewish... Most people in the United States simply don’t want their biological kids to be raised by Jews” (47). She writes:

Critical race theorists may be busy analyzing the supposed Jewish-white power alliance in recent years, calling attention to the ways that

many U.S. Jews seem to have “opted” to be white, and accepting whatever privileges comes with the designation. Given the vagaries of race, however, it may not be surprising that I have heard from many U.S. Jews that they chose to pursue adoption in Latin America because they wanted their children to “look like” them. When it comes down to the sensitive issues of family and lineage, many U.S. Jews have decided that their “racial” features look more “Latino/a” than U.S. “white.”(47)

In this construction, Brettschneider is discriminated against as a *stranger* by soon-to-be mothers seeking adoptive parents because of her Jewishness and queerness. In comparison, she describes her partner (a Jewish convert raised Christian) as being perceived as less threatening because she is understood as religiously Jewish and therefore not an inheritor of “all those ‘problematic’ Jewish racial characteristics... Those they reserve for me” (52). Further, the would-be-adoptive Jewish parents are described as *strangers*—understood to be white, but secretly understanding themselves as more akin to a racialized, ethnicized people.

Queer Theory and the Jewish Question, edited by Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, stands as one of the seminal texts interrogating queerness and Jewishness as co-constitutive properties as well as similarly constructed identities in their own right. It includes—besides an essay by Stacy Wolf on Barbra Streisand and an autobiographical essay by Judith Butler—a focus on Jewish men (queer and straight) and the ways in which “the popular notion that Jews (meaning men) embodied non-normative sexual and gender categories is long-

standing” (1). In the introduction (authored by Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini), titled “Strange Bedfellows: An Introduction,” “the theorists establish that the male Jew stands in for all Jews and that all Jews are womanly but no women are Jews” (2).

Further:

Long-standing stereotypes of Jewish gender difference were thus translated into signs of racial difference, operating as a kind of visible proof text. So, for example, the alleged failure of the male Jew to embody 'proper' masculinity became the indelible evidence of racial difference of **all** Jews. (2)

Perhaps examining their own elision of the Jewish woman, they write:

although the work on the correlation between the homosexual and the jew has largely focused on maleness, what the jewess and the female sexual invert both shared was their alleged excess: both types went beyond the bounds of female virtue and sexual propriety, they were too active in their desires... The manliness and self-promotion with which the female sexual invert was charged also featured in some of the stereotypes of the “Jewess,” who was sometimes portrayed as pushy, unladylike in her entry into and activity in the world of paid labor. If a Jewish woman can pass as a man, this is because, at least according to stereotype, she is already something of a man. (5, 7)

Stacy Wolf, in her essay “Barbra’s ‘Funny Girl’ Body” examines the ways in which the portrayal of Barbra Streisand and her body suggests that Jewish women and their gender performance troubles the waters of their white and female identities.

She writes, “Her marked portrayal of Jewishness in her body (her nose) voice (frequent yiddishisms), and behavior (aggressiveness) run counter to the ideal of ‘The Feminine’ in American culture” (247). She portrays “womanhood gone awry” (247). She suggests Streisand’s performance in *Funny Girl* runs counter to Gilman’s portrayal of the Jew’s intent on assimilation, desiring invisibility where the “desire to become ‘white’ lies at the center of the Jew’s flight from his or her own body” (251). Rather, “Streisand’s performance in the popular musical knits together queerness and Jewishness to create a ‘woman’ who in body, gesture, voice, and character is indeed a ‘funny girl’” (247). Here “funny” can be equated with *strange*, and there lies the suggestion that Streisand is indeed funny—after all, with whiteness (a nose job, a toning of gestures and voice) available to her at every turn, why does she not reach for invisibility? We must begin to entertain that “invisibility,” (or passing) though within reach, may be untenable both for Streisand and the lesser known Barbra’s populating the United States.

Judith Butler, in “Reflections on Germany,” ruminates on her experience giving talks in Germany—ironically, on her work that complicates and problematizes gender. She analyzes what it means that she was mistaken not only for a man but also as Italian in origin, and what this says about the Jewish female queer body in a German context. She writes:

A conjured Italian origin attests to the continuing “illegibility” and “unseeability” of the Jew in Germany. Better: this southern, darker, more emotional, gesticulating, excessive, sexually confusing Other

becomes a sire for anxiety over the loss of both gendered and racial boundaries. (402)

These examinations emerging out of queer Jewish studies, particularly those in which queer and/or Jewish women are interrogated, begin to elucidate the ways in which some Jewish Americans may continue to inhabit *stranger* positions despite the stories of completed assimilation. Though they don't often confront the master narrative of Jewish American assimilation overtly, their findings surely call the narrative into question. However, queer Jewish theory has largely been ignored by the larger body of Jewish studies as well as the larger body of queer theory and LGBT studies.

The Jewish American Woman Stranger

The characters to which I will attend are all *strangers* in that they blur the border between insider and outsider. Rather than being fully assimilated insiders, as accepted versions of Jewish assimilation would suggest, they try repeatedly to enter different communities but fail to be completely accepted or find a comfortable home. Several of the characters work continuously to rid themselves of their *strangeness* in an effort to fit seamlessly into white middle- and upper-class communities, while others attempt to live in this *strange* space, sometimes by themselves and sometimes with other *strange* characters. Those who do work to rid themselves of their *strange* markings internalize performative strategies to behave, and ultimately feel, in accordance with the communities in which they seek belonging. As Judith Butler reminds us in *Bodies That Matter*, performativity is not a conscious performance but a series of reiterative movements and behaviors that come to constitute identity and the self. Therefore, while characters seeking assimilated status may not be conscious of this effort, we can read these desires in their performances of identity and the “ghosts” that disrupt them.

What proves most interesting and revealing about the characters (and to some extent, the writers) is that they have all been deeply influenced by post-WWII ideologies of Jewish American identity. Not only have they absorbed the notion that they are assimilated, and thus cannot acknowledge the omnipresent “ghost” of the process of assimilating, but they have also been deeply influenced by stereotypes of

Jewish American women created and reiterated by writers like Philip Roth⁵ and Woody Allen⁶. Rather than focusing on coming to terms with the traumatic Jewish historical ghosts that they carry, as is the narrative focus in numerous texts generated by young Jewish American male writers, such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*⁷, these characters are concerned with the struggle to maintain normalcy (whiteness) or the struggle to live as the *stranger*. They cannot afford to spend much time in listening to the whispers in the walls, although they are troubled by the ghosts that they sense are there. I will act as the ears on the wall and the eyes on the street (as the Yiddish proverb goes) in these writers' texts to uncover these whispering ghosts to show that there is a deep ambivalence about assimilation, and its ongoing need for reiteration, being expressed by Jewish women inhabiting *stranger* status. I will argue that it is necessary to see these characters not just as tools of fiction (and memoir), but as symbolic of a faction of Jewish American women who have yet to be represented in the available scholarship on Jewish American identity.

Unlike predecessors such as Anzia Yezierska and Mary Antin, who felt themselves to be neither a part of an imagined white, middle-class America nor a part of other immigrant, or post-emancipated communities and who attributed their *stranger* statuses directly to their identities as Jewish women, these writers create characters who attribute their *stranger* status to mental illness, and queerness, both gender queerness and sexual identity. However, the feelings expressed by

⁵ Alexander Portnoy's mother in *Portnoy's Complaint*.

⁶ Harry Block's disapproving, whining Zionist sister in *Deconstructing Harry*.

⁷ In *Everything is Illuminated*, Foer's main character, Jonathan Safran Foer, a contemporary, Secular Jew, goes to the Ukraine to try to find remnants of his family from after the Holocaust.

contemporary writers such as Elizabeth Wurtzel—particularly feelings about embodiment—often mirror those expressed by the earliest American Jewish women writers such as Anzia Yeziarska. Some of the characters attempt to stabilize their *stranger* position, such as Wurtzel in *Prozac Nation* and Jenny Schecter on Ilene Chaiken's *The L Word*. Other characters, such as Anna O. in Schulman's *Empathy*, attempt to retain their *stranger* status, much like Gloria Anzaldua advises Chicana's and Mestiza's to do in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In trying to cure their mental illnesses, and hide their sexual identities these characters attempt to rid themselves of markers that place them in a *stranger* position to communities of white, middle-class women. The characters that manage to make themselves smaller, quieter, more consistent, less masculine, and in constant relationship to men stand perhaps closer to inhabiting an “unmarked” body. The characters who reject these restrictions do not become outsiders as their predecessors often did, but remain in a *strange* relationship to those deemed outsiders and insiders. Therefore, both Jewish American woman characters here are in a perpetual state of *assimilating*, whether inhabiting a *stranger* space or vigilantly working to be at the edges of whiteness, and it is unclear as to whether or not this *assimilating* will ever become completed assimilation.

The following chapters expand on the establishment of *stranger* identity and how this lens is necessary to understanding the narratives of some contemporary Jewish American women writer's texts. Further, I will illustrate and deconstruct the narrative trajectories of a number of characters that give further insight into *assimilating* and *strangeness* as a current space of residence.

In Chapter One, “Posing a Problem: *Prozac* Nation and Jewish White Masks,” I assert that Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation* is an example of a story of the process of *assimilating*. Although Wurtzel primarily sees and presents herself as a *stranger* because of the status associated with her diagnosis of mental illness, I will claim that Wurtzel also uses several narrative tactics that mirror the ambivalence of assimilation portrayed in early Jewish American women’s writings. I will show that Wurtzel’s perpetual feeling of being neither here nor there is a manifestation of her inability to fully assimilate into an unmarked whiteness, rather than simply a manifestation of her living in a “Prozac Nation” of divorced children, as she appears to assert in her memoir.

I also explore how the past presents itself in ghostly ways with the Holocaust playing the part of a ghost in this memoir, acting as an influential “character” that shapes Wurtzel’s perception of the world and her own identity. While much work has been done to date on survivors and the children of survivors, little work has yet been done on the ways in which the Holocaust presents itself in “third generation” writing and art. This is important, I contend, because this is the first generation to grow up in a public educational system that teaches the Holocaust as a historical subject, and positions “third generation” Jews in the classroom as living symbols of human atrocities. This difficult but inescapable position has profoundly affected the relationship of this generation to Jewish identity, and must be considered when looking at issues of assimilation. Wurtzel carries this historical weight with her in ways that argue that psychic trauma does not disappear but becomes a “ghost” in the inheritor’s life.

In "The L World and its Evasions: Jewish Presence and Absence on the Queer Screen" I examine the workings of Jewishness in Ilene Chaiken's *The L Word*. On the last episode of the third season of Showtime's *The L Word*, Jenny Schechter, the show's resident sexually confused, Jewish writer confronts her transitioning transgendered boyfriend, Max, about identity. In a dramatic scene set in a lavish hotel preceding the near wedding of Shane and Carmen, the show's resident androgynous promiscuous "bad girl" and the show's resident emotional Latina character (played by an Iranian-American actress) respectively, Jenny attempts to dance with another feminine woman in a room full of older, richly dressed white people. Max tries to stop her by reminding her that the two women dancing may make the other inhabitants of the room uncomfortable. Jenny, in one of the last utterances of the last episode of the season, responds:

You're great the way you are and the way you were. And you know what happens when you walk into this room (looking back at the "straight" people dancing on the floor and then looking back into his eyes, this time the camera shooting from above so we can see Jenny "looking up" into Max's face)? They start watching you, looking at you closely. And at first they think you're one of them, but then they look more and more closely and then they begin to feel uneasy because they realize that you're not. You're always going to be one of the others (Max shake his head, Jenny pauses). You're like us ("Left Hand of the Goddess").

In this statement Jenny sums up her character on the show and in the worlds she inhabits where she is at first received as “one of them” in almost every situation we find her in, until it is clear that she is not, through the way she emotes herself and expresses herself through language. However, she is never completely an outsider either, as an outsider is readily identifiable as such, rather she exists as more of a *stranger*, a next door neighbor who at first appears similar, only to become quickly very *strange*. While the show’s focus is on the sexuality of its characters, largely, I posit that Jenny’s feeling of ongoing strangerhood is tied, also, to her Jewish ethnic status.

I will show how Jenny is the perpetual *stranger* on the show who is kept from being an outsider by the insertion of several more overtly “othered” characters, including Tonya, a JAP figure who is ultimately excised from the show on the arm of famous uber-JAP, Melissa Rivers. Through various visual tactics and storytelling techniques Jenny develops as an ethnicized character who is not easily placed in categories that are assumed to be fixed, including sexual, racial, and class positions. I will engage with questions that illuminate the liminal space Jenny Schecter inhabits and how this space functions in her narrative as well as the narratives of the other characters. I will ask what the difference is between Jenny’s stranger position and Kit Porter’s outsider position as the only straight, African American character on the show. Further, I will seek to answer what role the *stranger* plays between the insider and the outsiders on the show. Lastly I will engage what the other characters on the show are forced to struggle with through the character of Jenny Schecter.

In the last chapter, “Writing from the 'Remnants': Sarah Schulman's *Empathy* and the Possibilities of the *Stranger*,” I will look at Sarah Schulman’s *Empathy* as an example of the Jewish American woman who is caught in the desire to reject assimilation even as it is being read on her body by the other characters in the book. I will suggest that assimilation is not necessarily a chosen project, but one that is instigated by the need for whiteness to be ever expanding in the “threat” of minority uprising. I will show that Sarah Schulman, through the main character Anna O., argues against essentialist notions of identity and argues for an acknowledgment of the various locations one individual inhabits simultaneously. By mirroring the main character with an alter-ego “Doc,” I will show how Schulman argues Jewish women’s bodies often prohibit them from full inclusion into middle-class whiteness that their male counterparts have, supposedly, achieved. Further, I will show that Sarah Schulman argues that empathy and a vision of human beings as complicated and multifaceted is a plausible resolution for the failings of identity politics.

In my conclusion I will posit that re-examination of Jewish American women’s assimilation is important not just in refining notions of Jewish American assimilation, but also in examining the liminal “ethnic” space which some Americans must inhabit in order for unmarked and highly marked American identity to exist. Dislodging the metonymic usage of male narratives for the entire Jewish American Assimilation story allows a more refined and complicated vision of Jewish American assimilation to emerge.

Chapter 2. Posing a Problem: Prozac Nation and Jewish

White Masks

Enough is enough of this sad family, with all its grief and depression and sorrow that get passed on and on, this miserable birthright, this ugly heirloom. The legacy stops here with me. Anything that happened before is gone. This is my world. This is my home. Here's how the story begins.

Elizabeth Wurtzel, *More, Now, and Again*

The advantaged are those whose place in a set of classifications of knowledge appears natural. For these people the infrastructures that together support and construct their identities operate particularly smoothly (though never fully so). For others, the fitting process of being able to use the infrastructures takes a terrible toll. To “act naturally,” they have to reclassify and be reclassified socially.

Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out*

Preface

In an October 3rd, 2007 *Village Voice* review of Michael Chabon's *Gentleman of the Road*, Alexander Nazaryn writes, "What strange days these are to be a Jew...From the ashes of cultural unity has risen a new literature, propagated by young writers like Jonathan Safran Foer...Less occupied with assimilation, these new Jewish novelists search through diaspora, immigration, and genocide for those precious strands of continuity that would make Jewish history their own" ("Gentleman of the Road"). Nazaryn's assertion reflects an assumption that this new wave of writers inherited an assimilated position in the United States and now has the privilege to focus on examining the past. However, such a premise ignores many of the authors examined in this dissertation and illustrates a tendency to allow contemporary narratives that evoke a picture of completed Jewish American assimilation to serve as the entire vision of post-World War II Jewish American life.⁸ Specifically, this practice excludes stories told by contemporary Jewish women, including Elizabeth Wurtzel, author of the memoir *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America* and the focus of this chapter, who cannot yet fully address the past because assimilation is still a concern of the present.

This chapter undertakes a complex project: to use *Prozac Nation* and the experience of young, Jewish, female otherness to explore problematics/prohibitions in the Jewish American assimilation narrative. To achieve this goal, the chapter offers an alternative reading of Wurtzel's experience of depression as described in *Prozac Nation*. My reading imagines Wurtzel's depression as a response to the ongoing

⁸ For instance, Jonathan Safran Foer, Michael Chabon, and Gary Shteyngart.

burden of *strangerhood*, of incomplete assimilation and the struggle to “pass” as white. It is not entirely incompatible with a medicalized conception of depression as an illness, but it does seek to establish a framework through which to understand why *Prozac Nation*, and indeed Wurtzel herself, exists in a cultural space of *strangeness*. My reading examines a larger context of Jewish American women writer's narratives to show a continuity and consistency across time in Jewish American women's struggles with assimilation and its costs and then moves on to a close reading of Wurtzel's memoir in light of her predecessors, Anzia Yezierska and Mary Antin's work, as well as some of her contemporaries.

Prozac Nation's strangeness emerges at the simple mention of the book title-- it is as loved as it is hated, reviled as it is worshipped--on the *New York Times* Bestseller list for weeks on end, selling millions of copies, all while being torn to shreds by literary critics. David Klinghoffer, in a book review of *Prozac Nation* appearing in the January 1994 issue of the *National Review*, sums up the overall critical reception of the memoir; “Of course there is something inherently egotistical about a 27-year-old writing her memoirs,” writes Klinghoffer. “However, until she began taking the antidepressant Prozac, Miss *Wurtzel's* life really was about as harrowing as it could be--given that she is a middle-class New Yorker who went to private schools, then Harvard, followed by a succession of apparently effortless swings upward from plumb newspaper job to plumb magazine job to plumb book contract” (74).

As in most of the reviews written about *Prozac Nation* in popular national newspapers and magazines (which will be examined later), Klinghoffer conjures a

vision of Elizabeth Wurtzel as the quintessential Jewish American Princess—disregarding the precarious economic circumstances Wurtzel describes experiencing during her adolescent and early adult life. Later, I will show how the allure of the assimilated, affluent Jewish American stereotype overrides the story Wurtzel actually tells. The story of completed assimilation, so seductive in its relentless promotion of the achievability of the American dream, proves alluring not only to the critics of *Prozac Nation*, but also to Wurtzel, I will show, as she tries to tell the story of her struggle with depression.

Rather than simply dismissing Wurtzel's text as histrionic writing by a 'spoiled brat,' I argue that Wurtzel's depression can be read as giving form to the anxieties and struggle of being Jewish and "off-white" (a *stranger*) or still not quite completely assimilated. To fully understand Jewish American assimilation, in all its manifestations, it is necessary to look beyond the narratives of those who themselves immigrated. We must also consider that the succeeding generations may also experience the splitting and double-consciousness endemic to being neither here nor there, or what Adrienne Rich calls being "split at the roots" in her influential essay of the same name.

To re-read Wurtzel's story, it is necessary to think about unearthing matter that is not immediately available or apparent. Avery Gordon, in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* offers useful tools with which to excavate. She proposes that to fully understand the complexity of life and the difficulty of compressing it into intelligible and linear narratives, theoreticians must also listen to the spaces, the pauses, the information that comes to us in 'ghostly'

ways, because this can offer special insight into the workings of power. Gordon states:

...Power can be invisible, it can be fantastic, it can be dull and routine. It can be obvious, it can reach you by the baton of the police, it can speak the language of your thoughts and desires. It can feel like remote control, it can exhilarate like liberation, it can travel through time, and it can drown you in the present. It is dense and superficial, it can cause bodily injury, and it can harm you without seeming ever to touch you. It is systematic and particularistic and it is often both at the same time. It causes dreams to live and dreams to die. We can and must call it by recognizable names, but so too we need to remember that power arrives in forms that can range from blatant white supremacy and state terror to “furniture without memories.” (3)

Thus, this chapter gives life to the ghostly matters inherent (yet submerged) in Wurtzel’s memoir and creates a companion reader of sorts. It seeks to show the true critical weight of a text typically passed off by critics as an empty shell penned by a whiny, spoiled girl.⁹ Through an examination of Wurtzel’s relationship with her

⁹ Note that “spoiled” can be used interchangeably with the euphemism “Jewish American Princess,” or “JAP.” Like Hollywood movies produced in the mid-twentieth century by Jewish writers, Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation* makes a nationalistic statement out of a group-oriented problem. Unintentionally, the aforementioned group and the latter create an imaginary national community out of profoundly Jewish interests, stories, ghosts, and historical aftermaths (one might even say Freud is such an example, though not, at least during his time, pop culture). Thus, not only does the country, if buying and inserting themselves into the story, begin to become “Jewished,” but the Jewish-American subject loses license to his/her

mother, her romantic relationships, and her interactions with Jewish and non-Jewish generational counterparts, I will show the palimpsest *Prozac Nation* offers and how we might better read it for a fuller understanding of contemporary experiences of Jewish American assimilation.

Though I do not claim that Wurtzel inhabits a position of being a person of color in the United States (and all of the attendant problematics of inhabiting such a position), I do suggest that she hovers precariously at the edge of whiteness, always one move (or depression) away from being pushed into an off-white (or *stranger* position). The work she must do to maintain her toe-hold in whiteness (or assimilation) illuminates the ways in which she is in the midst of assimilating, something that may be a never-ending project for Wurtzel. I will use the terms off-white and *stranger* somewhat interchangeably here, depending on the necessities of the moment--this lack of solidity of terminology points to the newness of this inquiry and the ways in which a useable 'jargon' is not yet available.

(his)story. In essence, becoming whitened, we can see the deleterious effects of such a (subconscious) project in the despair expressed (though doubted by critics) by Elizabeth Wurtzel.

Jewish Women's Literary Excavation of Assimilation and Its Failures, In Context

Although Wurtzel imagines her struggles and her story to be unique, perhaps the agonies of a brilliant but tortured writer, she continues a long tradition of such concerns in the writings of Jewish American women. To understand Wurtzel's story in context, it is first necessary to re-visit, briefly, the beginning of the twentieth century. While contemporary Jewish American women may have come to understand their racial positionality differently than their predecessors they continue to manifest many of the same anxieties and ambivalence of early Jewish American writers such as Anzia Yeziarska and Mary Antin. Through comparing contemporary female Jewish American writers and their ambivalence about their identities (Vared Hankin, Clara Thaler, and Lynne Meredith Schreiber) with Yeziarska and Antin, it becomes clear that despite a gap of a hundred years, Yeziarska and Antin living through the post-third wave of Jewish American immigration to the United States and the contemporary authors inhabiting a post-Holocaust, post-Cold War world, these writers all understand their anxieties through the same ethnicized lens. Through a brief look at Yeziarska's memoir, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, and contemporary memoirs, Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*, "Where the Mountain Touches the Sky," by Vared Hankin, "At Home in My Own Skin" by Clara Thaler ", and "Meeting in the Middle" by Lynne Meredith Schreiber, I will place Wurtzel firmly in a tradition of Jewish American women's writing about race and assimilation, despite Wurtzel's disavowal that the issues she struggles with are rooted in Jewishness and the difficulties of incomplete assimilation.

Anzia Yeziarska's 1950 fictionalized memoir, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, exemplifies the ambivalences and difficulties of assimilation; she describes being exoticized by her non-Jewish counterparts, and how through this exoticization she becomes acceptable. Today, Yeziarska is best known for her 1925 novel, *The Bread Givers*, and also her novel *Hungry Hearts* that became a Hollywood film in 1922. Though Yeziarska experienced brief notoriety in her early career, she soon slipped into relative obscurity despite the fact that she continued to write and publish until the end of her life in 1970. Recently, Yeziarska's work has been unearthed by feminist scholars who have been able to bring the works back to print status. Yeziarska's experiences foreshadow many of Wurtzel's experiences in *Prozac Nation*: as a Jew, she is exoticized as hyper-emotional, serves as an outlet for others to vent repressed feelings and through this outletting is admitted to an elite, wealthy white society. Both Yeziarska and Wurtzel desire acceptance in this white world, and struggle with the emotional and cultural sacrifices—with differing results—that are required for continued acceptance.

In her memoir, Yeziarska struggles with the ambivalences and difficulties of assimilation, moving away from Hollywood as soon as she understands that she will become an acceptable (token) Jew only while the Jews she left behind in the Lower East Side (NYC) are further denigrated and made invisible in their poverty. For instance, Yeziarska details working as a stenographer for John Morrow (a fictionalized rendering of philosopher John Dewey) and developing a personal relationship with him. Through the scenes in which the two interact the reader is privy both to Yeziarska's anxieties about her racial status and personhood and to the

ways Morrow exploits her otherness. Because he is a wealthy, white man he both validates her existence, thus causing her to fall in love with him, and exploits her simultaneously.

He calls her an “unusual person,” rendering her strange, at the same time as he pats her hand, bridging the tactile gap Yeziarska usually feels with “gentiles”. She writes:

He patted my hand. It was a gesture of simple kindness, but it stirred currents in me that I had never been touched. The mountain of hurts I carried on my back from czarist Russia....dissolved. I had been accepted, recognized as a person...I tasted the bread and wine of equality” (107).

When Morrow asks Yeziarska to the Lower East Side for dinner, he remarks that her neighborhood “is like a foreign country!” (108). She writes, “At first I had been embarrassed about showing him the dirty streets, the haggling and bargaining, and the smells from the alleys of the ghetto where I lived. But what I had thought coarse and commonplace was to him exotic” (109). After the two attend the Yiddish theater, Morrow says that “the emotion of the actors was so vivid and the audience so responsive that this interested him more than the play” (109). He goes on to tell her, “You know, they have something you have too...The same intensity. I think it comes from fighting for every inch of ground on which you stand” (109).

Morrow begins to write her love letters, despite being married. His letters exemplify that he is not in love with her, but in love with how he begins to feel emotion with and through her, precisely because he sees her as hyper-emotive. He

writes, “My life has been an evasion of life. I substituted reason for emotion, hiding behind a shell of safe abstraction. I’ve been so repressed by the fear of feeling” (111).

Another letter states:

I never knew how starved I was until I met you. I was sunk inside my little world of business and family, petrified by the inertia of abundance. You saved me from the barren existence of eat, sleep, and multiply. I must begin humbly, like a child, to learn the meaning of life from you. Without you I’m the dry dust of hopes realized. You are fire, water, sunshine and desire. (112)

Yeziarska is exoticized, made super-human with a hyper-emotive body through which Morrow, who struggles mightily to repress and control his emotions, may expunge his unwanted feelings. As soon as he has rid himself of his unwanted passions, he rids himself of Yeziarska (like Wurtzel, many years later will be used by her rich, white Harvard counterparts).

Like Wurtzel, Yeziarska stands on the periphery of many worlds. She exists, in memory, in Eastern Europe, while she lives, in her present, in the United States. She enters an elite, white world, and is quickly pushed back to her poverty-stricken tenement on the Lower East Side of New York. She is denigrated by white women and Jewish women, white men and Jewish men, and the brief encounters she has with people of color suggest both a solidarity and a complete alienation (denoting the ways in which Jewish-Americans were just one of the many groups imported and incorporated into whiteness in order to combat the “threat of blackness” in the middle twentieth century). She thinks of this connection, writing “I wondered whether it was

harder to be born a Jew in a Christian world than a Negro—a black skin in a white world” (158).

Interestingly, Anzia Yeziarska’s memoir concerns itself largely with her own inner development and her experiences attempting to assimilate—the birth of her daughter and her middle-aged years where she had exited poverty are left out. Rather, Yeziarska skips this period of her life, returning to her narration in her later years where we find her better off but still riddled with the anxieties of being in-between. In an attempt to finally find some peace to her anxiousness and alienation, she moves to Vermont and attempts to become like the stoic, white, working class people in her town. She writes:

On my walk along the mountain road to Marian Foster’s house for tea the next day, I remembered Will Rogers upbraiding me for always harping on the past. “You’ve won success the hard way. Must you play the same tune forever? Suppose you give us another number.” That’s what I would do. I would learn from Marian Foster to be happy, learn to enjoy everything and everybody. Instead of the fear and anxiety with which I once wrote, I would write with joy and thanksgiving. In my infatuation right after I arrived in Fair Oaks, I actually believed I could slough off my skin and with this new home begin a new life. The furniture that was presented to me, so steeped in the history of the village, would help me take on the life of the villagers (202).

Yeziarska envies her neighbors for their concrete concerns about crops, while “I was plagued by doubts and uncertainties, the conflict between what I was and what I

wanted to be, the consuming fear that I was nothing, nobody—and the inordinate craving for approval” (206).

Mary Antin, Anzia Yeziarska's contemporary, immigrated to the United States from Polotsk with her family when she was a child. While Yeziarska writes about the illusion of the American Dream, Antin embraces the United States as the place where she was able to bloom. However, the prologue to Antin's memoir, *The Promised Land* (1912), complicates reading the text simply as an illustration of the achievement of the American Dream. While the rest of the memoir details the horrors of Polotsk she experienced as well as the awakening of enlightenment and opportunity she found in the United States upholds the rags to riches ideas of American assimilation success stories, Antin's prologue gives light to the underbelly of this assimilation.

In the prologue to *The Promised Land*, Antin illustrates the ways in which she became a fragmented person when she left Polotsk and came to the United States. She suggests a fragmentation so violent that she wishes for the telling of her tale to be the end of her former self. Antin writes:

All the processes of uprooting, transportation, replanting, acclimatization, and development took place in my own soul...I can never forget, for I bear the scars. But I want to forget—sometimes I long to forget. I think I have thoroughly assimilated my past—I have done its bidding—I want now to be of to-day. It is painful to be consciously of two worlds. The Wandering Jew in me seeks forgetfulness. I am not afraid to live on and on, if only I do not have to remember too much. A long past vividly remembered is like a heavy

garment that clings to your limbs when you would run. And I have thought of a charm that should release me from the folds of my clinging past. I take the hint from the Ancient Mariner, who told his tale in order to be rid of it. I, too, will tell my tale, for once and never hark back any more. I will write a bold 'Finis' at the end, and shut the book with a bang! (xiv-xv)

Here, Antin suggests a traumatized state in which her past life and her present life are at odds, existing as irreconcilable fragments. She hopes that through the telling of her story she will be able to shut the book on it and sever the hold her past self has on her present self. This is in line with psychoanalytic thought developing during the same time, in which re-telling, or re-enacting, the past might lead to resolution of issues troubling the psyche. Whether or not it is possible for the re-telling of Antin's story to effectively silence her past, the desire for it to do so is telling about the consequences of otherness and *strangeness* she experienced.

Antin's work, both the upholding of the American Dream and the complicating of it in the prologue, is important, she suggests, because she is just one of many who have experienced this type of fragmentation, loss of self, and disorientation. She writes:

I am not yet thirty, counting in years, and I am writing my life history. Under which of the above categories do I find my justification? I have not accomplished anything, I have not discovered America. My life has been unusual, but by no means unique. And this is the very core of the matter. It is because I understand my history, in its larger outlines,

to be typical of many, that I consider it worth recording. My life is a concrete illustration of a multitude of statistical facts. Although I have written a genuine personal memoir, I believe that its chief interest lies in the fact that it is illustrative of scores of unwritten lives. I am only one of many whose fate it has been to live a page of modern history. We are the strands of the cable that binds the Old World to the New. As the ships that brought us link the shores of Europe and America, so our lives span the bitter sea of racial differences and misunderstandings. Before we came, the New World knew not the Old; but since we have begun to come, the Young World has taken the Old by the hand, and the two are learning to march side by side, seeking a common destiny. (xiii)

Like Yeziarska, Antin tells the story of many immigrants, attempting to get at the strange experience of dislocation, otherness, and all of the anxieties associated with inhabiting these *strange* places. Accompanying their own anxieties is the anxiety to tell the story of abjection experienced not just by themselves, but many.

Vared Hankin, nearly a century later exhibits many of the same anxieties as Yeziarska and Antin, despite the fact that she is culturally understood as being fully assimilated. In “Where the Mountain Touches the Sky,” part of the collection *Joining the Sisterhood: Young Jewish Women Write Their Lives*, Hankin constructs a story of sublimating her own internal voice, attempting to assimilate into a white, mid-western culture, and eventually resolving her ethnic/racial ambivalence through becoming more and more immersed in a totally Jewish world. She stresses the importance of

minimizing her voice and gestures in order to pass, as well as the need to study her white counterparts diligently in order to know ‘how to behave’. She writes:

I noticed how my classmates spoke and what they said: how girls spoke to boys, how boys spoke to girls. I imitated them. I noticed that boys seemed to like it when girls laughed and giggled, so I began to laugh and giggle. I would laugh. I would smile. Nothing ever bothered me. I observed how to be a nice midwestern American. I learned not to stand out too much, to be polite and friendly...My difference was insinuated with comments from my classmates like, “Where are you from?” or “Your hair is so *black*,” or “Your personality seems so *prominent*.” Most of the time, if I suppressed myself enough, it would be okay. I would be okay, as long as I smiled...I always knew I was different, especially when I was with my non-Jewish peers at school.

(62)

Like Wurtzel, Hankin understands that she must learn to perform a white, middle-class femininity, or don a white mask, in order to escape the consequences of being in-between. Also, like Wurtzel, she understands that engaging in this performance is not optional—there is no outsider group with whom she may seek refuge, as a white middle-class identity is imagined to be her birthright. Just as Wurtzel’s therapists and family insist that there is a smiling, giggling girl beneath her morose exterior, Hankin understands “if I suppressed myself, I would be okay...as long as I smiled” (62).

When Clara Thaler was a child she was interested in learning about Jewishness, both culturally and religiously, as a tie to her ancestors. As she grew

older, she renounces her Judaism as she simultaneously begins to starve herself, attempting to rid herself of ethnic markers that make her *strange*. Her mother, while appalled by her starvation encourages her to "seek happiness in structured, sanctioned food deprivation," taking her to weight watchers and supporting her attempt to be an acceptable white middle-class girl rather than the *stranger* she had previously been on the road to becoming (101). Giving up her obsession with weight, Thaler was able to allow herself to come out as queer, and coming out as queer helped her to return to her ethnic roots (102). Thaler, like Yeziarska leaving Hollywood in order to reclaim herself from exoticization, finds herself in reclaiming her *stranger* self, no longer willing to capitulate to a mother and country that would rather see her starving for assimilation.

In "Meeting in the Middle," Lynn Meredith Schreiber writes, "My story is the story of the exile of the Jews: a story of discovery, of picking up and discarding, of mending the worn fabric of a life, and sometimes throwing away the sharp shards of identity found in the back of a dark closet" (174). Unlike the pronouncements by white studies theorists that Jews "born" assimilated inherit whiteness (and its attendant history), Schreiber sets out to tell readers that she is connected to the history of the Jewish people. However, this inheritance comes with its own contemporary problems of an assimilated status available only to 'certain' Jewish women who are able to attain a white, middle-class feminine facade (or a passing identity). She writes:

Like most girls (Jews) who grew up in Los Angeles, I began to cultivate my appearance at a young age. Only beautiful, thin women (I

believed) were worthy of men's desires. In junior high, I thought that wearing the right clothes would make me popular with the boys. I quickly discovered that my body was wrong: the right clothes didn't fit. I went to a nutritionist to learn that small portions of low-fat food would make me thin. Which meant desirable. Which meant happy. I was desperate to be happy, so I lost thirty pounds. For good measure, I made one additional adjustment. I got my nose 'fixed.' The less Jewish I looked, the more beautiful I felt. (181)

This fear of looking Jewish correlates with the need for Jewish women to rid themselves of ethnic identity markers in order to achieve an assimilated status-- something that is attributed to women such as Yezierska and Mary Antin, both immigrants, and not to Jewish women born in the post-World War II period. Schreiber acknowledges the ways in which the portrayal of Jewish women in the media contributed to her anxieties about looking Jewish and the deleterious effects looking Jewish, embodying Jewishness, could have on her life. She writes:

My fears have been intensified by the entertainment industry, which offers particularly offensive images of Jewish women. We are overwhelmingly portrayed as loud, pushy, and completely undesirable. Jewish men on television are never attracted to Jewish women, the rate of intermarriage and interdating on television is 100 percent. (180)

While Schreiber ultimately changes her appearance and behavior to avoid being the *strange* Jewish woman portrayed by the entertainment industry, she cautions that it is time for the generations seen as completely assimilated to begin to

speaking for themselves, to tell the truth about Jewish American assimilation and its failures. She writes, "while Jewish scholars and community leaders from across the political and religious spectrum purport to be fundamentally concerned about the next generation, they consistently talk about young Jews, instead of with us" (185). Her essay serves as an intervention into this silence, disproving the theories abounding about post-World War II generations (and in particular, post 1970s generations) and our supposed finished assimilation and inherited seamless white, middle-class identities.

What is Recognizable Here?

Judith Butler, in *Giving An Account of Oneself*, suggests that asking a subject to mediate her life experiences through language is inherently violent. As one struggles to tell oneself, there are inevitably holes, gaps, and places one is reaching towards but cannot yet find; “Moreover, the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making” (Butler 21). Elizabeth Wurtzel is “constrained in advance by a regime of truth that decides what will and will not be a recognizable form of being” (22).

This is most succinctly evidenced in the typical review of *Prozac Nation*, in which Wurtzel is read as a spoiled, uber-privileged Jewish American Princess despite the myriad of moments throughout the text that illuminate the financial life of her single-parent household was precarious and her elite schooling acquired only through scholarships. Ken Tucker, in a New York Times Review writes:

Instead of prescribing Prozac to depressive patients, doctors might now want to try something else first: give them a copy of *Prozac Nation* and say, 'Read this; if you don't watch out, you could end up sounding like her.' This may have a bracing effect on many poor souls, because it is likely that few of us would want to be the author of a book in which the phrase 'I became rambunctious with tears' appears.

(11)

Mark Harris, in Entertainment Weekly writes:

Nor, despite the implicit claims of 'nation' and the subtitle Young and Depressed In America, is it representative of any generation (X or

otherwise) anywhere on earth, except possibly for the rarefied climes that encompass Manhattan private schools, Harvard Yard, summer camp and trips to London. Wurtzel's memoir of what it was like to grow up smart, sensitive, talented, and miserable would be moving in its specificity were it not so prattling and smug. (Harris)

Both these reviews, and the review interrogated earlier in this essay, exemplify that Wurtzel's portrayal of herself as solidly middle-class, and thoroughly assimilated is so convincing that these reviewers are able to dismiss any matters within the text that suggest otherwise. Therefore, we encounter two distinct problems—Wurtzel's inability to tell herself outside of the frame of the Jewish American assimilation story through most of her text and the inability of receivers of the text to read her story outside of the framework of completed Jewish American assimilation (or, rather, an inability to see Jewish-Americans as anything other than privileged, middle-upper class whites).

Wurtzel repeatedly asks readers to accept her as a clichéd, middle-class, every-girl (or an unmarked white girl). Yet, between these pleas she writes of her family's precarious financial state, disrupting her desire to be read as metonymic of the “average” depressed, privileged, twenty-something white female. Why, then, is Wurtzel dismissed as a whiny, overly privileged brat by critics? Wurtzel is trivialized because though she often inhabits an off-white (*stranger*) identity (when she is unable to remediate herself) she, and others, are instructed to read her as always, and originally, authentically white because of the relentless and pervasive nature of the narrative of successful and completed Jewish American assimilation. Her own desire

to establish herself as the depressed every-woman masks the tenuous hold she has on an assimilated status and the daily struggle she has to maintain her status in privileged spaces. In some ways, Wurtzel's performance of the 'every American girl' reads like Rogin's analysis of how the use of 'blackface' helped actors like Al Jolson transcend their off-white identities. Wurtzel not only exhibits the anxiety of assimilating her depressed self into sanity, she also exhibits the anxiety of assimilating herself into proper white femininity from her off-white Jewish position, projects that this chapter illustrates as deeply intertwined.

In “Obnoxious to Their Very Nature: Asian Americans and Constitutional Citizenship,” Leti Volpp writes about the dangers of reading economic success in the United States as equaling assimilation or full citizenry in the myth of the “model minority.” Although Volpp addresses Asian American assimilation and citizenship issues, I think aspects of her analysis could prove useful in looking at Jewish American assimilation:

The ideal of the ‘model minority’ is that a strong work ethic and family cohesion has led to Asian American economic success, without the need to rely on government welfare. As many have documented, the idea of the model minority is a myth that belies poverty and disenfranchisement, including high welfare use by certain Asian American communities. It is also used to discipline other persons of color in the United States (66).

The stereotype of the wealthy Jew allows Wurtzel to perform a rich, white girl identity even as her economic status betrays the authenticity of this identity. Wurtzel,

in order to maintain her white identity must attempt to unmark herself of the traces of working class, ghetto girl (a popular term for working Jewish women in the 1920s and 30s) Jewish femininity in order to 'put on' whiteness. This includes becoming quieter, smaller, smiling more, and relying on masculine attention/desire for self-worth and happiness. Wurtzel is never able to fully contain herself, however, and relies on psychotropic medication and therapy to propel her to the outskirts of whiteness. Even in her medicated, more accepting states she is still aware that she stands at the edge of normality (unmarked whiteness) and one misstep can push her right back into a *stranger* (off-white) state. However, this *strangeness* is attributed to her managed, but not ameliorated, depressive state and not a confusing, liminal racial position. Wurtzel works to maintain her whiteness by attempting to make her racial/ethnic status a non-entity in her text. Yet, time and again she exemplifies anxieties of assimilation. Wurtzel, hovering between a white and off-white (*stranger*) female status is neither here nor there. Yet, I suggest, it is precisely Wurtzel's alignment with white femininity that forces her character into a caricatured unintelligibility in which the reader is not asked to grapple with the precariousness of Wurtzel's position, as she becomes simply a stereotype of a depressive without a cause.

Commenting on the phenomenon of the performativity of white femininity, Karen Brodtkin writes:

When immigrants learn that the way to be American is to claim white patriarchal constructions of womanhood and manhood and a middle-class or bourgeois outlook for themselves, they are adapting patterns

and practices that were here long before they were. These are the patterns and practices by which the United States has continually redefined itself as a nation of whites (however variably white has been defined) (178).

Wurtzel's ambivalent ethno-racial status is dependent on location. Brodtkin, writing about her own childhood, addresses this in-between status that depends upon its context for solidification. She writes, "In relation to "the blond people," mainstream white folks, the women of my family felt different. However, in relation to African Americans, we experienced ourselves as mainstream and white" (17). This shape-shifting, this neither-here-nor-there status exacts its toll in its constant demand for performativity. Jewish women who do not whiten themselves properly are abjected as backwards, lazy, hyper-consumptive, frigid and/or hypersexual, fat, loud, and, conversely, sans white performance, as impostors attempting to claim non-white status.¹⁰ The motions available for Wurtzel are limited to the performance of white, middle to upper-class femininity and deviations from this performance make her unreadable, a position so profoundly uneasy that she is driven to debilitating anxiety and depression. In order to be proclaimed rehabilitated from her depression, as well as reabsorbed into whiteness, she must rid herself of the behaviors that make her unrecognizable lest she risk complete disenfranchisement.

¹⁰ An oft-used example of "backwards" women (within larger U.S. communities and narratives and sometimes also within Jewish communities themselves) are religious Jewish women who fully cover. Franny Fine from the show *The Nanny* exemplifies the JAP stereotype which includes laziness, over-consumption, preoccupation with appearance, and a ravenous appetite. Sandra Bernhard, particularly in her performance *Without You I'm Nothing* exemplifies the impostor attempting to claim non-white status.

Wurtzel, therefore, becomes properly white through her comportment and expression, rather than through the vocational and legalistic rights that whitened Jewish men. This suggests that Jewish feminine assimilation into whiteness is much more highly dependent on the body and its movements than its masculine counterpart. While assimilation for straight Jewish American men has been explored as something facilitated by public inclusions such as the GI Bill following World War II, Jewish American women's assimilation needs to be explored as a highly personal ability to perform white femininity, lest we imagine Jewish women were all carried into white, middle-class status by their male counterparts. Wurtzel is mentally ill (off-white, *strange*) when she cannot perform proper white femininity and well (white) when she is able to discipline her body and behaviors. Mental illness, particularly the diagnosis of depression, is therefore, not simply about easing this particular patient's suffering, which is undoubtedly real and harrowing, but also a method of re-establishing Wurtzel where she has been relegated post-Jewish-American assimilation in the racialized, gendered, and classed hierarchies already present in the United States.

Elizabeth Wurtzel, though certainly encompassed within and aware of a philosophy of the Holocaust that insists all Jewish Americans born since are bearers of survival and memory, is not a descendant of survivors and barely touches on the traumatic matter that pushed her father's family to emigrate from Russia to the United States, nor does she ever mention her mother's family's assimilation story, though it is alluded they are from Germany. Not only does she not offer readers a contextualization for her anxiety and depression (for to do so would disrupt her authorial intent to posit herself as an unexceptional, white twenty-something with no

reason to be depressed other than a chemical imbalance), I suggest she also does not possess lenses with which to understand the impact of inherited history on her present because such a lens has been eradicated in order for contemporary Jewish Americans to be seen, and to understand themselves, as seamlessly white. For, if Jews are white in America, having been racialized others in every corner of the world previously, than we may believe in the American dream and we may finally believe we have found a 'true' and accepting home (in many ways eerily similar to how assimilated and secular German Jews felt right before the Holocaust began).

Prozac Nation: Jewish and Struggling to Pass in America

Wurtzel, in the prologue to *Prozac Nation*, writes, “I start to feel like I can’t maintain the facade any longer, that I may just start to show through” (2). The statement instructs readers to understand Wurtzel as a person who “passes” through the world as “normal” while underneath she is “abnormal” or possibly crazy. However, the façade may also be read as a white mask that hides her ethnic Jewish markings that are threatening to emerge. The very possibility that Elizabeth Wurtzel may be working, and often failing, to keep her “whiteface” intact struggles against the very foundational notion of Jewish American Assimilation.

Jewish American assimilation is used as a foundational example in white ethnic studies of the constructivist nature of ethnicity/race in the United States. Critics like Noel Ignatiev, Michael Rogin, and Karen Brodtkin show how Jews in America, particularly Eastern European Jews arriving after 1880 during the third wave of Jewish immigration to the United States, went from being classified as non-white ethnic others to being white after World War II. While the sources of this whitening are contested amongst scholars concerned with this assimilation, there is almost no challenge to the notion that all Jews achieved assimilated white status after World War II. The story Elizabeth Wurtzel conveys in *Prozac Nation*, rife with hiding, grappling, and striving to become someone else (enunciated as a struggle to transcend depression) suggests that the assumptions about completed Jewish American assimilation need to be questioned and our conception of Jewish American assimilation is in need of reform.

Wurtzel begins her construction of whiteness when she attempts to portray her

parents as American (i.e., white) and her junior high and high school Yeshiva peers' parents as old-fashioned and outdated (i.e., off-white). She focuses on her mother's life history because it helps to solidify Wurtzel's white racial position more than her father's life history that is rife with immigration and poverty. She writes, "She'd gone to Cornell to be an architect, but her mother told her that all she could be was an architect's secretary, so she majored in art history with that goal in mind. She'd spent a junior year abroad at the Sorbonne and did all the studiedly adventurous things a nice Jewish girl from Long Island can do in Paris" (22). We learn quickly of this clichéd version of the Jewish American assimilation story, predictably set in Long Island, New York. Her mother holds the expectations of an upper-class white woman coming of age in the late forties and early fifties. She is educated, but as a woman she is also simultaneously limited in what work she may expect to obtain; only through marriage may she expect to be uplifted economically. Here Wurtzel begins identifying herself with other white upper-class American women of her generation, who expect to surpass their mothers' economic status in part because of their mothers' work in the second wave of the women's movement.¹¹

In order to construct this version of unmarked¹², white identity, Wurtzel

¹¹ The "Second Wave" of the women's movement included considerable involvement by Jewish women. Theorists see this movement as one of the sites of Jewish women's metamorphosis into whiteness.

¹² While whiteness is often spoken about in popular culture as an unmarked and empty hegemonic identity, Ruth Frankenberg notes that "the more one scrutinizes it, the more the notion of whiteness as unmarked norm is revealed to be a mirage, or indeed, to put it even more strongly, a white delusion" (73). Benedict Anderson's notion of imaginary community usefully explains why Wurtzel (along with her family, doctor's, and friends) is convinced maintaining a façade of 'whiteness' will make her ordinary, unnoticed (or in essence unmarked).

chooses to give very little attention to her father's working-class, immigrant Jewish family. While her maternal grandparents appear in her memoir, her paternal grandparents and family rarely emerge, even as subjects who are an absent presence in her life. However, what she does offer about her paternal family exemplifies one of the many moments in *Prozac Nation* where Wurtzel begins to open the possibility that some of her misery is related to her (and her families) Jewish matters and the process of ongoing assimilation. In one of the only mentions of her paternal grandparents, she writes:

To me, Grandpa Saul was just a docile old man. And Grandma Dorothy, well, she surely must have had an awful life, but I knew her only as the old lady who made chicken soup for me on the rare occasions my father took me to visit her...her little apartment full of fake wood furniture, pile carpet, impressionistic wallpaper, with a view of the Cyclone roller coaster in Coney Island. My grandmother always seemed like any other oversolicitous, doting Jewish mother to me. (29)

Despite this stereotyped version of the Jewish family, she asserts that this side of her family was rife with depression and sadness (28). While Wurtzel will drop this information in the text and never revisit it, this very information suggests her own misery may be related to her father's families misery which is likely, at least partly, a product of immigration, assimilation and all of the attendant failures associated with these processes. We can make this analytical leap from studying earlier Jewish American women's writing, such as Yeziarska's and Mary Antin's, to see the ways in

which being in-between and unincorporated contributes to anxiety and (what we would now call) depression as well as what is now referred to as post traumatic stress disorder. However, Wurtzel does not ruminate on any of this history, nor do any of her therapists analyze this matter as important in understanding her depression diagnosis. Rather, this information begins to amass as ghostly matter.

Describing her father, she writes, “He came from a background that was more blue-collar immigrant than anything else. And instead of college, he’d done time in the U.S. Army. He was not cool or groovy at all, just a fuckup” (24). While her mother “was frantic to keep at least a toehold in the bourgeoisie...my dad was working overtime (or actually, not gainfully working much at all) to stay the hell out of it” (24). In this version, and throughout the text, Wurtzel will associate herself with her mother and dissociate herself from her father, as if she has inherited nothing from him. This allows her to construct a narrative in which she is an all-American girl depressed like the rest of the all-American children of divorce who are depressed—rife with a mother who does everything and a father who is a good for nothing. Further, dissociating from her father, and her father's family, allows her to extricate herself from any need to think about the weight of Jewish history in relationship to her depression diagnosis. An alternative reading of this information evidences a man raised without any ability to escape his working class status besides joining the army. The experience of the army leaves him alienated (before alienation was fashionable) and disenfranchised, and he cannot pull himself up by his bootstraps into the upper-class white world as his wife, his community, and the nation expect him to do.

Wurtzel also attempts to establish an all-American (white) identity by aligning

herself with the legions of children of divorce across the United States. Again she is a clichéd symbol of a United States gone awry, failing even its most elite. She writes:

The more children of divorce I have met over the years, the more common and trivial my own family history starts to seem. And I always feel so stupid sitting in therapy talking about my problems because, Jesus Christ, so what? I can't equate the amount of pain and misery and despair I have suffered and endured as a depressive with the events of my life, which just seem so common. My reaction has been uncommonly strong, but really, it seems wrong to blame a statistical fact of life for any of it (30).

Wurtzel attempts to collapse all particularities and position divorce as an institution that is experienced the same way by all children. Doing so allows Wurtzel to ignore other factors that contribute to her mental state and to imagine herself as “really” sick because she cannot cope with such a common experience.

A few pages later, Wurtzel writes of the school she attends and the reality of family life for most of her classmates, again attempting to position herself as “normal” and therefore white in relationship to their *strangeness*. Like the construction of the 'good gay' and the 'bad queer' in Michael Warner's *The Trouble With Normal* where the "good gay" gains assimilation in part by denigrating their counterparts, the "bad queer," Wurtzel abjects religious Jews (physically marked by the necessities of dress dictated by religious tenants) to normalize (whiten) her own identity. “Since I went to a Jewish school where the divorce rate among parents was fairly low (that was the main reason my mom sent me there), I would visit friends’

homes and find myself amazed at how glum things seemed compared to life at our apartment” (34). Here, Wurtzel is the exception to the rule, in some ways *more* “American” (and thus “normal” and “white”) than her Jewish schoolmates, as per the divorce statistics she often re-visits. She describes her classmates’ fathers as unapproachable and distant, while the mothers “quite simply lacked style, were dowdy and school-marmish, and they often smelled bad to me as well. ... The sheer joy of having kids seemed completely lost on them. They did not get down with parenthood” (34). The description of Wurtzel’s classmates parents seems an extension of the description of her paternal grandparents, setting up a moment where Wurtzel can disavow their influence and her classmates influence on her identity formation all in one clean break.

Her mother, she writes, “hung out with me whenever she was home, helping me fill in the patterns on the Lite-Brite or dunking Oreo cookies in milk with me or dancing around the living room with me while we played *Free To Be You and Me*.” (34) Wurtzel’s mother is hip and fun, a Bohemian New Yorker, while her friends’ parents are purveyors of a more austere Jewish parenting that she sees as unloving, cold, and even smelly (conjuring stereotypes of Jews popular during the third wave of Jewish American assimilation mentioned earlier in the section on Yeziarska). Through this comparison, Wurtzel appears seamlessly assimilated into a bohemian, urban 1970s America while her counterparts live in the *strange* margins, experiencing an upbringing associated with antiquated methods of parenting in the white, upper-class worlds in which she longs to be assimilated.

Wurtzel continues to attempt to construct a normalized, white identity by

abjecting more visibly religious Jews. She writes:

While we didn't keep a kosher home, I somehow managed to win the school Brochos Bee, the Jewish equivalent of a spelling bee, five years in a row. Instead of spelling words, I had to know what blessings to say on different foods. I retired from this rather odd competition after winning the national contest, against boys with earlocks and girls who wore long sleeves and thick tights in June" (35).

Wurtzel establishes herself as separate from the environment in which she competes, a temporary inhabitant of this *strange* world. She learns the prayers, she insists, because she is bored and precocious and absorbs any information like a sponge. These are not "her" people with "their" strange fathers and schoolmarmish mothers. Rather, they serve as colorful examples of the *strange*, mystical, "exotic" world of Jewish practice. Wurtzel imagines herself to be part of the assimilated, white world, and not the *strange* world her classmates inhabit in which men wear yarmulkes and girls wear dresses below the knee and past the elbow.

Later on, Wurtzel will use stories of these "funny," "quirky" spaces and people to entertain her friends at Harvard as well as to differentiate herself from the Jewish world she both represents and portrays. She conjures the "religious Jews...intellectual types that you'd see in Woody Allen movies..." of her Upper West Side upbringing in order to establish the ways in which she, while perhaps neurotic and depressed, is not one of the American Jewish separatists from her tales (107).

Wurtzel, again displaying her anxieties about being *strange* as well as her intense desire to read herself as the American every-girl (or unmarked white girl),

recalls her adolescent identification with Bruce Springsteen and the hours she would spend listening to his music in the dark. She writes:

But I identify with him so completely that I start to wish I could be a boy in New Jersey. I try to convince my mother that we should move out there, that she should work in a factory or as a waitress in a roadside diner or as a secretary at a storefront insurance office. I want so badly to have my life circumstances match the oppressiveness I feel internally...I'm figuring if I can just become poor white trash, if I can just get in touch with the blue collar blues, then there'll be a reason why I feel this way" (44).

Here, Wurtzel creates a scenario similar to the use of blackface by Jewish actors as a tool of whitening in early Hollywood described by theorist Michael Rogin in *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*. Rogin, writing about the function of minstrelsy in constructing and incorporating immigrants into white America, states, "It was Americanizing ethnics, first the Irish and then the Jews, who dominated minstrelsy at the antebellum flourishing and early-twentieth century revitalization of the form. Blacked-up ethnics entered, even as they helped to create, the American melting pot" (53). By constructing herself in opposition to the "white trash" she claims she longs to be, Wurtzel effectively solidifies herself as a white insider in opposition to the white *strangers* Springsteen refers to in his songs (*strangers* largely because of class).

However, the reader also knows her mother is employed only part-time and her father rarely pays alimony and that she is in private school on a scholarship—this

information undercuts her desire to align herself with middle-class white America and is mentioned only a few times in the text (Wurtzel 23). Wurtzel ends this section of “Secret Life” insisting once again:

Nothing about my life seemed worthy of art or literature or even of just plain life. It seemed too stupid, too girlish, too middle-class. All that was left for me to do was shut down and enter the world of Bruce Springsteen, of music about people from somewhere else, for people doing something else, that would just have to do, because for the moment, for me, there was nothing else (43-44).

When Wurtzel finally manages to spend a summer at her aunt’s home in the New Jersey of her Springsteen dreams she finds herself as miscast there as anywhere else. She spends the summer hanging out with her cousin; going to parties, smoking pot, listening to music, swimming, and sleeping. The cousin and her friends are set to start community colleges in the fall and Wurtzel writes:

It was hard for me not to seem like a superior snothead in that environment, so to keep from repelling everyone around me, I tried not to talk too much. Where on earth would I ever fit in? I kept wondering. At camp everyone is so Jappy, and here in Matawan they’re not Jappy enough. Would it be too much to ask to be in an environment where I had something in common with the people whose lot I shared? (78-79).

Here the *strange* hovering space in which Wurtzel exists is illuminated. By using the word JAP, Wurtzel invokes language that is used as a tool of discipline both within

and without Jewish communities. Evelyn Torton Beck, in her essay “From “Kike” to “JAP”: How Misogyny, Anti-Semitism, and Racism Construct the “Jewish American Princess,” writes:

in the popular imagination, Jews, "Japs," women and homosexuals have all been viewed as devious, unreliable, and power hungry. What has happened in the decades following World War II is that the "Japs," whom we de-humanized when we dropped our atom bomb on them, have subliminally merged in the popular imagination with "kikes" and other foreign undesirables” (88).

Further, Beck writes:

Jews have been said to be materialistic, money-grabbing, greedy, and ostentatious. Women have been said to be vain, trivial and shallow; they're only interested in clothing, in show. When you put these together you get the Jewish-woman type who's only interested in designer clothes and sees her children only as extensions of herself. The Jew has been seen as manipulative, crafty, untrustworthy, unreliable, calculating, controlling, and malevolent. The Jewish Princess is seen as manipulative, particularly of the men in her life, her husband, her boyfriend, her father. And what does she want? Their *money!* In addition, she's lazy -- she doesn't work inside or outside the home. She is the female version of the Jew who, according to anti-Semitic lore, is a parasite on society; contradictorily, the Jew has been viewed both as dangerous communist" as well as non-productive

"capitalist." The cartoon vision of the Jewish American Princess is someone who sucks men dry: she is an "unnatural mother" who refuses to nurture her children (the very opposite of the "Jewish mother" whose willingness to martyr herself makes her ludicrous). And she doesn't "put out" except in return for goods; she isn't really interested in either sexuality or lovingness. We live in a world climate and culture in which materialism is rampant, and Jewish women are taking the rap for it... There are physical stereotypes as well: the Jew with the big hook nose, thick lips, and frizzy hair. The Jewish American Princess has had a nose job and her hair has been straightened, but she too has large lips (an image we immediately also recognize as racist). Jews are supposed to be loud, pushy, and speak with unrefined accents. Jewish American Princesses are said to come from Long Island and speak with funny accents: "Oh my Gawd!" The accent has changed from the lampooned immigrant speech of previous generations, but assimilation into the middle class hasn't helped the Jewish American Princess get rid of her accent. It doesn't matter how she speaks, because if it's Eastern and recognizably Jewish, it's not okay. (90)

Perhaps without intention, Wurtzel here allows readers to understand how deeply the stereotypes of Jewish American women instruct how she evaluates herself and other girls around her. While she uses the term JAP to exemplify class difference, she also inadvertently invokes Jewish difference and how this is understood in her

contemporary moment.

Wurtzel imagines she has found entrance into whiteness, or insider status, when she begins to date the most popular boy in her high school. Attaching herself to this pinnacle of all-Americanness (it is unclear as to whether or not Zachary is Jewish, as he is never marked, but his lack of marking speaks as loud as marking him would. Jewish men need not be identified as they are already assumed white and assimilated, while all of the Jewish women in the text are marked) allows Wurtzel to filter her anxieties into the appropriately white, feminine obsession with heterosexual romance detailed in so many coming of age American girl stories in magazines such as *Seventeen* magazine.

Wurtzel begins dating Zachary, “this really great, sociable, charming, fun-loving guy,” and feels that her long-standing yearning to transcend herself is finally granted (86). “It seemed that for years I had quietly and surreptitiously prayed to God that He might make me—or whatever it was about me that made me—disappear, metamorphose into somebody else, somebody who didn’t walk around as though a crazy, hazy shade of winter hung over even the brightest of days...”(Wurtzel 86). Dating Zachary allows Wurtzel to gain temporary entrance into clearly intelligible white femininity because she attaches herself to the school’s symbol of clearly intelligible *normal* masculinity. Sensing this precarious grip on being rescued from her *stranger* identity, Wurtzel clings to Zachary with a stranglehold, emphasizing the anxieties she has about slipping back into her *stranger* state. The demise of the relationship with Zachary pushes Wurtzel into a deep despair. She writes, “I used to weep for never having anything worth losing, but now I was simply resplendent—

puffy, red, hysterical—with a loss I could identify completely” (90). The deep sadness Wurtzel began to exhibit when she reached puberty is finally explicable in its scope.

While Wurtzel will root this sadness in the chemical depression with which she is later diagnosed, aligning herself with 'other privileged' people who are inexplicably sad, I contend that her sadness is in large part related to being raised Jewish in a post-Holocaust world in which the Holocaust is a trope for all Jewish histories of public traumas. Though she rarely mentions the Holocaust in *Prozac Nation*, she spends a good deal of time relating the ways in which previous trauma dictates how she is parented (this will be explored further in this essay in more depth) and how an inexplicable sense of loss and fear of sudden disappearance is deeply attached to this upbringing. The fact that this insinuation is 'written between the lines' of Wurtzel's text makes it no less salient, in fact perhaps more salient. Janet Burstein, in *Telling the Little Secrets: American Jewish Writing since the 1980s*, writes:

In the last twenty years an all but obsessive preoccupation with the European past has become not only the subject of much American Jewish writing, but also a pervasive presence--even in the works that concentrate on other subjects. Indeed, all the salient issues that perplex American Jews and that figure in their literature after 1980 are bent, wrinkled in some way by either forgetting or remembering what happened in the thirties and forties to the Jews of Europe. (3)

Burstein goes on, stating, "psychoanalysts and historiographers insist that the past haunts and hobbles us until its losses are mourned" (8). This haunting can emerge in

post 1980s Jewish American literature as a "sense of the individual as fragmented, strange, unrecognizable to itself in its ceaseless changes" (9).

In *Prozac Nation* this haunting, or ghostly matter, is inscribed through the ways in which Wurtzel's depression is exacerbated by her anxious upbringing as well as how she must mediate herself in the world to not appear "too Jewish". Her relentless sadness, her sense that anything can disappear at any moment is cultivated not only in her own family, but also in the Holocaust education popular in Hebrew Schools (and now in secular schooling as well where Jewish students become, inadvertently, the living example of past Jewish trauma) as a tool of remembrance and as a prevention of future genocide. But the sense of loss, far removed from the soil of Eastern and Central Europe, is amorphous, inexplicable, and somehow inappropriate--much more easily diagnosed as a chemical imbalance than as remnants of Jewish history and the reality of post-Holocaust Jewish life (her parents are both born during the Holocaust).

Alan Berger, in "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and Identity in Third Generation Writing about the Holocaust," claims that third generation (3G) descendents of Holocaust survivors' are left with memories shot through with holes (150). While Berger's work focuses on direct descendants of Holocaust survivors, it may also be useful to include the third generation descendents of Holocaust deaths in order to fully understand the implications of inherited trauma in our understanding of the Holocaust, and genocide in general. Berger argues that while third generation descendants share the condition of postmemory with their parents (second generation), they are largely shaped by experiences that cannot be imagined or

recreated (150). In many instances, third generation descendants may not have met the survivor(s), but may have heard fragmented stories or seen photographs. Despite this distance from the traumatized past of their families, Berger asserts that 3G writers, like Jonathan Safran Foer, create works that embody "Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma" (151). Further, Berger contends, "the third generation illuminates a cognitive darkness that wasn't present among the survivors and their children" (151).

In "Third Generation Descendants of Holocaust Survivors and the Future of Remembering," Eva Fogelman explores the ways in which third generation Holocaust survivors are recognized in Israel but not in the United States (where they are imagined to have not inherited any trauma). While she finds that 3Gs thrive in light of their legacy ("Third Generation Descendants of Holocaust Survivors and the Future of Remembering" *Jewcy*), respondents bitterly refuted her, suggesting that the far-reaching effects of the Holocaust continue to shape the psyches of the Jews who have been born "after". An anonymous respondent on June 28th, 2008 refutes Fogelman, citing her own position as a descendant of survivors of Pogroms and extreme anti-Semitism as the main contributor to her history of depression and anxiety (Fogelman). Further, she claims that in Hebrew School the time spent learning about the Holocaust heightened her anxiety and feelings of being a *stranger* (Fogelman). She goes on further, stating:

Now, in my mid-thirties, I struggle with my own emotional challenges and view my childhood home as having been the intersection of two (unconscious) family legacies of trauma resulting from persecution.

While I gained wisdom and deep compassion from my paternal grandmother's lesson about strength and resilience in the face of death, the teachings were painfully delivered within a boundary-less relationship that inadvertently transmitted a lot of fear, guilt, and shame directly from her to me, and indirectly to me through my father. My mother actually embodied similar feelings resulting from many stories her grandmother told her of pogroms and pre-Holocaust persecution experiences. I feel strongly that if it were not for the various historical strands of trauma and persecution on both sides of my family, the pervasive legacy of abuse, trauma, and mental illness might not have existed. (Fogelman)

Wurtzel's relentless desire to be read as seamlessly *normal* (white) inhibits her from exploring the historical residues contributing to her depression and anxiety, but the familial relationships she describes (as well as her schooling) illuminates these ghostly markings. Wurtzel, acting as the receptacle for these unwanted worries for her family, momentarily finds an outlet for her own anxieties by attaching herself to the symbol of stability, assimilation, and white masculinity she finds in Zachary. With appropriate outlets for her anxieties, Wurtzel can momentarily stabilize herself into a middle-class, white, adolescent female narrative in which heterosexual heartbreak is an acceptable and encouraged circumstance for feeling sad and not wanting to get out of bed. This narrative absolves her of her inability to explain her sadness, and even allows her mother to stop worrying, for a moment, about her daughter's *strangeness* because she is finally exhibiting *normal* worries for an assimilated girl with no

inherited worries.

When Wurtzel is accepted at Harvard, she imagines that stepping foot on its hallowed soil will finally resolve her *stranger* status. However, the reality was otherwise:

It wasn't supposed to be this way. I was supposed to be an exotic little Jewish American princess, a beautiful and brilliant bespectacled literature student reading Foucault and Faulkner...I wanted a futon with a thick crimson-colored bedspread where I could make love endless nights through sleepy mornings with my boyfriend, a guy who had grown up in Connecticut and played lacrosse and the guitar and me, and who loved me with naughty desire, respect, and abandon (94-95).

Though Wurtzel imagines herself being exoticized at Harvard, it is a controlled exoticization that serves only to make her appear even more beautiful and smart, rather than a source of pain and othering. In that way, Harvard was supposed to be her ultimate move into whiteness (albeit a somewhat "sexier" *normal* whiteness) and yet she finds herself still a *stranger* at Harvard. She:

thought all that was going to stop at Harvard. I thought it was just a matter of getting away from the physical site of my depression [strangerhood or off-whiteness]. Instead it was even worse; instead the black wave, the gloom, was everywhere. It chased me like a runaway train and clung to me like leeches. And I wasn't just running in a metaphoric sense: I literally didn't stop moving, never dared to slow

down to think, too scared to find out what was there (98).

Her *strangeness*, her too-muchness (read as depression and anxiety) is written onto her body—she cannot rid herself of these markings, despite the promise of being a part of one of the first Jewish American generations to inherit whiteness as a birthright.

The less frequently Wurtzel's parents appear in her narrative, the more *normally* white Wurtzel becomes. She becomes rootless, untied from her parents and the semi-assimilated Jewish identity they represent, yet still outside of the white, moneyed circles she moves in, both at Harvard and later in Dallas, working for the *Dallas Sun*. "I'm a stranger wherever I go because I'm strange to myself" Wurtzel writes (142). In assimilating more fully than any other generation of American Jews, Wurtzel and others of her generation are expected to bear no markings of passing anxieties. Yet, her identification as a *stranger* shows that she sees herself as belonging nowhere—not with her Jewish counterparts, people of color, or inheritors of white privilege. Her belonging in any of those spaces is dependent on her ability to pass, and her struggles with depression and anxiety show the cracks in this pursuit.

Wurtzel's *stranger* Jewish identity becomes apparent in her anxieties even as she struggles to maintain an image of white, middle-class femininity. "Don't you get it?" she says to her psychiatrist, Dr. Sterling, "Nothing sticks. That's my whole problem. And that's how it is for me with everything. Nothing is real to me unless it's right in front of me." Dr. Sterling responds, "What a terrible way to live" (Wurtzel 203). Anxieties about disappearances or sudden absences are embedded in much of post-Holocaust Jewish writings, music, and art, suggesting these anxieties are not

merely signals of a universalized depression, as the anxieties exhibited by Wurtzel's presumed white body are read. "My main symptoms, Dr. Sterling believes, are anxiety and agitation. In her opinion, even worse than the depression itself is the fear I seem to have about never escaping from it" (Wurtzel, 204). In fact, "Dr. Sterling knew that somewhere in my personality there was a giggly girl who just wanted to have fun..." (Wurtzel, 207). Wurtzel's anxieties over disappearances are read not as a deep-rooted ethno-cultural anxiety. Rather, these anxieties are read simply and exclusively as the symptoms of a "chemical" depression induced by her parents' divorce. Dr. Sterling's belief that underneath Wurtzel's morose exterior lies a giggly girl who just wants to have fun points to the belief that Jews born after 1950 have prefiguratively acquired white culture. Dr. Sterling cannot believe that depression and anxiety may be passed down in the aftermath of cultural trauma because she reads Wurtzel as seamlessly white, devoid of such a traumatic inherited history evidenced in her anxious upbringing.

While Wurtzel's therapists try to unearth the smiling, happy girl they believe lies beneath her morose exterior, her friends seem less convinced that she is actually one of them, e.g., a properly white, middle-class person. Rather Wurtzel's friends view her as different and exotic, a colorful additive to their Andover-educated, whitewashed world. She writes of her friend Archer who was "one of those Yankee gentlemen who collects hysterical Jewesses as good buddies because we are as foreign and exotic to him as the natives in Tahiti were to Gaugin—and no matter how well he got to know any of us, his bafflement never abated" (218). Here Wurtzel acknowledges the ways in which she is exoticized, made into a *stranger*, even as she

establishes her whiteness in relationship to “the natives in Tahiti.” While she enjoys the attention she receives as an exotic Jewess in the hallowed halls of Harvard, the realities of exoticization and the *strangeness* it entails push Wurtzel deeper and deeper into the funhouse mirror of anxiety and depression, in which all is distorted through a lens that suggests her excessive emotions need immediate remediation. This idea of being excessively emotional points back to Evelyn Torton Beck's assertions of stereotypes of Jewish women, a stereotype that contributes to the diagnosis Wurtzel receives despite the ways in which her Jewishness is erased by her therapists.

Archer is baffled by her hyper-enmeshed family, just as she is baffled by his affluent Protestant family's distance in which each person is imagined to be on his/her own after the age of eighteen. Wurtzel writes, “The concept of Who asked you? does not exist in my family, because the concept of individuals doesn't exist. We're all meshed together, all a reflection of one another, as if we were a pot of stew in which all the ingredients affect the flavor” (224). A stew metaphor is an apt one in reference to assimilation projects because family members are often used as gauges for one another's authenticity/inauthenticity. For instance, the largest wave of Jewish immigration to the United States included large numbers of impoverished and uneducated Jews. Jewish organizations already present in the United States began benevolent programs in part to discipline these immigrants into white, middle-class Americans because they understood that the racialization of these new immigrants would also affect their own race identity within the United States (Baum, 163). It is necessary for members of Wurtzel's Jewish family to police one another's behaviors into *normalized* performance in order to continue to pass for white and middle class.

This need to police family member's behavior is surely heightened in the aftermath of modern Jewish history in which being designated as *strangers* has proved fatal.

Her friends, intelligibly middle and upper-class white women “don’t understand how desperate I am to have someone say, I love you and I support you just the way you are because you’re wonderful just the way you are. They don’t understand that I can’t remember anyone ever saying that to me” (225). Wurtzel’s therapists, parents, classmates, romantic interests, and employers are all invested in Wurtzel inhabiting a normal (white) identity; thus, the notion of “you’re wonderful the way you are” is not available to her as such proclamations would encourage her to relax and cease putting forth the effort to pass. Her “properly” white female friends cannot understand this significance because their relationship with abjection, and subsequently acceptance, is nonexistent, showing some of the differences between inhabiting an unmarked, normalized position and inhabiting an assimilating (and threateningly *strange*) position. These simple words seem trite to them and make them think Wurtzel is indeed a bit off. In fact, Wurtzel’s success (working for *Rolling Stone* and several national newspapers before graduating college), coupled with her feelings of inadequacy and failure, seem incredibly disturbing to those around her, almost as if Wurtzel enjoyed indulging in her miseries, partly for the pleasure of playing the hysterical Jewess.

The ways in which Wurtzel’s deepening depression gets acted out place her solidly into the standard narrative of the body-mutilating white, middle-class girl endemic to talk shows, after-school specials, and nineteen-nineties memoirs. However, Wurtzel’s particular narrative strays from the motif of the girl who hurts

herself for no reason when she writes, “but I could never completely drop out, I could never lose my mind to the point where they’d have to send me away to a loony bin or some place for juvenile defectives because my mother would not be able to survive such a personal debacle. She barely wanted to know about the extent of the despair I was able to experience” (47). Here, Wurtzel’s mother is not the doting white mother of Betty Crocker commercials who will do anything to make her little girl better. Rather, she explicitly instructs Wurtzel to contain and manage her anxieties, to “tell this stuff to Dr. Isaac, she’d say every time I tried to talk to her about my depression” (47). Wurtzel’s mother cannot deal with her depression or accept her mental state, because Wurtzel’s opportunities for assimilation into white middle-class communities far surpassed the opportunities she had herself.

As Wurtzel descends further into depression she writes of becoming “one of those people” who engage in behaviors viewed as deviant, like “one of those people who walks alone at night while others sleep or watch Mary Tyler Moore re-runs or pull all-nighters to finish up some paper that’s due first thing tomorrow” (181). She sleeps during the day, skips classes, and spends much of her time crying. The control Wurtzel exercises during the beginning of her life starts to waver in her early twenties as she sees the ways that assimilation is not an actual absorption into whiteness but a shoddy facsimile in need of constant reiteration to appear authentic.¹³ However, since there is no “original” whiteness, Wurtzel’s off-whiteness must be in place in order to

¹³ Though whiteness is a construct and no person fully embodies this imagined identity, we must acknowledge the material reality that those who are ‘more naturally’ able to perform the behaviors and body movements associated with white middle-class identity are more likely to garner the benefits of white hegemony.

brighten the whiteness of her imagined horizontal peers.

Finally, on page 225, in one of the last chapters of the book, Wurtzel suggests, “part of the problem (the depression problem) relates to ethnicity” (225). However, she does not point to post-Holocaust anxieties or assimilation problems, but to the differences between Catholic guilt and Jewish guilt—“Catholic guilt is about impossibility, while Jewish guilt is about an abundance of possibility” (225). Wurtzel does not ask whether the super drive toward ambition and possibility may be embedded in attempts to excel and assimilate in an effort to avoid threats of annihilation or expulsion that have plagued Jews throughout thousands of years of human history.

Toward the end of the *Prozac Nation*, Wurtzel describes the ways in which she tried to compensate for being depressed; “I had developed a persona that could be extremely melodramatic and entertaining. It had, at times, all the selling points of madness, all the aspects of performance art. I was able to reduce whatever craziness I’d experienced into the perfect anecdote” (290). Here Wurtzel exists as the exotic entertainer for her old-moneyed white friends, the hysterical Jewess with endless stories of intrigue and sex. However, she posits herself as attempting to cover up her depression, to pass as sane, rather than as attempting to assimilate, or at least gain entrance into privileged white spaces by performing the “exotic little American princess” she had set out to be at the beginning of her freshmen year at Harvard (95).

Wurtzel’s memoir ends with an epilogue bearing the same name as the title, *Prozac Nation*. As in the prologue, Wurtzel establishes the current United States as a deeply troubled, alienated place in which Prozac might be used as a pacifier for

symptoms of the empty way that, she contends, we live. The epilogue collapses the United States into a horizontal community of depressed individuals all suffering the same feelings of disenfranchisement and emptiness and Wurtzel relentlessly insists that her story is unoriginal and clichéd in its prevalence. She asserts that what is fascinating about this wave of depression is that the depressed individuals are those who hold the greatest promise for success and achievement, reaffirming Wurtzel's imagined adoring public's vision of her as an overly privileged white girl. She does not talk about the ways in which her depression may be related to the constant process of assimilating in which she must always be proving her proper whiteness even as she continuously fails.

Like Wurtzel's literary predecessors, and contemporaries, she exhibits anxiety and depression about being a *stranger* wherever she goes, in whatever context she finds herself situated. While earlier writers like Yeziarska more readily understood themselves as being off-white *strangers*, and her contemporaries understand themselves to be *strangers* in need of bodily and behavioral modification to shrug off their *strange* state, Wurtzel continues to assert that she is *strange* "simply" because of a chemical imbalance due to her parents divorce (and perhaps hereditary genetic factors). Her reliance on this narrative belies her desperate desire to be read as an upper-class white woman who has "made it" but continues to be besieged by depression and anxiety. Wurtzel wants readers to be alarmed that even the most elite of America's youth are depressed, and while this may surely be a worthy criticism, it is a mask meant to distract us from her assimilating status. Between the cracks, in small utterances, readers can begin to see the fragile hold she has on being 'normal'

and the lurking sense of *strangeness* haunting her at every turn.

**Chapter 3. *The L Word* And Its Evasions: Jewish Presence
and Absence on the Queer Screen**

I have reflected many times upon our rigid search. *It has shown me that everything is illuminated in the light of the past.* It is always along the side of us. On the inside looking out, like you say, inside out. Jonfen, in this way I will always be on the side of your life and you will always be along the side of mine. Our families will be with us and our families families. Your grandfather, and perhaps in some way, my grandfather as well. It is possible I will never know why grandfather did this to himself. Perhaps he wished to bury his life alongside his past. But I must tell you Jonfen, at this moment he seemed, as if for the first time in his life, contented to be where he was.

Everything Is Illuminated, Jonathan Safran Foer

For we understand ourselves in psychological terms from the attribution of difference...Thus I am not speaking here about "realities" but about their representations and the reflection of these representations in the world of those who stereotype as well as those who are stereotyped. In this volume I am not interested in determining the line between "real" and "fabled" aspects of the Jew...Rather I am engrossed by the ideological implications associated with the image of the Jews (and other groups) as "different." This says nothing about the "realities" of the difference.

The Jew's Body, Sander Gilman

"Do you see what I see?" Hyper-visible/invisible Jewish American women and their popular culture manifestations

Joyce Antler, in a special *American Jewish History* issue devoted to popular culture studies (1999), notes that in the early half of the twentieth century "popular culture representations of Jewish life became increasingly masked, indirect, and invisible as opposed to the full-bodied representations of the preceding half century" (247). Antler contends that this invisibility continued throughout much of the twentieth century. She notes that the few representations of Jewish American women emergent in popular culture in the early twentieth century tended to be caricatures of the Yiddishe Mama, while more contemporary examples are largely confined to representations of frigid JAPS and kvetching wives (251). Antler contends, "Jewish women in particular seemed to stand as symbols--and stereotypes--of the darker side of the Jewish ascension to the American mainstream" (7). Further, she asserts that in "most male Jewish American books/movies, Jewish women are not seen from the inside and rarely achieve fullness" (8). Therefore, though there has been a resurgence of Jewish Americans (and Jewish American jokes in television sitcoms regardless of whether or not there are Jews as main characters on the show) depicted on television, it is important to begin to analyze who benefits from this depiction and whether this visibility (or hyper-visibility) is necessarily progressive¹⁴.

¹⁴ In this way there is overlap between Jewish American depiction in popular culture and queer Americans in popular culture--theorists argue amongst themselves if this visibility is necessarily positive and, further, what problematics emerge from increased visibility. Jewish Americans, like queer Americans, are believed to be able to 'hide,' perhaps alluding to the ways in which all Jewish Americans and queer Americans are imagined to be seamlessly white.

Echoing Antler's assertions that Jews have once again become visible in popular culture, Vincent Brooks, like Antler, urges theorists to question this resurgence in representation beyond a simplistic model where visibility necessarily equals positive advancement in assimilation and 'normalization'. Brooks, a scholar of film and literature, claims "the period from 1989 through the early 2000s has seen an unprecedented upsurge in American television featuring explicitly Jewish protagonists (e.g. *Seinfeld*, *Brooklyn Bridge*, *The Nanny*, *Mad About You*, *Friends*, *Dharma and Greg*, *Will and Grace*)" (1). Rather than reading this seeming inclusion as evidence of Jewish American assimilatory progress, Brooks argues "the trend also points to a renewed crisis in Jewish identity formation, which, in turn, reflects a broader struggle over incorporation and diversity in U.S. television and society" (2). He suggests further examination of this resurgence is necessary in gaining deeper understanding of the mechanisms of belonging and citizenship within the United States.

Jon Stratton, in an essay entitled "Not Really White Again: Performing Jewish Difference in Hollywood Films since the 1980s," argues the re-emergence of Jewish Americans in U.S. popular culture troubled the assimilatory tenets of "Be a Jew in private and an individual in public" (153). He writes, "American assimilation was closely allied to the modern distinction between the public and private sphere" (152). Partly due to this distinction (and an assimilation imperative amplified by there being no "home" to return to), Stratton posits that "in the fifties and sixties Jews are portrayed as assimilated whites in Hollywood films" (145). However, Stratton continues, "in the 1980s Jews begin to become racialized subjects again and this is

troped as performance” (145). In this re-ethnicization, Stratton writes, “in film, as in life, markers that are thought to signify Jewish phenotypic difference are bound together with cultural differences” (149). Stratton claims Jewish men are shown as assimilated (despite being identified, again, as Jewish) through the almost ubiquitous portrayal of Jewish American men in popular culture being intermarried.

While he superficially remarks that Jewish women are signified as assimilated through their identification with white women (particularly in the second wave women's movement), he doesn't account for Jewish American women characters (whether 'real persons' or fictional) who are maligned, caricatured, or who otherwise problematize his suppositions. He does not address the Jewish American woman in entertainment who is signified as assimilated through her association with white women but fails to ‘properly’ and seamlessly perform and pass as a white woman. He also doesn't address the plethora of Jewish American characters being played by non-Jews, a popular current trend that further elides and makes invisible (while appearing to be hyper-visible) the Jewish woman's body¹⁵.

In this essay I will attend to two highly marked and highly invisible television characters created by queer Jewish American television producer (and writer), Ilene

¹⁵ *In Her Shoes*, a 2005 movie starring Cameron Diaz and Toni Collette as Jewish American sisters is a fine example of the growing invisibility of the Jewish American woman's body in popular culture. As more and more non-Jewish women play Jewish women, the actual Jewish woman actress becomes more hyper-visible and more undesirable, an unreal caricature or a hyper-ethnicized body. There is room only for non-Jewish women to play Jewish women or extremely 'whitened' Jewish women actresses to be seen. This is not to say that Jewish American women who do not 'look like' stereotypical Jewish women are any less valid, but it is to question what happens to the Jewish woman who does embody physical stereotypes--where does she go, how is she understood, how does she fit into the schema of completed assimilation if she is absented or caricatured?

Chaiken. These characters are of particular interest because they have largely been ignored by critics concerned with Jewish and queer representations in popular culture. These characters, Jenny Schecter and Tonya (who is never given a last name), emerge on *The L Word*, an almost entirely female queer drama, and are thus differentiated from the majority of Jewish American women's narratives on television that are eclipsed by male narratives (and have served as the basis of examination of Jewish woman on TV, such as Franny Fine from *The Nanny* and Monica Geller from *Friends*). Further, Jenny Schecter, in particular, is highly marked as Jewish by her explorations of her Jewish history and Jewish present in numerous story lines. Yet, despite this visibility, her Jewish matters are ignored by the other characters on the show as well as the audience of the show, belying that Jewish women, particularly those who are *strange* (not entirely assimilated), may be highly visible and incredibly invisible at the same time. This ambivalent, and puzzling, situation, then, exhibits itself to be a case worthy of more examination as part of the investigation into the re-emergent visibility of Jews in popular culture within the United States.

Karen Brodtkin, in *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, suggests Jewish Americans have inhabited a *stranger* position for most of the twentieth century, being shuttled back and forth between being identified as white and non-white (175). I contend here that the myriad stories being told by Jewish American queer women artists, and particularly here the story Ilene Chaiken tells of *The L Word's* queer (mainly white) women's community in which Jewish women still inhabit *stranger* positions, are important in considering that the standardized notion of completed Jewish American assimilation may tell only part of

the story. Unlike the assimilated model of Jewish Americans, these characters existing as *strangers* illuminate the failures, problematics, and questions left in the wake of supposed completed and closed inclusions. For, unlike the absorbed Jew who poses no threat to the status quo, the *stranger*, as per Zygmunt Bauman, is dangerous because she has the ability to masquerade as an insider until her movements begins to seem stilted, her speech too precise and careful, until a hint of something foreign emerges in her gait suddenly, and irrevocably (59). At the moment that the *stranger* is ousted the solidity of category and identity is dislodged in such a way that disturbs the insider as well as the outsider, with, often, dire consequences for the stranger (60).

In some cases the *stranger* has the ability to mediate her position by positioning herself in opposition to designated outsiders or attempting to align herself with insiders as I have attempted to illuminate in my examination of Elizabeth Wurtzel in *Prozac Nation*. In other cases there is no choice but for the *stranger* to make a home in this homeless state, as I will show in the next chapter on Sarah Schulman's *Empathy*. Here I will work to show how the *stranger* is often ousted to discipline insiders and outsiders alike, and how sometimes *strangers* attempt to make homes in *stranger* spaces only to find that there, too, lies a normal body with whom the *stranger* will be compared and disciplined. In this topography, the *stranger* is as important as the insider and the outsider in creating and maintaining punitive systems of hierarchical order. Jenny Schecter and Tonya inhabit this necessary *stranger* space throughout the duration of *The L Word* series, and this is no small Jewish matter.

The L World and its Inhabitants: Belonging and Disenfranchisement in a Televised Queer Women's World

While the late nineteen seventies and the nineteen eighties saw a plethora of writing and art that attempted to address Jewish American women's issues within the auspices of lesbian communities¹⁶, there has been a decided silence on the subject in recent years, suggesting that lesbian and queer communities have caught up with the rest of the country in reading Jewish American women as simply and blankly white. However, despite this silence, Jewish American queer women writers, such as the creator and head writer of *The L Word* Ilene Chaiken, are creating narratives in which Jewish American women's life experiences, on a daily level, defy the parameters for identification as properly white and feminine. Therefore, it is important to revive the conversation on Jewish American women's issues in a myriad of spaces, including queer communities, in order to more fully understand the weight of history that ghosts some Jewish American women's lives, hindering full assimilation and producing a state of perpetual *assimilating*.

In 2001 *Showtime* announced plans for a new lesbian drama, originally titled *Earthlings* and later re-named *The L Word*. In the two years between the announcement of the show and its actual airing, *The L Word* garnered much speculation on the internet where queer women discussed plot-line spoilers, as well as their hopes and apprehensions about 'their' lives coming out in such a public forum. When the show eventually aired, the number of websites devoted to the show grew

¹⁶ *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* by Evelyn Torton Beck (1982), Minnie Bruce Pratt's *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* (1984) are two influential books that discuss the need for Jewish women's concerns to be addressed in lesbian communities.

exponentially, suggesting *The L Word*; perhaps most simply because of the dearth of other mainstream lesbian-focused entertainment, was connecting queer women across the country in conversations about queer women's communities.

Much of the web buzz after the show aired concerned the dearth of women of color on the show as well as the lack of any transgender characters. This internet feedback caught the attention of the series writers and caused them to revision aspects of the show, illuminating the ways in which the show was evolving as a veritable call-and-response between the viewers and producers of the show. Eventually, Ilene Chaiken and her crew worked to include previously elided transgender issues beginning in the third season with the introduction of the character of Moira who soon begins sexual reassignment to 'become' Max. Chaiken and company also responded to criticism of setting a show in Los Angeles without having a Latina representation from East Los Angeles by including Papi (East Los Angeles' lothario played by Indian American actress Janina Gavankar) in the fourth season.

Such interactions suggest that viewers are invested in seeing themselves and their communities accurately portrayed on the only show depicting an all (or almost all) queer women's world. Further, these interactions suggest that the show has an impact in not only depicting, but also shaping and influencing queer women's consciousness, particularly as an *imagined* national (or global) *community* (as per Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities).

The show aired on January 18th, 2004, a full two years after the series was announced. Viewers were invited into the world of Bette Porter (Jennifer Beals), a bi-racial art museum director; Tina Kinnard (Laurel Holloman), a former movie

executive who quit her job to have a child, identified simply as Bette's partner on the Showtime official *L Word* website; Dana Fairbanks (Erin Daniels), a closeted professional tennis player; Alice (Leisha Hailey), a bisexual free-lance journalist who acts as the groups purveyor of gossip; Jenny Schecter (Mia Kirshner), a Jewish writer who moves to Los Angeles to live with her boyfriend, Tim, who lives next door to Bette and Tina who will quickly begin to question her sexuality and identity; Shane McCutcheon (Katherine Moennig), a semi-butch hairdresser who is the groups lothario; Kit Porter (Pam Grier), Bette's straight African-American half-sister, a former professional singer, recovering alcoholic, and absent mom who is at least ten years older than the rest of the group (Sho.com). The series follows these characters over six seasons and details the intimate and public facets of their lives. Like the heterosexual popular culture phenomenon, *Friends*, *The L Word* often shows the group gathering at a coffeeshop to discuss their lives. It is most acutely obvious in these group scenes who inhabits insider status, outsider status, and *stranger* status and how this is used to discipline one another in an often unspoken code of conduct that mimics much of the comportment of straight, white, urban middle-class communities. It is important to note that only Jenny, Bette, and Kit are ethnically identified, though Bette and Kit's ethnic and racial identities will be explored publically while Jenny's Jewish matters are relegated to the proverbial closet of her writing and her bedroom. All the other women on the show will grapple with 'issues' but they will be relegated to universalized 'queer' issues (barring, perhaps, Shane who explores issues she inherited as a poor white person).

Although clearly a phenomena worth critically examining, *The L Word* has

garnered little academic attention. The little scholarship available at present on *The L Word* is concerned with reification of heteronormativity, the dearth of representations of masculine women, and the lack of representation of women of color—all subjects worthy of investigation and critical attention, though not addressing the matters I attend to here. The two major queer theorists who have tackled the show, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Halberstam are themselves Jewish, though neither spends much time entertaining the significance of Jenny Schecter, other than to complain about the tediousness of her storyline. Halberstam, in a *Girlfriend's* magazine article entitled “I Love Not the L Word,” writes, “I am also unhappy about the centering of the never ending and rather tedious dramas of the rather lame heterosexual turned bisexual Jenny, who can only find destructive ways to deal with her childhood sexual abuse and getting in touch with her Jewish heritage” (Halberstam). No Jewish scholarship has yet to take on the character, which is not surprising given that only recently has Jewish scholarship opened up to thinking about queer Jews and the intersection of Jewishness and queerness.

Through an examination of Jenny Schecter with a brief detour to interrogate the minor character of Tonya (who is never given a last name), the ways in which insiders and outsiders are established through these *stranger* characters will be illuminated¹⁷. I begin with an examination of Tonya, a character who appeared on 9 episodes of the show before she was excised for her *strangeness*. Next, I engage with the storyline of Jennifer Schecter to establish her *stranger* status and how this *stranger* status obscures the more useful and interesting aspects of her storyline that

¹⁷ Jennifer Schecter is clearly and indelibly marked as Jewish, while Tonya is insinuated to be Jewish--particularly to the 'knowing' ear.

center on the residue of inherited and experienced trauma. Lastly, I show how these representations not only work to discipline the other characters on *The L Word* but also exemplify Ilene Chaiken's vision of Jewish American women's assimilation as an ongoing *assimilating* process.

In a January 9th, 2004 interview with *The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California* Ilene Chaiken told reporter Curt Schleir that Jenny Schecter's story was loosely her own, adding that "there are bits and pieces of me in Jenny and one or two other characters I channel myself through" (Schleir). Further, Chaiken reveals, "Jenny Schecter is one of two Jewish characters in the show. There is one other character I think is Jewish. I haven't had to decide yet" (Schleir). This is important when considering the character of Tonya who is never fully disclosed as Jewish, but who bears the markers of a Jewish woman (namely a Jewish American Princess) that Sander Gilman suggests all Americans (regardless of demographics) are capable of reading and understanding. Gilman proposes that despite ideas of assimilation, "the informed listener hears the Jew hidden within no matter whether this difference is overt or disguised" (19).

Schleir goes on to detail that Chaiken grew up in a very liberal, progressive Jewish centered middle-class home outside of Philadelphia dating men. Like Jennifer Schecter, when Chaiken moved to L.A. she met an older woman, fell in love, and ceased dating men within a year or so (Schleir). Therefore, Jennifer Schecter's narrative can be read to a certain extent as a fictional account of Chaiken's move from her liberal Jewish community in Philadelphia to a largely non-Jewish lesbian community in L.A. This is not to suggest we read Schecter as a factual account of

Chaiken and her family, but rather as a metaphor for Chaiken reaching to understand and tell “what happened” (or telling the little secrets, as Janet Burstein might suggest). Because, as Jennifer, or Jenny, Schecter tells her stepfather in a dramatic confrontational scene, “I’m not going to shut up and be subservient. I’m not going to set the dinner table and pretend that things don’t happen. Because when you don’t talk about them, they get worse Warren” (Season Three, Episode 1).

The tales told by Ilene Chaiken¹⁸ are sad ones in which Jewish women are either excised from the main group of friends, made invisible, or disciplined and reformed. Further, at several moments throughout the series when we are privy to Jenny Schecter’s ‘private,’ unuttered thoughts, we are told ghost stories of unutterable and unreachable memories of abuse and violence, both her own and her grandparents’ Holocaust narratives. However, these excisions, disciplined inclusions, and invisibilities belie the necessary behaviors for being included in the community of *The L Word*. Further, the viewer response to the Jewish characters on the show allows us to understand that these characters are both highly visible and invisible *strangers*, simultaneously, and thus easily excisable, illuminating the current crisis in visibility/invisibility of Jewish identity in popular culture that Joyce Antler, Jon Stratton, Vincent Brooks, and others have identified. And the crisis for Jenny Schecter (and by extension, Ilene Chaiken) is that her story has no viable way to be illuminated through the narrative lens of white femininity, despite the idea that she is seamlessly white. While Jenny cannot be read as a simple caricature fitting into the

¹⁸ There are a myriad of writers on the show, but Chaiken, as the head writer and creator is responsible for setting the trajectory and basic storyline of the characters. However, it is good to keep in mind that Chaiken does not have one hundred percent control over the script.

role of Yiddishe Mama, overbearing mother, or JAP, she also cannot be read as a fully fleshed out nuanced character because her internal, privatized psychic pain cannot be made manifest in any meaningful way, since her assumed pre-acquired white history precludes her Jewish matters from becoming visible, even to the viewers who watch her gruesome story unfold.

Jenny Schecter is necessarily a writer as she struggles to piece together fragmented memories of her childhood and her family members' stories. Fiction becomes a way of reckoning with a ghostly past that haunts her that cannot be accurately articulated in linear, conventional stories as bits and pieces of memory bleed out. Whether or not the stories are “really” reflections of Ilene Chaiken’s life becomes irrelevant. What is relevant is that through Jenny Schecter we can begin to understand the residue of the past that may complicate some Jewish American women’s assimilated status.

Before I attend to Jenny and her storyline, I would like to first visit the narrative of Tonya, the most maligned character to appear on the show besides Jennifer Schecter (who will be murdered by the end of the series). Through her character I will show how we know who is an insider on *The L Word*, who is an outsider, and who is a *stranger*. I contend that understanding these ‘roles’ helps us to understand what stories/concerns are made apparent and what stories/concerns are invisible, or caricatured (in that they become hypervisible, but still invisible in that viewers cannot empathize). Without empathy, as Judith Butler (*Giving An Account of Oneself*) and Sarah Schulman (*Empathy*) theorize, we lose the ability to stretch ourselves past what people can understand and utter about themselves in order to

convey themselves and their life stories. On *The L Word* there is no clearer way to understand whom we are to empathize with, identify with, and abhor than through examining the storylines offered for Jenny Schecter and Tonya, the way other characters react to them, and the way they are literally portrayed by the camera. And no other character thus far in the show's series has been more abjected than Tonya.

Tonya enters *The L Word* on the eleventh episode of season one, titled "Looking Back". Dana Fairbanks, a professional tennis player who is newly out of the closet, is invited by the Human Rights Coalition (HRC) to speak on an Olivia cruise and she brings along all of her friends. Tonya is assigned to be Dana's "guest liaison" and clearly hopes that she will also be able to be more to Dana. Alice (Dana's best friend and future girlfriend) asks if "that thing comes with batteries" as Tonya is shown to be neurotically involved with every single moment of Dana's time. Tonya is vulgar and inappropriate in her clinging clothes and her too-tall (the camera shoots from the floor in all of her scenes), too voluptuous, too "tan" body. The script does not ask if this really is a "tan," or if her whiteness is somewhat removed from Dana's WASP heritage (Dana Fairbanks, portrayed as the uber-WASP of the show is played by Erin Daniels, a Jewish American actress). Tonya never even gets a last name and thus she becomes the unruly, out-of-control, over-the-top white girl, or perhaps even worse than an over-the-top white girl, she becomes the vision of the unmarked assimilated Jew, an alarming example of the drawbacks of assimilation and the perils of seeking inclusion through economic uplift and employment success. I suggest she is being portrayed as the latter, the monstrous example of effects of the "whitening" and "Americanizing" of Ashkenazi Jews Joyce Antler identifies. Even if she is

unmarked, her mannerisms, her language (she uses Yiddishisms like “shtup”), and her embodiment all suggest she is Jewish, off-white.

In *The Jew's Body*, Sander Gilman writes, “The image of the Jew who sounds too Jewish is the counter-image of the hidden language of the Jew. The language used by the Jew reveals or masks the Jew’s corrupt nature” (19). Further, as stated earlier, regardless of whether the Jew and his or her voice is disguised or overt, the informed listener hears this *difference*. In this ontology all United States inhabitants are “informed listeners” and can sense the Jew from beneath the “whitened” facade.

The reactions to Tonya I found on the internet, as well as the reactions I heard from fellow queers suggest we recognize her as “other,” “unacceptable,” even if an actual ethnic designation is never applied but simply inferred. For instance, there is a Facebook page devoted to “People Who Hate Tonya from the L Word.” Merri Lisa Johnson, in “L is for 'long term': Compulsory Monogamy on the L Word,” writes about the growing, clandestine relationship between Dana and Alice while acknowledging, derisively, “Dana is engaged to Tonya (Meredith McGeachie), an objectionable star-fucker who glommed onto Dana at a tennis tournament” (160). Johnson's assessment, along with the Facebook page devoted to hating Tonya, sums up the overall viewer reception to Tonya's presence on *The L Word*, earning the character the nickname 'Toxic Tonya'. Not one of the reactions discussed Tonya’s ethnicity; however, I think the vilification of Tonya’s habits and dress, including hand motions, volume, and hair speaks to the ways in which an ethnicity is being established and the ways in which this excisable, unnamed, *strange* “ethnicity” is necessary for the other characters to establish their own identities.

Through the identification of her “inappropriateness,” other characters, both white and off-white, can police their own (and other characters) daily behaviors into appropriate “white” femininity. Of course, several of the show’s characters can never fulfill this project and thus exist at the periphery of the show at all times. Tonya, off-white, becomes more included into the central group of the show, while Kit, African American, remains more on the outskirts. Thus, if white femininity needs off-white femininity (*strangers*) to become seamlessly white, off-white femininity relies on the exclusion/abjection of non-white femininity to become less off and more white. Tonya, I suggest, can be read as example of the ways in which fixation on the character in desperate need of containment detracts attention away from the ways in which other characters also exhibit the behaviors in need of containment. While characters like Alice (who is portrayed as seamlessly white) can put on, as well as take off, these excesses, characters like Tonya are relegated always to the over-the-top slot. This cannot be removed from the ways in which Alice and Tonya are ethnically marked even as Tonya’s ethnicity is made covert. Alice can go from drinking excessively, having sex with her girlfriend for days instead of going to work, and then appear at Dana’s mother’s Orange County Republican country club with a sweater tied around her neck without any seeming inauthenticity. Tonya, however, cannot escape her excessiveness; no matter how many sweaters she ties around her neck.

The second episode of the second season of *The L Word*, “Lap Dance,” begins with a dream sequence titled, *Present Day–In Your Wildest Dreams* (“Lap Dance”). The camera focuses in on what appears to be a jungle, lush and green, with a

soundtrack of screaming monkeys as a signal, I suppose, that we really are in the “jungle.” The soundtrack continues on as the camera pans through a mass of greenery and branches until focusing on Alice sitting at an ornate white, patio furniture type table, typing away on her Apple (to accentuate the Garden of Eden theme). She is dressed in a white tank top that covers all of her skin besides her neck and arms, making her appear pure and virginal, replete with silky blonde hair. Tonya appears, seemingly out of thin air, slithering snake-like in a clinging red see-through mesh dress with visible red underwear (Snake and Apple all in one?). The “temptress” (as she is obviously being played) dons blood-red nails and thick black eyeliner, feathered at the edges in “Cleopatra” style ala the *Bangles* hit “Walk Like An Egyptian.” Lips thick with red lipstick, dark thick curly hair pulled up to frame her face, Tonya calls up any of a number of stereotypical representations of “off-white” women, but of which ethnicity we cannot be sure, especially since her character has been assumed as normatively white since she first appeared.

The next few clips focus on Alice’s facial expression as the camera pans back and forth from her face to Tonya’s red-meshed, tan (because we think she is white) breasts. Alice’s eyes are narrowed, her lips slightly parted--she looks turned on and terrified, simultaneously--after all part of the temptress’s charm comes from her elusive unpredictability. When Tonya asks her, “do you know how to say you’re sorry” while grazing her blood red nail at the edge of Alice’s tank top, Alice, as if in a trance, begins to pull apart the laces holding Tonya’s shirt together, freeing the breasts she can’t keep herself away from (“Lap Dance”). The scene conjures the archetypal wicked witch who can shape shift into a beautiful temptress, but we (the

viewers, or readers) always know how ugly and undesirable she really is. Tonya pulls Alice into a deep kiss as if she intends to devour her before pulling Alice's legs apart, murmuring "someone's hungry," and whispering "starving" as she puts her head between Alice's parted legs ("Lap Dance"). At the end of the dream sequence Alice wakes up gasping in horror and fear in her bed in a room with muted colors, jumping up from a sleeping position

Later on in the episode we find ourselves moving into a swank French restaurant, the camera panning in on the ornate facade of the restaurant as classical music plays. Inside, with the classical music still going, we watch Tonya secure the "First ever corporate-sponsored celebrity lesbian wedding" for Dana, and subsequently herself ("Lap Dance"). Tonya in a beige business suit, a tight bun, pearls, and muted make-up at first appears to look "uber-professional." However, on further inspection we see she is wearing a low-cut tank top beneath the jacket and a short skirt. Although this ensemble on Alice would still appear professional, on Tonya it looks garish, more like she is playing a "professional" in a girl-on-girl porn scene. Unlike Pam Grier's Kit Porter, one of the few women of color included in the series who has a similar body to Tonya, who is always dressed as well as her uber-stylish, uber-thin castmates', Tonya is continuously shown in clothing that's always a little too tight, a little too over the top, denoting her inability to become a proper refined, white woman even when she tries to look professional.

Robyn Longhurst, in *Bodies Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, writes, "In western culture, while white men may have presumed that they could transcend their embodiment (or at least have their bodily needs met by others) by seeing the body as

little more than a container for the pure consciousness it held inside, this was not allowed for women, blacks, homosexuals, people with disabilities, the elderly and children” (13). Further along in her examination of pregnant bodies, men’s bathrooms, and corporate suits, she suggests that the corporate uniform is so important for managers because the highly tailored dark colored business suit functions to seal the bodies of women and men managers, “Firm, straight lines and starched crease give the appearance of a body that is impervious to outside penetration” (Longhurst 99). While more androgynous bodied women may have access to this appearance of imperviousness to outside penetration while in a business suit, Tonya’s body clearly cannot be contained. And rather than this inability to contain herself being the fault of clothing manufacturers who expect women to be thin and angular if they are to look professional and contained, Tonya’s moral character becomes questionable. Yet she does not become an outsider where the other characters would be able to assess who she ‘is’ and react accordingly. Rather, she remains *strange* and garish, a next-door neighbor who has the ability to ‘just get it together’ like you have, but just will not.

The corporate folks, a mix of men and women around the table, unlike Tonya, are in suits that cover all of their skin, sealing up their thin bodies. Dana, walking in after the meeting begins in a white Fila shirt with a white sweatshirt, is completely covered up, with her hair pulled back in a ponytail without any visible traces of makeup, in contrast to Tonya’s highly done up face. Tonya circles the table as she speaks, bringing the viewer back to the opening dream sequence in which she hovered around Alice in a similarly predatory fashion. She gestures widely with her

hands, laughs raucously, and persuades the corporate representatives to go along with her every move. Her tone of voice and her laughter seem inauthentic, connoting she is simply the ravenous opportunist the script imagined her to be from her first entrance to the show at the Dinah Shore weekend in Palm Springs, California, where she served as Dana's guest liaison.

She is the trickster Jew here (as per Gilman's definition of the Jew who can shapeshift, mask, and hide, according to popular culture lore and anti-Semitic tracts), the character who can become anything for a buck. She does not embody white femininity—she does not speak quietly, but loudly; her laugh is not demure; her body is not small and understated as she uses her hands in large sweeping gestures to accentuate her points. In contrast to Dana she is too-much, too-loud, as Dana embodies proper white femininity by making her body and its gestures quiet, laughing softly, and sounding ever happy, but not too happy. Yet, Dana's white femininity can only be accessed (she is, of course, queer) through Tonya's abjection—Dana needs Tonya to embody the too-queer so that she can be the absorbed/tolerated lesbian. Michael Warner, in *The Trouble With Normal*, designates this dichotomy as the good gay and the bad queer, with the bad queer becoming the *stranger* as the good gay is incorporated through the bad queer's abjection. If the viewer received more information about Tonya's identity and back-story, as we do with even more peripheral characters, then it may be harder to flagrantly call her "Evil Tonya," and hating her might look more insidious and racialized than it first might seem.

If we do read Tonya through the Jewish lens the writer's of the show ambivalently grant viewers (with her usage of the Yiddish shtup and the name of her

ex-fiancé) she ceases to seem quite so absurd. Like the women Karen Brodtkin analyzes in her text, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race In America*, Tonya claims space in a way that is not properly white or feminine.

Brodtkin writes:

Young working-class immigrant women claimed the streets and public spaces as theirs; they dressed to attract the attention of men. They frankly acknowledged their sexuality as expressive of power and subjectivity and as a means to get men to take them to the new public amusements they could not afford on women's low wages. (128)

Tonya, by embodying these characteristics Brodtkin identifies, defies the quietness of white femininity. However, I would argue, with her strong, sturdy, curvy body she is already too uncontained.

When Dana finds out Tonya is receiving a fifteen percent manager's fee for the First Ever Corporate-sponsored Celebrity Lesbian Wedding meeting, she becomes enraged and disgusted, heading to Alice's apartment to complain. Alice responds to the news by/ saying, "you're just going to let her take fifteen percent of your income?" ("Lap Dance") She tells Dana to, "fire her, fire her. Dana, you're marrying an endorsement slut. Man. I can't believe she got you all those deals, though" ("Lap Dance"). Dana agrees, "it is pretty incredible actually" to which Alice retorts, "if you want to auction off your love to the higher bidder, I guess" ("Lap Dance"). Alice further suggests Tonya has brainwashed Dana and Dana, whispering back, agrees.

Tonya is portrayed as a money hungry parasite with no respect for what we are to believe is the highest attainment: love. Karen Brodtkin, in her investigation of

absorption of Jews into whiteness in the United States, establishes the ways in which the “off-white” or “non-white” person is expected to be a producer of wealth but not a consumer. She writes, “The alleged character deficiencies and lack of sharp gender distinctions among peoples designated as nonwhite have been portrayed as confirmation of the myth that nonwhites are not fit to be actors on the national stage or to parent the nation’s children, that their only place is to produce—but not to consume—its wealth” (176). Clearly we can see the ways in which Tonya is shunned not for making the money for Dana, but for having the audacity to expect compensation for her work. We are asked to see her taking a fifteen percent manager’s fee as money-grubbing and greedy, ultimately vulgar. We are not asked to see Dana in the same light, even as we see her selling herself to corporate sponsors from the beginning of the series. As viewer’s we are asked to ignore Tonya’s status as Dana’s manager and to see her as the “JAP” figure, a self-centered, materialistic, and greedy Jewish wife (Brodkin 161).

Like Monica Lewinsky, one of U.S. histories most recent notorious Jewish temptresses who managed to seduce the president even when most of the country considered her fat, ugly, and garish, Tonya is marked without ever being actually marked. This allows viewers and other characters to hate her “off-white” behaviors without identifying her as “ethnic” or “off-white,” a designation that might make their hatred somewhat more complicated. By reading JAP-like qualities on to Tonya without identifying her, she is easily excisable, a caricatured figure who exists only to discipline the other characters (and by extension, the viewers) into 'normal' behaviors. Existing as a *stranger*, Tonya threatens those around her with her ability to mimic an

insider while bearing *strange* markings.

Jenny Schecter And Her Jewish Matters

I seek to avoid the problem of hierarchies of suffering by working, as it were, horizontally rather than vertically, extending a wide embrace beyond the immediate site of suffering to look at the experiences of those who are feeling its effects even if they are removed from it (whether historically or spatially). In looking at emotional responses that are tangential to trauma yet that still touch on it, I am arguing not that they are the equivalent of trauma but that they help illuminate its emotional dynamics. The nuances of everyday emotional life contain the residues that are left by traumatic histories, and they too belong in the archive of trauma...They can make one feel totally alone, but in being made public, they are revealed to be part of a shared experience of the social.

Archive of Feelings, Ann Cvetkovich

If Jon Stratton is correct, then “Jews were not thought to be naturally white (in the United States), but needed to learn how to be white, particularly in relationship to family” (145). “For Jews to be fully accepted as white, as differentiated from American, meant to be thought to have Anglo-American culture, an achievement made possible by the assumption of what, following Brodtkin, we could call prefigurative acquisition” (Stratton 145). For Jenny Schecter this acquisitive assumption of Anglo-American culture, particularly in relationship to family (or more largely, personal relationships) is a recent one, according to the third season opener storyline in which we find ourselves in Jenny Schecter’s childhood home and first find out that her parents are Orthodox Jews. Throughout this episode (the second time we have ever heard of her parents, and the first we have seen them) we learn that Jenny has grown up in an enclosed community in which she was expected to marry a “nice Jewish boy” and her introduction to non-Jewish communities occurred around her 18th birthday when she went away to college.

Interestingly, the actress who portrays Jenny Schecter, Mia Kirshner, has a

biography that reads similarly to Jenny's storyline. The grandchild of Holocaust survivors, (her father is reported to have been born in an internment camp), who tells of a childhood in which she was this strange 'dark' child amongst blonde counterparts with the history of the Holocaust imprinted in her paternal grandparents cells and displacement and diaspora written into her Bulgarian maternal grandparents hearts (Pfefferman). She tells of Shabbat dinners where:

I would watch my grandfather vanish. His eyes dark slits, mouth open in mute horror. Sometimes, he would stop talking for days.... Now my father likes to travel; they never want him to leave. Hysteria accompanies his departures, my father repeating his itinerary over and over again. (Pfefferman)

The only actress on the show who bares any similarity to the character she plays is not surprisingly the unofficial 'narrator' or viewpoint into the show throughout the first two seasons, as well as being a representative of the creator and head writer of the show¹⁹.

However, something about this doubling renders Kirshner's performance stilted, as if her own self is difficult to quiet as she portrays Schecter, and she never fully inhabits her but remains both, simultaneously. Even her eating becomes exaggerated in a way that prompts critics to comment that her inability to chew 'normally' may be signal of Jenny possessing an eating disorder (interestingly the

¹⁹ On this show, this is indeed surprising, especially when you have an Indian-American actress playing a Latina American, an Iranian-American playing a Latina American, and a Jewish American playing a upper-class white, Christian woman passing as straight to her wealthy parents.

critic, afterellen.com, refers to Jenny Schechter as being anorexic and in need of immediate sustenance, yet never suggests that Mia Kirshner, the actress whose body embodies Schechter, is anorexic).

We enter the *L Word's* world through Jenny Schechter, our 'guide' throughout the first two seasons of the series. Jenny moves to L.A. to live with her boyfriend and to become a professional writer after she graduates from the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop. Within the first episode Jenny begins to question her sexuality through her involvement with Marina, the series mysterious Italian femme fatale (though the actress Karina Lombard is Lakota, Russian, and Swiss) who will eventually try to kill herself in a lavish Beverly Hills hotel. Throughout the series Jenny Schechter inhabits a myriad of personas only to eventually become a caricature of a character in the last few seasons of the show before she is murdered in the show's last season. In the first season of the series Jenny sheds her oversized sweatshirts with teddy bears, her oversized glasses and her Midwestern accent for vintage clothing, thick black eyeliner and goes from straight to gay. Though the first season involves several references to her Jewish ethnicity, including an ever-present Chai around her neck²⁰, it is in the second season that the ghostly matters of her identity emerge.

Jenny goes from being the heterosexual-vehicle-turned-lesbian who allows straight viewers of the show to easily and comfortably enter this queer women's world to being immersed in her own inner turmoil of past sexual abuse and inherited trauma troped by the Holocaust. This inner turmoil will ultimately lead to a breakdown that will be diagnosed as mental illness and remediated as such. In the

²⁰ Mia Kirshner is often reported wearing a Chai around her neck during interviews.

next seasons these psychic matters will be dropped as Jenny, in the third season, becomes ‘normalized’ by her relationship with *stranger* Moira, who transitions to Max and is rendered *strange* for his class, rural background, and transgendered identity. Jenny again becomes a suspicious stranger in the fourth season by writing stories for the *New Yorker* about the *The L Word* friends that get picked up to be made into a movie. Though Jenny accurately portrays her friends and their escapades, the friends are infuriated that Jenny would expose their proverbial skeletons in the closet.

In this season Jenny becomes a caricature, acting in what might easily be identified as a Jewish American Princess fashion, and is portrayed in the last episode of the season floating in a tiny boat from a beach party in Los Angeles out into the Pacific after referring to herself as an Arendtian pariah. In the fifth season Jenny is altogether transformed into a caricature, replete with a deep tan, large hoop earrings, and a sudden shift from the camera shooting her from above to emphasize her ‘diminutiveness’ to shooting her from below to make her look larger as she holds her tiny dog under her arm and orders everyone around. In the sixth and final season, Jenny Schecter has been killed and the season focuses on who killed her and why, though the mystery is never revealed though the rest of the characters become more tightly knit in the wake of her death, strengthening their feelings of belonging.

Mia Kirshner, talking about her character Jenny Schecter, says:

I was attracted originally to the naiveté and innocence of Jenny, she was sort of this very classic character who was a blank slate. I had no idea what I was getting into. Every year I sort of had a different

character for Jenny, that's how I approached it because she's so radically different each season. ("Preview for Sixth Season")

Leisha Hailey, who plays Alice, says that Kirshner has "created a girl we all love to hate and I think that's so important in a cast, it keeps all these other characters on their toes" ("Preview for Sixth Season"). Ilene Chaiken reasons that the death/murder of Jenny Schecter allows the rest of the friends to realize what is important in life and that since Jenny serves as our point of access into the world it is only right that we lose access to this world with Jenny's death ("Preview for Sixth Season"). Essentially, Hailey (one of the only out lesbian actors on the show) and Chaiken affirm here that in order for insider, belonging status to be solidified amongst *The L Word* characters, Jenny Schecter, the show's resident *stranger* must continue to be a *stranger* until she is necessarily excised. In the following scene close readings I will show how Jenny becomes constituted as this *stranger*, how she bears the markings other characters possess but do not want to own, and why she must ultimately be expunged in order for *normalcy* to be maintained and protected in this almost all-white lesbian world.

In "Left Hand of the Goddess," the last episode of season three of *The L Word*, Jenny Schecter confronts her transitioning transgendered boyfriend, Max, about identity. In a dramatic scene set in a lavish hotel in Vancouver following the near marriage of Carmen and Shane (the show's lothario and supposed hot Latina played by Iranian actress, Sarah Shahi), Jenny attempts to dance with another feminine woman in a room full of older, wealthy and conservative people. Max tries to stop her by reminding her that the two women dancing may cause these conservative straight

people discomfort. Jenny retorts with one of the last utterances of the last episode of the season. She says angrily:

You're great the way you are and the way you were. And you know what happens when you walk into this room (looking back at the 'straight' people dancing on the dance floor and then looking back into his eyes, this time the camera shooting from above so we can see Jenny 'looking up' into Max's face)? They start watching you, looking at you closely and then they begin to feel uneasy because they realize that you're not. You're always going to be one of the others (Max shakes his head, Jenny pauses). You're like us. ("Left Hand of the Goddess")

In this statement Jenny sums up her character on the show in the worlds she inhabits where she is first received as 'one of them' in almost every situation we find her in, until the way she embodies and enunciates herself betrays her passing. However, she is never completely an outsider either, as an outsider is readily identifiable as such, rather she exists as more of a *stranger*, a next-door neighbor who at first appears similar, only to become quickly very *strange* (as per Phelan and Bauman's definitions). While the show focuses primarily on the sexuality of its characters, I posit that Jenny's feeling of ongoing *strangerhood* is tied also to her Jewish ethnicity.

Jenny Schecter becomes obsessed with helping Max 'transition' (going as far as calling it what 'they' are doing) because she has no outlet for openly cultivating (and perfecting) her own ethnic passing. Like Max (whose name is not officially

changed from Moira), Jenny risks being outed everytime she has to utter her name, Jennifer Schecter. However, unlike Max, Jenny is able to pass even while being out—this paradox makes for an interesting case in identity politics indeed. How is it that Jenny can be out (as a ‘known’ Jew) and yet none of her friends know just how ‘Jewish’ she grew up (only as the viewer am I privy to the private scenes between her and her Orthodox parents in Skokie, Illinois), nor do they know how personal the Holocaust is to her with her grandmother being a survivor of Auschwitz? How is it that profound markers of her ethnic Jewish identity are privy only to the viewer, yet the kitschy markers of her ‘Jewishness’ are thrown around the group with witty repartee, such as when Jenny is campily dubbed the ‘Jewish star’? How then does reading Jenny’s character in a compassionate, multidimensional way become not only impossible to the rest of the *L Worders*, but also disorienting to the viewer who is left to either connect, disconnect or reject these private scenes from Jenny’s public appearances?

I start with this late in the series scene simply because this is the first time in the entire series that Jenny Schecter, the show’s most liminal character, acknowledges and embraces her *strange* position. Rather than reading Jenny’s outburst as an insight into Max’s desire to pass (and be ‘normal’) as a man and the visible and psychic reminders of his ‘womanhood’ that (straight) people pick up on, I suggest this scene be read as Jenny’s acknowledgement that her history makes her a perpetual, palpable *stranger*; “And therein lies the frightening aspect of haunting: you can be grasped and hurtled into the maelstrom of the powerful and material forces that lay claim to you whether you claim them as yours or not” (Gordon, 166).

Earlier in the series, as season two comes to a close, Jenny is thrust further and further into contact with her private ghosts (in that the 'matters' haunting her are not always readily visible to her memory) and demons. After a scene in which Jenny has invited her friends to watch her strip at a seedy, dangerous club (where she strips, only twice, under the name Yeshiva Girl), Shane confronts her on her increasingly risky and *strange* behavior. Jenny responds, not with an answer, but with a question. She asks Shane if she remembers the "fucked up shit that happened to her that makes not want to be open, makes her not want to feel?" ("Loud and Proud") Here, Jenny, referring to her own obscured traumas, is alluding not just to the trauma of her own past that appears in fragments but also the trauma that she has inherited that also appears elusively in her artistic expressions. Jenny Schecter's grandmother is necessarily an Auschwitz survivor, just as it is necessary to reveal her parents as Orthodox at the height of the re-emergence of past trauma memory. If we are to believe that Jenny's trauma lives beyond her own bodily scars then it is necessary to be offered the rope of the Holocaust survivor. Trauma will eventually ground Jenny into a character with whom we can sympathize when the other characters on the show becoming privy to her private pain, pushing viewers into considering 'the wide range of effects of trauma on those who are not strictly speaking survivors' (Cvetkovitch 282).

Jenny is also necessarily a writer. In order for the viewer to be granted access to the nuances of Jenny's internal life (inaccessible in her 'passing' as a white woman) we need a lens. Writing is also appropriate for Jenny as a representative of the 'people of the word'. Jenny is the only character who we see alone in almost

every episode in the first two seasons, where she writes stories such as one where Jenny is walking around a carnival scene where everyone besides her has a pig face and they all whisper ‘monstrosity’ as she passes by, a *stranger* amongst the *strange*, a Jew amongst the pig-faced gentiles. As a stranger she is an observer of both the insiders and the outsiders of the show, serving as a receptacle of confession for the show’s insiders when they momentarily find themselves as outsiders—Bette, a bi-racial character masculinized through racialization, and Shane who is masculinized through her class and gender identity.

The first time Jenny’s Jewish identity is directly addressed is outside of the purview of *The L Word* crew, on the 12th episode of the first season. She is at an aquarium, observing the dolphins (ostensibly as sort of quasi-research for her story on a woman who is mute but communicates with manatees), and the curator of the museum begins to speak to her. He introduces himself as Gene Feinberg and questions her on the uniform that she is wearing, inquiring if it is from the local grocery store. He then exclaims, "I didn’t know nice Jewish girls worked in grocery stores," to which she retorts, "How do you know that I’m a nice Jewish girl!" ("Locked Up")? He doesn’t miss a beat before replying, "Are you implying that you’re not nice" ("Locked Up")? This statement iterates that Jenny’s Jewishness is essential and unquestionable, an integral part of how she is viewed in the world. Until this moment the show relied on the ‘in-joke’ of Jenny sporting a Chai in every episode, allowing Jewish viewers (and those in the know) to identify Jenny from the beginning, while those not in the know must wait to be informed explicitly in this episode (the show often relies on gay jokes that allow the viewer to conjure themselves into a larger

community of viewers around the world—it is not surprising that this same tactic would be employed for Jewish viewers). Alan Finkielkraut comments on this recognition, or lack thereof, stating

The difference of Jews is a difference unlike others. They are ‘those people’ whom no label fits, whether assigned by the Gaze, the Concept, or the State...[F]or Jewishness, the type is the expectation and its absence the rule; in fact you can rarely pick out a Jew at first glance. It’s an insubstantial difference that resists definition as much as it frustrates the eye; are they a people? A religion? A nation? All these categories apply, but none is adequate in itself’ (164).

Several episodes before Jenny Schecter will be found on the bathroom floor cutting into her legs with the only language she finds to enunciate her traumas²¹, we find her writing a story titled "Luminous". As the scene develops we watch what Jenny is writing come to life before us, with eerie Yiddish Klezmer music accompanying the scenes. An adolescent version of Jenny appears in a blue gingham dress reminiscent of Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz. She begins riding a bicycle out of a garage into daylight where there is a Ferris wheel and a trailer in the background²². The girl rides on into glaring sunlight until she reaches a pink trailer

²¹ While Jenny attempts many times to transmit to her friends the fragmented memories and residues of inherited traumas coming back to her, her friends are unable to take her seriously, partially because they believe she is seamlessly white with no inherited traumas. However, when she is revealed as a victim of sexual assault she becomes illuminated, and then, worthy of 'remediation' (or normalization, or whitening).

²² The Ferris wheel and carnival motif will become prevalent in Jenny’s writing as we come to understand that she was sexually assaulted outside of a carnival. However, these scenes almost always have a Jewish element, with klezmer music

and knocks on the door. A man with dark, thick stubble emerges in a ratty bathrobe. The colors of the scene continue to get brighter and more surreal. The girl looks confused and looks down again at a piece of paper as if she's made some mistake. She says, 'I'm looking for the Venus de Mylar. I was told she lives here' ("Luminous"). The man replies, 'I'm her girly,' as the lighting gets brighter and more disorienting, mirroring the girls' confusion at how the woman in the poster could also be this bearded man. She looks again at the poster, furrowing her eyebrows in confusion. The Venus de Mylar sighs, waves his hand and closes the door of the trailer. From behind the closed door we hear moaning and banging, things falling down around the trailer. Finally, he emerges with a pink beehive wig, red painted toenails and high, clear stiletto heels. He throws his hands out to the side and says, "That better" ("Luminous")? The girls smiles, he walks over to her, puts his hands on her shoulders, towering over her, and says, "so what's your name little girl" ("Luminous")? "Didi. Didi Steinberg" she replies ("Luminous"). He responds by throwing his hands off her shoulders in surprise. "Victor Bernstein" he replies in a higher pitched voice, grabbing Didi's hands in both of his own and shaking them profusely saying, "It wouldn't fly in Peoria" ("Luminous"). In this moment, both characters are revealed as Jews and Bernstein assesses that their Jewishness, coupled with their *strangeness*, in the context of a middle-American town, just wouldn't fly.

playing and often Chasid's being portrayed having a holiday celebration underneath a big top tent in the background. A letter to Ilene Chaiken, published on afterellen.com a few seasons into the show, proposes to Chaiken that she should put Jenny on a Ferris Wheel spinning out of control--the proposed Ferris Wheel would kill Max and give Jenny amnesia so she becomes a new and improved, *pleasant* character. This illuminates that what makes Jenny *strange* is her refusal, or inability, to be a pleasant and sweet properly gendered white woman.

Bernstein/Venus de Mylar asks Didi Steinberg why she wants to join the circus and what her story is, to which she replies, "I don't belong anywhere else, everybody in my family thinks I'm a freak because..." trailing off at the end of her sentence. He shrugs this aside, wanting to know if besides being a freak, or *stranger*, she has any talents. The scene ends with Didi lifting up her skirt and Venus de Mylar/Victor Bernstein saying, "Holy Jesus, that is special, but it'll never fly in Peoria" ("Luminous"). Viewers are led to believe Didi Steinberg has shown Bernstein freakish or *strange* genitalia, worthy of being included in a circus freak show (reminiscent of enslaved women of color who were forced into traveling freak shows to exhibit their genitalia which was understood to be abnormally large and 'grotesque'--always in reference to an absent and 'normal' white woman's genitalia).

In this scene, it is important that we are watching Schechter writing, creating a fictional vision of her younger self, showing how she is left to turn to fiction to grapple with her *strange* excesses and remainders that don't fit into the white, queer world of *The L Word*. Here we are given a window into Jenny's previous life in the Midwest, starved to get away and join the other freaks and *strangers* like Victor Bernstein, another queer Jew who believes they just don't fly in Peoria (a parable for Skokie, Illinois where Schechter grew up). This is one of the first moments where we engage with Jenny's life before Los Angeles, albeit through a distorted, fictional lens, and we can begin to imagine that both her Jewishness and her (then latent) queerness troubled her seamless assimilation into Midwestern white straight cultures as well as her queerness troubling her inclusion in the Orthodox spaces from which she emerged. It is also important to note that many of Jenny's stories include a Jewish

presence and thematic, as did the first story we find her writing in the first season that takes place at a Jewish funeral. Why then, we must ask, do we never see any mention of her Jewishness other than when she is writing her stories, alone? Clearly the matter troubles her mind and consequently contributes to her *stranger* status and yet there is no reckoning with what is troublingly unearthed in her stories, either within the show with other characters or any of the scant criticism that has emerged about the show.

In another scene in which Jenny's *stranger* status is addressed we begin to understand that Jenny will be aligned (doubled or made oppositional) with every peripheral character that enters the show to help them acclimate (much like she does for the straight viewers) to *The L Word* and learn the expected behaviors necessary for inclusion. In a nighttime scene, Shane, Alice and two extra 'lesbians' go skinny-dipping in Bette's pool while Bette is away ("Lynch Pin"). Mark--Shane and Jenny's new roommate and the sole straight man on the show--stands outside in their driveway watching the women in the pool next door as Jenny walks up the driveway, returning from work. She does not join the women in the pool, as viewers might expect since she her recent peripheral incorporation into the group this season, but sits with Mark at the edge of their property, outside the fence to Bette's pool. They smoke cigarettes as Mark asks her questions about lesbians as if he is an anthropologist and she is a native inhabitant of Lesbos. While the rest of the queer women in this scene are wearing jeans, t-shirts and uber-stylish haircuts, Jenny is in a lacy white dress, her long hair down around her shoulders. When the camera pans to the women skinny-dipping there is a song whispering, "wet, wet, wet," denoting viewers are to understand the scene as provocative and sexy (despite the seeming anorexia of most

of the women in the pool--denoting the expected embodiment for normalization amongst the characters).

Jenny is mirrored with Bette (who plays the pariah during this part of the third season after she cheats on Tina) as the scenes switch back and forth between Jenny and Mark talking and Bette having sex with a woman she picked up earlier in a bar. Evocative music plays in the background. As the scenes pan back and forth, Bette and Jenny are both framed as *strangers*. Jenny's scene verbally instructs viewers to understand her as a *stranger* to the women in the pool, while Bette's desperate sex scene denotes the recent excision she has experienced from the group and how she is seeking to make any connection. This parallel between Bette Porter, who is bi-racial, and Jenny Schecter, who is Jewish, is cultivated throughout the entire series, and this is irremovable from these two character ethnic/racial identities, beyond being queer, being coded and revealed though the rest of the main characters remain solely marked by their queer identities. This parallel, perhaps illuminating Chaiken's elision of the theoretical works examining Black/Jewish relations since the civil rights movement, suggests Bette and Jenny bear some of the same fragmentation (and subsequent *estrangement*) born from the refusal within the group to imagine the world as anything but a white one.

Mark begins by asking, "those girls, they're all gay right" ("Lynch Pin")? As Jenny replies, "yeah they pretty much are" we pan to the pool, dark and steamy ("Lynch Pin"). He asks, "what about you?"--echoing similar utterances of ethnic inquiries thrown at people who are understood to be unidentifiable ("Lynch Pin"). She throws the question back at him, pretending not to understand "what about me?"-

-suggesting she bears several identity markers that may be *strangely* unclear ("Lynch Pin"). He asks again, more specifically this time, "are you gay" ("Lynch Pin")? Again she plays around with his discomfort at not being able to identify her, saying, "I don't know, what do you think?" as she shakes her head and shrugs her shoulders ("Lynch Pin"). He responds to her taunt, "If I saw you in a bar I would assume you were straight" ("Lynch Pin"). She murmurs "hmm" beneath her breath as he continues, "but that doesn't really mean anything" ("Lynch Pin"). He starts again, "you never know, do you?" and Jenny is quick to point to the discrepancy between his original desire to think queerness is utterly identifiable and his reframed position that queerness is empty of physical markers. She responds, while sticking her pointer finger out, "no you don't, except you knew that they were, right" ("Lynch Pin")? Mark agrees, prompting Jenny to ask him why he thinks 'he knows'. He responds:

I don't know. It seems like it has something to do with their attitude. It's not that they're masculine or anything, cause actually some of them are pretty feminine, you know. It's, they have these haircuts, these very cool haircuts. I mean, don't get me wrong, it's not just about hair, it's obviously more than a haircut, but it's, no it's true, it's this (pauses) something that they exude. I'm going to try to put my finger on it. ("Lynch Pin")

Jenny ends the conversation by asking Mark to tell her when he figures it out.

While Jenny does not seem ruffled when Mark announces that she is unrecognizable unless she is attached to either a man or a woman, later that night Jenny sits in the dark kitchen waiting for Shane to come in and asks her to cut her hair

off. Shane, seeming shocked, agrees. As her hair falls to the ground the camera focuses on her face as we watch tears well up and release from her eyes. The obvious translation of this scene might be that Jenny is relinquishing a symbolic hold on heterosexual privilege through the trope of her hair. However, I suggest that Jenny cuts her hair to root herself in a community in which she is regularly reminded she may be passing, a *stranger*, and not an authentic insider. In a sense, we might read Jenny's haircut on the same spectrum of a nose job in which the patient (in Sander Gilman's assessment, a Jewish patient) may desire to rid herself of visual ethnic markings. Through this new coding Jenny becomes even more incorporated into the lesbian world, attempting to evade what Mark has uncovered--her *strangeness*.

As Jenny begins to 'lose her mind' in the end of the second season she strips at a seedy, rough bar and invites her friends to watch. Disturbed by her increasingly *strange* behavior, Shane confronts her after the show, asking her what she is doing. Jenny responds by saying it helps her to feel in control of her sexually traumatized body. She goes on, saying, "it helps me remember all of this childhood shit that happens to me, you know, like, I have to, it's important. Do you remember the shit that happened to you as a child that makes you not want to trust people as an adult" ("Lacuna")? When Shane responds that she does, Jenny tells her that she is lucky because she can get on with her life. She tells Shane, "You're not dogged down by these horrible childhood memories. You know, you stand a chance of being a normal, productive person" ("Lacuna"). Shane asks if she remembers and Jenny stammers, looking around erratically, stammering:

I don't know. You know, like I remember things and then I think, is

this true, did this stuff really happen or am I making it up, you know because the older I get, the memory becomes a little blurry and it's like I can't. I don't know, but you just don't know the truth anymore.

("Lacuna")

Jenny refuses a ride home from Shane, gets on a bus, and sits down in a seat next to what appears to be her as a child, dirty from the ground she is pummeled into as she is raped by several boys, and rocks this version of herself back and forth as she cries. The bus seems to have left Los Angeles and entered a world where all of the storefronts bear Hebrew writing and Jewish stars, denoting once again that Jenny's sexual abuse memories are directly linked to her Jewish matters, including her grandparents' experience of genocidal terror.

Here Jenny describes being dissociated from the traumas her body has experienced and watching them re-emerge in confusing fragments. Later we will learn, in a dramatic scene at her Orthodox parents home in Skokie, Illinois, that her parents had been silent about the rape as well as silent about the family's Holocaust past. It is important to consider that dissociation is passed down to her as a survival mechanism from people who themselves have been highly traumatized by history and its events. Later, in an interview about her movie with *Girlfriends* magazine, Jenny will say that this silence shaped her into the pathological liar she became for most of her early adulthood. It may be useful to reframe this self-designation as not necessarily simply lying, but also as an attempt to find a mask that suitably allowed her to pass into this group of friend's insider space. And we begin to understand, though briefly, how Jenny *strangely* may have no idea how to 'act,' if you will, in this

Los Angeles queer setting, when we meet her parents in the third season opener where she is living as an outpatient to the local mental hospital.

The third season begins six-months after Jenny's breakdown (described earlier in this chapter). Midway through the episode we find her setting Shabbos candles with her mother in Skokie, Illinois at her childhood home. Her mother's hair is covered, as is her entire body, denoting an Orthodox level of religious piety. While they set the table, Jenny's mother tells her that her father would like them all to go to temple that evening and that her father has invited over a family with a nice young Jewish man for Jenny. Jenny protests, saying that she is a lesbian, while her mother argues with her, asking why her psychiatrist hasn't fixed her gay problem. Jenny walks out of the room when her mother tells her that obviously her shrink is as sick as she is because he thinks that her being gay is not a problem ("Labia Majora").

Later in the episode we come back to Skokie, where we find Jenny having sex with Moira (who will later transition to Max) on her childhood bed. Suddenly the door swings open and we meet Jenny's father, a large man in a yarmulke with a big bushy beard. He begins to scream, yelling, "Get up! What the hell do you think you're doing? How dare you treat us this way after we opened our home to you! How dare you bring a man back into this house" ("Labia Majora")! Jenny replies, "I would never do that Warren. I want you to meet Moira, she lives over in Wilmette" ("Labia Majora"). Her father keeps screaming for her to get out, that he wants her out immediately. Jenny replies:

Actually, you've wanted me out of this house from the moment I stepped foot in here. (She walks closer to him, like an animal

stalking its prey). What is it Warren, am I too fucked up for you?
 Am I too perverted? Look at me. Do I remind you of how messy and
 out of control your life is? Her step-father begins to walk away, she
 follows him, growling, Warren? I'm just not the girl you wanted me to
 be. ("Labia Majora")

Her mother attempts to get her to stop, but Jenny only continues, "no you stop! When
 are you going to start being an actual person? Not this silent slave to this man"
 ("Labia Majora")? Her father tells her to stop disrespecting her mother and throws his
 hands up, exclaiming, "I don't know what more we can do" ("Labia Majora")! Jenny
 retorts:

Nothing. There's nothing more that you can do for me to make me into
 the person you're comfortable with, because I'm not going to marry
 that nice Jewish boy. I'm not going to have those nice Jewish kids. I'm
 not going to shut up and be subservient. I'm not going to set the
 dinner table and pretend that things don't happen. Because when you
 don't talk about them, they get worse Warren. ("Labia Majora")

Here Jenny is addressing the myriad silences that led her as an adult to not
 know 'the fucked up shit that happened to her as a kid' as well as addressing what
 happens when trauma is passed down but never acknowledged, how sick it made her
 become. In these moments Jenny Schecter is illuminated as a character in the midst of
 assimilating to a world in Los Angeles that is literally foreign to the cloistered, tribal
 space from which she emerged. Her passing is clumsy and full of seams, making the
 rest of the characters raise their eyebrows and attempt to discipline her body free of

these Jewish, survivor markings that become manifest to them simply as *strangeness*. And, yet, try as she might, she cannot cut these parts of her out, even as we find her previously, in the final episode of the second season ("Lacuna"), breaking down with a razor in her hand as she carves into her thighs.

The scene begins with Jenny in the bathtub, the bathroom very white, brashly and brightly lit, reminiscent of the florescent antiseptic nature of hospital rooms. Jenny's thick black eye makeup is running down her face while she dips a cup in the water and pours it over her head. She gets out of the bathtub and walks toward the medicine chest, opening it, the white of the bathroom lending a cold, clinical feeling to the scene. We pan away from her to Carmen and Shane in the hallway and see Shane begin to hear Jenny sobbing as she calls out, "Hey Jenny?" ("Lacuna") Behind the door Jenny is sniffing, attempting to stop sobbing. Shane calls to her again as she opens the door. The camera is on Shane's horrified face as the door opens. We pan to Jenny on the floor, naked, her legs out in front of her with a razor to her thighs already covered in cuts. Shane coaxes the razor out of Jenny's hand as she stares straight ahead. Shane begins pressing a towel to the cuts, repeating that it is going to be okay and then calling to Jenny when she does not respond. Shane begins rocking Jenny back and forth as she puts her hand on her face and begins to sob. Shane tells her, "it's alright, we're going to get you help, we'll get you help" ("Lacuna"). Jenny responds, crying, "fuck, I need help, don't I? I'm really fucked up" ("Lacuna"). Shane repeats, "we'll get you help" as she continues to rock Jenny, speaking in a soothing voice as if speaking to a child ("Lacuna").

Though we have been getting clues as viewers throughout the season that Jenny is suffering from the re-emergence of collective and personal psychic and ghostly matters, this is the first time in the season that Jenny is granted empathy by the other characters on *The L Word*, in contrast to the depressive without a cause persona of the seasons preceding episodes. However, it is only through the language of pathology, and subsequent expected remediation that Jenny becomes a character with whom we may empathize, for a moment, though no less *strange*. It is important that the solution to the ghostly matters Jenny presents to the viewers and *The L Word* characters is to fix her rather than to acknowledge the ghosts to be real and to allow Jenny to put them in view as opposed to the private, fictional spaces in which these matters are allowed to emerge. To put it more bluntly, Jenny needs to either shape up or ship out, and since she can't shape up, or become politely white, she is shipped out to Skokie and only comes back when she's been remediated, until she becomes an evil stranger again only to die at the hands of one of the other characters on the show.

One of the most troubling and ghostly moments in which Jenny confronts her Jewish matters occurs after she discovers that her roommate Mark has been secretly taping her and Shane in every room of their house. She steals his camera and begins her own video project, as well as her demise into a nervous breakdown. In "Land Ahoy" we find Jenny with the camera in her hand, with pictures of religious Eastern European Jews in the 'old country' in front of her. The camera (within the camera of the actual shot) focuses on a photo of an older man with a beard, wearing a Strolmel with a covered woman by his side. We hear Jenny's voice and see her hands manipulating the pictures, but we do not yet see her face. She begins to speak, "Hi

mom, as you can see I have all our family pictures here and I'm videotaping this because I have a couple of questions for you about Zayde" ("Land Ahoy"). She picks up a picture, saying:

I would like to know if Zayde lost his mind when he began to transcribe the Torah (Klezmer music rises in the background) by hand or did that cause him to lose his mind? Do you remember the day they took him away? And then I wanted to ask you questions about Grandma. Grandma if you're watching this I wanted to ask you questions about your experience in Auschwitz. I wanted to know if when you arrived in Auschwitz did they separate you from your daughter? And I wanted to know if you remember the name of the Unterscharfuhrer who took your arm and branded you with that tattoo? Do you remember his eyes? Do you remember if he used a steel plate or did he use a needle? ("Land Ahoy")

Jenny, here, begins to be framed as re-entering traumatized spaces that she has tried, desperately, to distance herself from—removing herself physically from the community in which she was raised in Skokie, Illinois, removing herself from marking herself as an Orthodox Jewish woman as she morphs into expressing her *strangeness* (or excesses beyond the parameters of white femininity) as a manifestation of her queerness. Clues begin to emerge that part of her ghostly matter is related to sexual abuse—denoted by stories she writes in which her younger self is being chased by young boys outside of a carnival. Murkier, however, are the images

that will increase in which klezmer music speeds up as Stars of David populate her drawings of men jeering at Jewish people with mob hatred ("Loud and Proud").

As Jenny works on this family excavation video project, Carmen, her girlfriend, asks her why she has not yet packed for their trip to a lesbian cruise, hosted by Olivia Cruises (a real lesbian cruise-line, denoting the overlap between fiction and reality that often emerges on *The L Word*). Jenny responds that she is too engrossed in her project to go on the trip, prompting Carmen to tell her she is lying, though Jenny has a ready excuse:

This is not an excuse. When Burr Connor fired me the best thing that came out of the experience is he was like, you gotta tell the truth about your life and you have to be truthful about your work. That's all I want to do is just tell the fucking truth and... ("Land Ahoy")

She trails off here, only to later pick up this advice of "telling the fucking truth" in verbal altercations with her Stepfather as well as the assigned editor of her novel turned memoir in season three of *The L Word*.

It is clear that Jenny is not speaking of any particular truth, other than a drive to tell 'what she sees.' As her writing professor Charlotte Birch (Sandra Bernhard) says, "You are a compulsive excavator of your own emotional navel lint, a nit-picking obsessive truth-teller" ("Late, Later, Latent"). This same disposition that Birch attributes to Jenny's writing style inflects Jenny's interactions with her parents in the opening episode of the third season where we learn what came of Jenny after her 'breakdown' (which will never be named as such, but pathologized similarly).

A Conclusive Map

What sort of daughter am I? What good is there in any of this? Why must I upset the bones of the past?

Shira Nayman “Dark Urges of the Blood”

The thirsts Jenny Schecter’s predecessors suffered, the hunger that rang through their bellies, the longings they let grow and those they repressed, bleed into her own longings, her own hungers, her own thirsts. What then if she has only intuited these sufferings through the motions and eyes of her parents, what then if she has learned to abide by unspoken rules guided by buried and shrouded pasts? How to then unravel what has led Jenny to the edges of life when it appears Jenny has been afflicted by nothing, has inherited the privileges of white middle class American femininity? How to tell her history when it has not been recorded, when she learned to store memories fragmented in hidden spaces from her family? Shira Nayman, in “Dark Urges of the Blood” addresses these vague silences:

I don’t remember when I was struck by the shroud of silence that seemed to hang in the air at virtually all of these homes; I think, though, that I must have been very young. I recognized it from my own home, though at our house, it seemed less dramatic, if silence can be dramatic. In the homes of my friends, it was as if we were surrounded by two kinds of ghosts, which could never be mentioned. The ghosts of too many relatives, murdered long before their time. And the ghostly pasts of my friends’ parents: these, too, were cloaked in silence. We didn’t talk about any of this among ourselves. The importance of honoring the code was simply understood. (175)

Surely, once Ilene Chaiken secured a deal with Showtime to film and air *The L Word*, the characters, including autobiographical characters, were no longer solely in her hands. Perhaps the interventions of the other writers on the show says as much about perceptions of Jewish Americans as the Chaiken authored storylines might say about her vision of queer female Jewish Americans. Perhaps even the writers themselves wrote Tonya off the show on the arms of the uber-J.A.P., Joan Rivers offspring, Melissa Rivers, without a moment of thought to the meaning of such a gesture? Chaiken may not have imagined her naïve Midwestern Jewish writer character, recent graduate of the prestigious Iowa writer's workshop and new arrival in Los Angeles, would end up as much of a *stranger* at the end of six seasons, murdered by one of her friends, as she had been when the series began.

Karen Brodtkin describes Jewish American racial designation before the GI Bill as being shuttled back and forth across the American color line. However, as Michael Rogin asserts, Jewish Americans have been classified as 'white' in this post-GI Bill state. Yet, despite this assertion, we watch Jenny Schecter unfold in *The L Word's* six seasons as a character who is shuttled back and forth across what can be read as an ethnic line, made manifest and visible through the consistent trajectory of Jenny as a *stranger* character who is neither here nor there, neither insider nor outsider. Where, then, is there room for Jenny's Jewish matters that haunt her throughout the series, and more metaphorically Chaiken asks (consciously or not) where is there room for these stories, both in Jewish and queer discourses, and what happens to her if there is no language and there are no listeners? The answer we are

given, quite suddenly and finally, as well as quite predictably, is that what happens is Jenny Schecter ends up dead.

We are given different indications of when Jenny is a friendly *stranger* and when she is to be read as a malevolent *stranger* through the way she is dressed, through the way the camera 'views' her as bigger than life or small and vulnerable, through the way she moves her body, whether she is included in the group outings, whether she is acting 'crazy' (as according to the groups unspoken social rules) or 'normal'. This designation is dependent primarily on Jenny's proximity to other *strangers* and 'others'. However, even in the moments when Jenny becomes the friendly *stranger*, next-door (quite literally), it is important to note she is still rendered *strange* as this allows us to understand the vision of Jewish American assimilation in this particular story. Jenny carries remainders of a life tied to soil and memories that her counterparts on *The L Word* cannot fathom, nor does she have the necessary tools to transmit this information. Even if she did, however, we must wonder if the narrative of successful and complete Jewish American assimilation is too powerful for them to hear?

Jenny Schecter can only confront her Jewish matter through fictional writing where she is free to imagine 'what might have happened,' much like Octavia Butler imagines 'what might have happened' to the silenced bodies of women slaves during slavery in the United States in her novel *Kindred*. There is no other way for her to give voice to the disturbances of mind that plague her and do not only bear the markings of her own individual experiences.

Her remembrances begin with an introduction of eerie, haunting klezmer music that accompanies every scene in which we find Jenny writing (and get a visual rendering of what she is writing, as a frame within the frame of the show). We quickly flash to nightmarish scenes of Jewish roundups in Eastern European ghettos merged with fun-house mirror carnival scenes that begin to reveal in fragmented vignettes a representation of the sexual assault Jenny experienced as a child at the hands of several young boys. By the end of the season Jenny is experiencing these flashbacks not simply when she is writing but also when she strips, when she visits a sado-masochist dungeon, and while riding the bus. This collision of fact and fiction culminates in a suicide attempt when Jenny can no longer distinguish between the real and the unreal, the past and the present, her own experiences and those of her collective Jungian unconscious.

She emerges in the third season, six months later, cured. Tellingly she was shipped off to her parents in Skokie, Illinois, the original point of her psychic matters. Her friends, not privy to her inner musings and writing, can literally not imagine what it is she is harboring. Her parents, depicted as religious Jews (despite viewers being given no clues that Jenny grew up in an Orthodox family), unlike her friends, are aware of the ghostly matters that haunt her, but they turn a blind eye to what they cannot accept or control, unable to dig in emotionally to what might trigger the unfathomable weight of recent Jewish history.

Jenny Schecter is used as a symbol of the danger of the *stranger*. Scheming, manipulative, darkly exotic and seductive, devourer of people's life stories as she writes with no compassion of her friends foibles, eventual murderer of a dog in order

to get back at a book reviewer who critiqued her novel, *The Sum of Her Parts*. An example of the untrustworthiness of those not easily identified, Jenny's sexuality is called into question over and over again, first by herself and then by the other characters. However, it is not just her sexual identity that is slippery, it is also her ethnic identity as she 'runs out of skills' in trying to 'act white' and her Orthodox Jewish family is outed. Yet, there is no discussion of this matter as there is with her sexual identity. Her ethnic identity is privatized and emerges only in the privacy of her creative writing and scenes between her and her religious family in much the same way that many Jews have relegated their Jewish matters and ghosts to lonely and tribalistic spaces.

This is only the beginning of a need to examine stories written contemporarily by secular queer Jewish American women. *Telling the Little Secrets* author Janet Burstein surely has a reason for her methodology of staying away from such a task because of its need for inference, reading between the lines, and in some ways supplementing fiction by the author with fiction by the critic. However, I suggest such a project is necessary if we are to not only more fully understand the ways in which assimilation and assimilating is working for Jewish American women, but also if we are to heal the ghostly matters of the past that seem to haunt those of us, like Jenny Schechter, who live liminally, hovering neither here nor there.

Avery Gordon asserts that, "to write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories" (17). Here, I have attempted to tell a ghost story of the Jewish matters that plague Jenny Schechter and *The L Word*, as well as how this manifests through the character of Tonya. Jenny and Tonya are disturbing to us

because they illuminate and exemplify un-boundaried figures. Specifically, Jenny Schecter, arguably the main character of *The L Word*, moves throughout the six seasons of the show from persona to persona, one end of the sexual spectrum to the other. Schecter taps into viewer's fears, partly, of the instability of the self as evidenced by this *stranger* with an uncanny ability to take on and take off a variety of masks. Though other characters perpetrate a variety of offenses, they are never marred and marked by these actions, allowing for somewhat complicated characters to emerge. However, Jenny is indelibly marked, much like the tattoo her grandmother bears, by all of her foibles, misdeeds, and fumbles. I have tried here to show the matters more plainly and to question what we are almost instructed to ignore; “More importantly, I have hoped to draw attention to a whole realm of experiences and social practices that can barely be approached without a method attentive to what is elusive, fantastic, contingent, and often barely there” (Gordon, 26).

Chapter 4. Writing from the "Remnant": Sarah Schulman's

Empathy and the Possibilities of the Stranger

It is probable that it is the Jewish community--or more accurately, perhaps, its remnants--that in America has paid the highest and most extraordinary price for becoming white.

James Baldwin, "On Being White"

However--! White being, absolutely, a moral choice (for there are no white people)...

James Baldwin, "On Being White"

There are readers--not a lot of them, perhaps, but even one is enough--who need, for a tangle of reasons, to be told that a life commonly held to be insufferable can be full and funny. I'm living the life. I can tell them.

Nancy Mairs, "Plunging In"

Preface

If for Jenny Schechter lesbianism offered a potential way out of her 'strange' Jewishness and into belonging, for Anna O., in Sarah Schulman's *Empathy*, lesbianism is inextricably tied to her Jewishness. For Schulman, as expressed in *Empathy*, this necessitates a narrative strategy in which her lesbianism and Jewishness are expressed (and understood) as being inextricably intertwined. However, because these categories have already been constituted as exclusive--the queer in much lgbt scholarship is expressed as 'only' queer, and the Jewish woman in Jewish studies is always imagined straight--she must borrow from a variety of narrative techniques and signifiers to guide readers to an understanding of the mutuality of these identity markers in constructing Anna O. as a *stranger*.

This approach, interdisciplinary in the best sense, creates a conundrum for the scholar attempting to deconstruct and critically read *Empathy*. To this date scant volumes of criticism have addressed Jewish issues and queer women's issues in simultaneity, despite the abundance of Jewish scholarship and the ever-growing body of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender studies and queer theory. One is left to consult volumes of critical work that hardly seem to get to the heart of *Empathy's* main character Anna's Jewish queer matters, to piece them together into a patchwork that may, by its end, accomplish the task of fully excavating Schulman's rendering of the post-modern *stranger*, Anna O.

It is this very dearth of materials addressing the queer Jewish woman in America that makes critically engaging texts like Sarah Schulman's *Empathy* a tricky, but essential, project. Particularly, it is important to address *characters* like Anna who

do not speak from a foundation of religious devotion (in which she necessarily must either find a home in a queer welcoming Jewish community or become exiled from any Jewish religious community) because they are in the most danger of being claimed solely on the basis of their sexuality (particularly by critics, which is mostly what has happened to Schulman's text) and discarded and disregarded by Jewish criticism²³. Here I will show how Anna O. inhabits a *stranger* position due to her queer Jewish identity and how Schulman writes this as a place of possibility rather than as an identity to work towards shedding. Inherent to the constitution of her *stranger* position is her inability to fulfill the parameters of white femininity.

Empathy is Sarah Schulman's most focused examination on Jewish matters.

Empathy is also Schulman's least successful book. Schulman, in "What I've Learned About Empathy" (the afterword of the most recent 2006 version of *Empathy*, rescued and put back into publication by *Arsenal Pulp Press*) writes "*Empathy* was my worst selling book, the least reviewed (the *Times*) ignored it, and the least translated. It has provoked the fewest Masters theses, doctoral dissertations, and chapters in academic books of any of my work. It is rarely taught. In short, it flopped. But I love it.

Empathy is my free, wild child" (202). Perhaps, because it is Schulman's free wild child, a book she purports to have written with the most freedom and lack of knowledge of the plot of any of her novels, *Empathy* gives readers insight into the worlds of the queer, female, Jewish *stranger*. This "free, wild child," including its

²³ In an informal interview with Sarah Schulman in March 2011, Schulman suggested presenting my criticism of her work at Jewish conferences. Schulman stated that while she has been trying to get her work included in Jewish bibliographies, she continues to be ignored despite her work consistently addressing queer Jewish issues.

messiness's and "failures"--pointed out by critics--, illuminates Schulman's vision of inhabiting the identity of the queer, female, Jewish *stranger* and the possibilities of resistance of this position.

This essay begins a Cvetkovechian 'Archive of Feelings' of a Jewish lesbian *stranger* making a home in what Gloria Anzaldua, in her examination of Chicana identity, names 'The Borderlands'. Like Anzia Yeziarska and Mary Antin, both immigrants from 'the old world' to 'the new world,' Anna is caught between many landscapes—unlike Elizabeth Wurtzel and Jenny Schecter who work tirelessly to transcend their abjected *stranger* identity, Anna will begin to live in this passage.

Sarah Schulman, in *Empathy*, imagines what it means to live in this passage, to be between the imagined (hyper) assimilated status of Jewish Americans and the ethnicized otherness of Eastern Europe (in *Empathy* Schulman deals only with Ashkenazi matters, primarily because she explores her own life and she is Ashkenazi). This stance is both impossible, Schulman shows as the novel develops, and the only ethical possibility in resisting what Schulman sees as the racist, homophobic, and classist projects of mainstream (unmarked white) America. Through an examination of the character development of Anna O. and her alter ego Doc this essay will show how Schulman suggests some queer Jewish women are still in the process of assimilating into whiteness as well as the ways in which she sees this off-white, or *stranger*, identity as an important site of resisting white hegemony.

Empathy, Sarah Schulman's fifth novel, published in 1992, is a complex work that weaves together a variety of post-modern narrative tactics to portray a Lower East Side rampant with AIDS, queers, poverty, drug-addiction-an apocalyptic vision

of crisis narrated by two inhabitants of this *strange* world. The AIDS crisis decimating effect on Schulman's New York City queer community is in many ways the main narrative thread of the novel, preoccupying much of the emotional life of main character Anna O. Weaving throughout this main focus, Schulman explores lesbian locations and gender difference, as well as racial and class problems escalating as the Lower East Side Manhattan location of the novel becomes embroiled in gentrification processes. Within this devastated (and oddly also gentrifying) landscape, Anna attempts to recover (and live with) the devastation of mass death in her community, shunning from employers, her family, and her lovers. As part of this coping process, Anna creates (imagines, hallucinates?) Doc, her Jewish, straight, male alter ego. Through Doc readers will encounter the different ways in which their bodies are received by the communities around them, despite the frequent narrative reminders that in almost every way (besides genitalia) Anna and Doc are identical. When Schulman reveals that Anna O. and Doc are the same person the reader is forced to encounter the ghosts of his/her own assumptions about identity. Further, through this narrative tactic, Schulman is able to illuminate the ways in which being Jewish, female and queer render Anna a *stranger* while the same 'characteristics' manifested as Doc, a straight Jewish male, are received as strange but endearing, a quality and not an identity. Before Anna attempts to speak, Schulman posits, being rendered *strange* already mitigates what her audience is able to hear and understand.

Embodiment, Constitution, and Filling in the Narrative Gaps

In order to begin to understand how Anna O. is constituted as a *stranger*, it is necessary to attend to the ways in which assimilation has operated differently for Jewish woman and Jewish men. Further, it is important to illuminate the ways in which the invisibility, and impossibility, of 'queer women' is written implicitly into assimilation narratives. Being written out of the narrative operated similarly with gay Jewish men (with differing effects on each group), both sexual identity possibilities rejected and rendered ghostly because of the stereotypes assigned to Ashkenazi Jews where the Jewish man is effeminate and the Jewish woman is both highly desirable (coded as feminine) and simultaneously highly undesirable (coded as masculine).

In *The Jewish Woman in America* Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel examine the ways in which the Jewish woman came to 'be' (as a group identity) in America. They hypothesize that "by western bourgeois standards, East European women seemed 'masculine,' for they were forthright and aggressive. Their husbands, on the other hand, sometimes appeared 'feminine,' for some were gentle, dreamy, and soft-spoken" (Baum, 56.). Further, "Jewish women were not only hyperbolic, but outspoken and aggressive as well. The barren economy of the shtetl demanded these traits; women who could be considered 'feminine' by Western standards could not have survived this environment" (69). In response to this Eastern-European version of femininity, "German-American Jewish women set up benevolent societies to enculturate their Eastern-European counterparts. They coached women on walking, talking, volume of speech, language, and how to avoid appearing loose" (163).

Baum, Hyman, and Michel suggest that while Jewish American men's assimilation (which often stands as the whole story) can be traced fairly apparently through public economic inclusions and uplifts, Jewish women's assimilation is much more murky to parse out (207). They look to fictional accounts of this assimilation process as well as interviews and historical accounts. "According to fictional accounts," they assert "Jewish women who did not want to stand out began going regularly to beauty parlors, tried to diet, polished their English and even tried to change their voices and inflections" (207). "Because of the prevalence of the gentile image, Jewish women felt compelled to divest themselves not only of their Jewish appearance, but of habits and mannerisms that marked them as well" (226). All of this because, "the unmelted Jewish woman, the woman who has not become completely assimilated, threatens the security of the Jewish community's acceptability to other Americans (according to the stereotypes) by continually reminding the gentile world that Jews are, after all, different" (249).

Baum, Hyman, and Michel establish the ways in which appearance and performance of the body were imperative components in the assimilation process of Jewish American women. While their project did not extend to examine contemporary Jewish American women and their experience with assimilation, there is suggestion in their text that Jewish American women's hold on assimilated status is based on precarious and changeable properties. Further, there is an absence of queer Jewish women who are doubly saturated with questions about the authenticity, and attached performance, of their femininity.

Melanie Kaye Kantrowitz in *The Color Of Jews* emphasizes that it was not simply the behaviors, etiquette, and gender assignment differences between the United States and 'old world' locales, but something more complicated. She writes:

But it's confusing, because to say someone *looks Jewish* is to say something both absurd (Jews look a million different ways) and shorthand communicative. When I was growing up in Flatbush, every girl with a certain kind of nose--sometimes named explicitly as a Jewish nose, sometimes only as "too big"--wanted a nose job, and if her parent could pay for it, often she got one...What was wrong with the original nose, the Jewish ones? A Jewish nose, I conclude, identifies its owner as a Jew. Nose jobs are performed so that a Jewish woman does not look like a Jew. The Ashkenazi girls of my generation bleached and shaved, to look less Jewish: the non-Ashkenazi girls bleached and shaved to look more Ashkenazi; more European; less Jewish. Tell me again Jewish is just a religion" (30).

She goes on to question how we begin to explicate the ethnic component of Jewish women's existence in the United States when we do not even have the language to enunciate this difference adequately. She posits, "ethnicity and culture is confused, even for many Jews. We need a word for the system that normalizes and honors Christianity, just as *racism* names the system that normalized and honors whiteness. Our very lack of a word illustrates the problem. How do we challenge what we have no language to discuss?" (30) Similarly, Kaye/Kantrowitz's question can be extended to discussing the lack of representation of queer Jewish women's

experience in the Jewish American assimilation story. Due to this lack of language, Jewish American queer *strangers* become not only unthinkable in Jewish spaces, secular and religious, but also in queer spaces, forced into a liminal space in which there is a struggle not only to understand the self but to communicate the (unthinkable) *strange* self to others.

In *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, edited by Daniel Boyarin, though much of the focus on Jewish men and male queers, several theorists examine the intersection of queerness, femaleness, and Jewishness. Ann Pellegrini writes, "although the work on the correlation between the homosexual and the Jew has largely focused on maleness, what the Jewess and the female sexual invert both shared was their alleged excess: both types went beyond the bounds of female virtues and sexual propriety, they were too active in their desires (5). Further, "The manliness and self-promotion with which the female sexual invert was charged also featured in some of the stereotypes of the 'Jewess,' who was sometimes portrayed as pushy, unladylike in her entry into and activity in the world of paid labor" (5). Marjorie Garber, ruminating on this intersection, offers, "If a Jewish woman can pass as a man, this is because, at least according to stereotype, she is already something of a man" (7). In these models Pellegrini and Garber offer, Anna O's anxieties over gender as a Jewish queer woman are as implicated in her Jewishness as they are rooted in her queerness. The text focuses these anxieties on Anna O's queerness, but the subtext, if 'audible,' illuminates the ways these anxieties are also inextricably tied to her Jewishness.

Analyzing Barbra Streisand in "Barbra's 'Funny Girl' Body" Stacy Wolf posits that the Jewish woman need not even be queer (sexually) because she is already rendered *strange* and thus queer. She postulates:

Her marked portrayal of Jewishness in body (her nose), voice (frequent Yiddishisms), and behavior (aggressiveness) run counter to the ideal of "The Feminine" in American culture" (247). Streisand's performance in the popular musical knits together queerness and Jewishness to create a "woman" who, in body, gesture, voice, and character is indeed a "funny girl." (247)

This will be important when Anna O. returns to a paper she wrote in college where she was asked to do a Freudian dream analysis of one of her dreams. While her interpretation may advise us to understand her dream with only a queer theoretical lens, thinking of the ways in which Anna Jewishness informs her queerness complicates her *strange* matters even further.

Judith Butler, in "Reflections on Germany," analyzes the consequences of being identified as "the funny girl" or the *queer stranger* Jew. She writes:

a conjured Italian origin attests to the continuing "illegibility" and "unseeability" of the Jew in Germany. Better: this southern, darker, more emotional, gesticulating, excessive, sexually confusing Other becomes a sire for an anxiety over the loss of both gendered and racial boundaries" (after being referred to as both mimicking a man and being of Italian heritage) (402).

In light of these stereotypes, misreadings, *strangeness*, Jewish American women's assimilation was and has been largely dependent on behavior, appearance²⁴ and most importantly attachment to men. The Jewish woman, it is imagined in analysis and definitions of Jewish American assimilation, assimilated alongside men--fathers, and then husbands, with the economic uplift experienced largely by this group. While there are numerous holes in this narrative--including Jewish men who did not reach prosperity and therefore did not bring their hypothetical children into the middle class--the most obvious omission is queer women. Queer, here, becomes murky--after all, as Ann Pellegrini and Stacy Wolf argue, the Jewish woman is often constructed as a queer (*strange*) woman. Asking questions about this previously elided identity, for Schulman in *Empathy*, illuminates the *stranger* elements of Jewish American assimilation, what has been rendered ghostly in the drive toward insider citizenship.

Commenting on a Yiddish Theater play, *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, in the *Village Voice*, Sarah Schulman writes:

The detail that I found most interesting in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* was the surprising information about Jewish aesthetic standards. We are told that the bride is ‘the most beautiful girl in the village.’ She is large-boned, plump, with big features and kinky hair. This is a pre-Americanization image of Jewish beauty. Today, an assimilated Jewish woman who looks like this would think of herself as unattractive. (“Yidl Mitn Fidl”)

²⁴ Much like all women under white patriarchy--however, the fact that women share this oppression does not negate the need to examine the myriad of different experiences of this oppression which is in direct constitution with race, class, ability, sexuality

While Schulman is writing here about *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, her suggestions about Jewish assimilation and physical preoccupation for women are useful when examining Anna O. in *Empathy*. Anna O. is indeed representative of this pre-Americanization image of Jewish beauty and through her interactions with others we learn how this effects her constitution as a *stranger*.

Despite the suffering she endures for inhabiting this *strange* body, Anna O. continues to see societal expectations (for all oppressed and unassimilated people) as the problem, not her body. Rather than discipline her body into something 'normal,' Anna explores *strangerhood* as a viable home. However, the price Anna pays for being a *stranger* would be dangerous to overlook even as she attempts to live in the space allotted her body and all of its manifestations. Anna O's body is a reminder of an off-white past of Eastern European Jewish life. By contrasting the reception of Anna body (by both the reader of her body internal to the book and external) with the reception of Anna O's body as Doc as well as in relationship to her lovers, Sarah Schulman shows that Anna is marked a *stranger* because of the precise way her Jewishness and queerness are read in the worlds she inhabits.

In his work on Eastern European Jews, Zygmunt Bauman develops his reading of the *stranger* figure. According to Bauman:

the threat he (the stranger) carries is more horrifying than that which one can fear from the enemy. The stranger threatens the sociation itself--the very *possibility* of sociation...And all this because the stranger is neither friend nor enemy: and because he may be both. And because we do not know, and have no way of knowing, which is

the case. The stranger is one (perhaps the main one, the archetypal one) member of the family of *undecidables*--those baffling yet ubiquitous entities that, in Derrida's words again, can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, *without* ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics. (55)

While, Bauman explains, "oppositions enable knowledge and action; undecidables paralyze them. Undecidables brutally expose the artifice...They bring the outside into the inside and poison the comfort of order with suspicion of chaos" (56).

Continuing to think about the *stranger* (or alien) Sara Ahmed, in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, establishes that the *stranger* is as essential to constituting the insider as the outsider. She writes:

By coming too close to home, they establish the very necessity of policing the borders of knowable and inhabitable terrains. The techniques for differentiating between citizens and aliens, as well as between humans and aliens, allows the familiar to be established as the familial. Through strange encounters, the figure of the 'stranger' is produced, not as that which we fail to recognize, but as that which we have already recognized as a 'stranger'. (3)

While the completed Jewish assimilation narrative imagines all *strangerhood* is in the past for Jewish Americans, other young Jewish American women theorists and writers espouse a similar *strangerhood* to Schulman's Anna O. Vered Hankin, writing about her experience growing up Jewish in the midwest describes the ways in

which she attempted to remediate herself to become an insider instead of the *stranger*, with ambiguous results. She writes:

I observed how to be a nice midwestern American. For the most part it worked...My difference was insinuated with comments from my classmates like "Where are you from?" or "Your hair is so *black*," or "Your personality seems so *prominent*." Most of the time if I suppressed myself enough, it would be okay. I would be okay, as long as I smiled. (62)

Here, like her predecessors Hankin is admonished for not only looking ethnically different, but also of having a 'personality' (or behavioral set) that was seen as excessive (and therefore masculine).

Echoing these sentiments, another young Jewish American woman writer Daveena Tauber expresses:

My alienation from the mainstream white culture of the West Coast took its toll on my self-esteem. I began to dislike my ethnic features. I hated my nose so passionately that my friends teased me about having an olfactory fixation. I was also self-conscious about my olive-skin. On the West Coast, white men at folk dances would frequently ask where I was from. When I answered northern California, they clarified, No, I mean, what's your ethnicity? They guessed that I was Latina American, Indian, Native American, or Middle Eastern. They almost never guessed Jewish, (192 and 196)

Both Hankin and Tauber express that both their physical 'difference' and behavioral 'difference' leaves them alienated (estranged, *stranger*) from the assimilated spaces that the Jewish-American assimilation story presumes is their home.

Another contemporary example of the Jewish American woman *stranger* is the case of Monica Lewinsky. While press in the United States avidly avoided mentioning Lewinsky's Jewishness, the ambivalent and *strange* way in which she was written about in the press wove her ethnicity into the base of the text. Around the world press portrayed her Jewishness as being paramount, and many articles were devoted to either her Jewish grotesqueness or her gorgeous Jewish temptress ways (the *stranger* is a shapeshifter). Marjorie Garber, in "Moniker," part of the collection *Our Monica, Ourselves* edited by Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan, investigates the ways in which Lewinsky's Jewishness was a central figure in the scandal despite the subliminal way it was treated. She writes:

While her Jewishness might have been ignored, it may just have been displaced into other references, she was "pushy, ambitious, zaftig, typical beverly hills, she was mature for her age, she was sexy and seductive, she was rich, she had designs on political or policy role, she lacked moral gravitas, she led a weak Christian man astray." (176)

Further, "although some of the story's "Jewish" elements went unnamed and unmarked, they powerfully and uncannily reinscribed the story of the Jewish-American assimilation and its late twentieth century discontents" (Garber 176).

Garber continues:

'An independent-minded odalisque, unshackled from sexual modesty and constantly celebrating her zaftig sensuality,' is how one critic characterized the response of women's magazines like *Glamour* to Lewinsky's erotic persona...An odalisque is a female slave or concubine in an Eastern harem, so that the orientalism of "Jewish looks" here encompasses both Turkey and Israel, by way of Byron and nineteenth-century French painting. The lush Jewish woman is sexual and sensual, but with a mind of her own." (178)

While during the beginning stages of mass Jewish migration to the United States the Jewish man may have bore the brunt of American anti-Semitism, Garber contends, "The woman, the Jewish woman as JAP, has replaced the male Jew as the scapegoat, and the Jewish male has not only participated, but has been instrumental in creating and perpetuating the image" (179). This abjection takes form in the identity of the changeable *stranger* Garber asserts:

As always seems to be the case with the images of Jewishness, and especially of Jewish women, they cross boundaries: between homeliness and beauty; between Jewish mother and 'wayward' daughter; between fat and thin; between proper and raucously improper. (184)

Though public narratives may imagine the hypothetical Jew to be, at present, an undifferentiated *American* insider of monetary means, the confrontation between this most public of Christians, Bill Clinton and the very Jewish Monica Lewinsky

enunciated how Jews may be highly known and unknown simultaneously, in the fashion of the *stranger* (197). Garber writes:

But to Bill Clinton she was an exotic. 'What kind of a name is Lewinsky?' he wanted to know...Clinton, a relatively sophisticated man who knew not only Jews but Jewish jokes, looked at Monica Lewinsky and both saw and failed to see. His relationship with her, retold by the press and the special prosecutor, re-created the stereotype it did not name ("pushy" "ambitious" "seductive") and dispersed it to the Diaspora and to the world. (197)

Garber elucidates the ways in which Jewishness was important in the media construction of Monica Lewinsky, even if it was often coded in Jewish American woman stereotypes (and thus perhaps imperceptible to consciousness for many American--highly visible, but invisible). Through an examination of the portrayal of Monica Lewinsky, Garber shows how some Jewish American women are viewed as *strangers*, and the ways in which this is deeply related to gender and sexuality.

David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel, in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* write, "In a variety of ways, then, to be a Jew, especially at this historical juncture, means to lack a single essence, to live with multiple identities. They continue:

Perhaps the Jews are even emblematic of the postmodern condition as a whole. If identity politics means to base one's political activity on one particular identity, then the Jews' experience of multiple identities

suggests that identity politics conceived as monolithic or total needs serious rethinking" (9).

Sarah Schulman, in *Empathy*, attempts to magnify and reproduce the experience of inhabiting multiple identities in simultaneity without rejection or privileging of one particular identity for normalization. Schulman has created a *stranger* character, Anna O, who attempts to make a home in this *strange*, "disturbing" position. Schulman has the seemingly impossible task of enunciating a character that, if Bauman is correct, is illegible, and unthinkable? If a life is 'unthinkable,' what tools are available for the author to portray and examine this character?

Schulman argues that the apparatus of empathy is imperative in approaching the narratives (and subjects themselves) of *strangers*. Further, she shows that there is a need for reframing the experiences of queer Jewish American women with narrative devices that are 'visible' in order to fully assess the state of assimilation. These arguments become most apparent in the (imagined) therapy sessions between Anna and Doc and their private reactions they to these sessions. Here, I will take a close look at these 'scenes,' as well as key scenes where Anna and Doc become embodied.

Though Doc is a key figure in *Empathy* from the beginning of the novel, when it becomes clear that Doc is Anna, the earlier narrative is illuminated in light of this late-in-the-novel revelation. The origin of Doc's emergence can be traced to a scene in the beginning of the novel. In this scene, Schulman depicts Anna breaking up with her girlfriend--in this scene, the oppression Anna experiences due to all of her identities emerges, jarring her into even further fragmentation to attempt to become visible. The form of the scene necessitates paying attention not only to the detail of

dialogue, but also what it all looked like, sounded like, and felt like to the touch.

While Anna O has not yet emerged as a traumatized figure (though she later will), the attention to detail, or hyper-vigilance often associated with a traumatized and post-traumatized state is apparent in the on-goings of the scene. Writing the scene in such a manner allows Schulman to attempt to get at portraying the physical and emotional reaction to being shunned for being a *stranger*.

Anna O's girlfriend leaves her, saying she is no longer a lesbian, that love can only be expected desire and anticipation fulfilled and with lesbians there is no early imagination so there is no fulfillment (*Empathy* 7). In response, Anna O asks, "there's something very important that I don't understand. How can I be a woman and still be happy?" (7). Anna O's unnamed girlfriend is described as androgynous in body and dress, eligible to be incorporated back into the fold of middle-upper class white heterosexuality. Anna, in contrast is a *strange* body lifted from *Yitl Mitn Fidl*, not entirely incorporated in 'the new world'. In the aftermath of this scene, Doc emerges as a character--in essence answering and resolving the question Anna poses--How can I be a woman and still be happy? The answer to this question is embodying Doc, an exact replica of Anna. Doc will only disappear from the narrative when he is revealed as Anna by this ex-girlfriend later in the story.

Sarah Schulman, in her revisitation (or re-enactment) of *Empathy* in its most current Arsenal Pulp Press edition, instructs readers to be wary of transposing a trans narrative onto Anna O to explain the existence of Doc in the narrative. She writes:

The doors that I thought that *Empathy* would open about gender turned out to be entirely out of step with the historic moment. Instead, the

zeitgeist was pointing in other directions. Judith Butler...argued persuasively for gender as something presentational...I found her followers to be sort of annoying...The transsexual/transgender revolution was happening in a big way...The tide had turned in exactly the opposite direction from my own private revelations about the lesbian self. And the shift seemed permanent...As *Empathy* expresses, I have never personally experienced any similarity between lesbians and men (202, new edition of *Empathy*).

The change in Anna O's expectations from when she was a child to what she actually experiences as an adult instructs readers in two ways. First, we are to understand that Jewish American assimilation, for Anna O, is still an ongoing process. Secondly, the discrepancy between expectation and reality shows us that Anna O's queerness constitutes her Jewishness and vice versa and because of this it is necessary to conduct studies in which both are primary with neither being seen as a secondary, or ancillary, attribute. Further, we are instructed that in order to render Jewish American queer women's experiences readable, in all of their fullness, an arsenal of mediums must be used to combat the current constitution of Jewish American women's assimilation narratives and to become utterable--including writing the main character into maleness in order to illuminate Anna in all of her fullness.

Through Anna's description of herself as a child and what she had imagined would be her future, she becomes complicated more than simply being the rejected lesbian figure--as much as she astutely pins her femaleness (and inherently her queerness) as prohibiting her from the right (and access) to happiness (as she

articulates on page 7), Anna O, in the prologue, also emerges as a (Jewish) *stranger*. Here she expresses the contrast between her lived experience and what is imagined to be her experience as per the lens of successful and complete Jewish American assimilation by imagining the world, she, a lower-middle class Jewish (queer) woman was promised in 1950s New York City. Schulman writes:

What happened to the world that I was promised back in first grade in 1965? Not only had she been promised successful middle-class romance, but other treats had been mentioned as well. In this dream of the future she would play with the white boys who were ‘rockets, superheroes, untouchable’. ...Anna O. knew that hers was the last generation to believe the future would be better. Now, she feared the future. With that last thought Anna fell into a troubled sleep. (7,8)

In this vision, Anna is the recipient of class/racial uplift detailed by the likes of Michael Rogin, Karen Brodtkin, David Roediger, etc. As a child, Anna O is aware that she has been promised the same advantages as the white, blonde boys she longed to play with as a child. As a 31-year old queer woman looking back on this promise, Anna O begins to emerge as a counter-narrative to the narrative of completed and (hyper) success of Jewish-American assimilation.

When we meet Anna again, she has just come home early from her temp agency, without a job she had been promised. Unlike what we will learn of Doc, Anna is more comfortable at home, away from the trappings and expectations of womanhood and her attendant failures. She ruminates on the expectations of appearance attached to her being possibly employed as she:

carefully rolled down her stockings, knowing that the slightest scratch would cost her. Damn it, they caught on a toenail. This was so humiliating. It made her sick to death of herself. Anna read *People* magazine...There was nothing in this magazine that she saw in the mirror. No person, gesture, slogan, or hairstyle looked like her. In fact, there was no magazine on the entire newsstand rack that had her in it." (42-43).

The rest of the chapter concerns itself with the various ways in which Anna is alienated from a world consumed with consuming, as she sought refuge in not only her apartment, but also in her thoughts and dreams. The language describing her night thoughts and dreams becomes ethereal and disconnected, suggesting an almost joyous dissociation in response to the external stimuli of the world. This suggestion about disassociation will be one of the many ways in which Schulman will contest conventional psychology and its observations on health and disease, particularly in response to trauma.

In Anna's first introduction to Doc, she hands him a paper she wrote in college in which she tries to carry out a Freudian dream analysis with one of her own dreams (the paper is one Schulman wrote in college, adding another layer of 'revelation'). In the dream, Anna O is having an affair with her best friend, but in the dream Anna is more feminized--thinner with longer hair. In her analysis, Anna O reasons that she feminized herself because she feels like she will be a more acceptable lesbian (woman) if she is more feminine (27). However, while handing this paper to Doc (a fictional psyche--so in essence she hands the paper to herself), Schulman also hands

her paper over to her readers. Schulman's struggle with being viewed as 'too masculine' while simultaneously being 'too feminine' (too much) in body is as much tied to her sexuality as it is her ethnicity, as per Baum, Hyman, Michel and other's theories explored earlier. Schulman pokes fun of Freudian revelations throughout *Empathy*, evident most overtly through the naming of her main character, Anna O, as well as the naming of the girlfriend Anna will be with at the end of the novel, Dora.

Though Anna O is the focus in the preface and chapter two (until the two meet in chapter three wherein they are both subjects of the chapters despite who is speaking), chapter one, notably begins with Doc. Through Doc we learn about Anna O's philosophies about life, particularly in relationship to the best therapies for emotional ailments. Doc is in many ways reminiscent of characters in Virginia Woolf novels, where one must accept elements of the fantastical being woven into the texts. He also exhibits Woolfian time--he feels like he is very old even though he is 31, he feels time moves according to his emotions and since he is prone to seriousness, time often moves slowly. The more introspective ruminations Anna experiences are disseminated through the character of Doc because readers and other characters in the book are more prone to listen to him.

Schulman describes Doc as a handsome young man with the world at his fingertips. Schulman writes, "This doctor was a young one. He was soft about the face and had clear brown eyes that exhibited a distracted kind of caring. He passed his hands over his small, fleshy body and then stretched his eyes and fingers toward the wall. The world was his this chilly morning. He could be human, inadequate, and still have it all" (9). The moment Anna and Doc encounter each other for the first time is

written by Schulman to emphasize the difference between how Anna is seen and treated in the world versus how Doc (also Anna) hypothetically (or literally, it is never clear) is seen and treated. She writes, "She reminded him immediately of himself as a girl. She was a little too pudgy, a little too soft" (30). During the textual moments Anna O's body is coded male as Doc, he can be "human, inadequate, and have it all," while Anna O's body read as female is "a little too pudgy, a little too soft" (9, 30).

Schulman continues to build the parallels between Anna O and Doc, as she leads up to the revelation that they are the same person. She writes, "Anna came from the same kind of middle class that "Doc" knew oh-so-well. The kind that could pass up just as easily as down" (30). Here, not only do we understand Doc and Anna to be nearly identical but also illuminated is one of the many moments within the text where Jewishness is coded. Doc's recognition that Anna is also a Secular Jew like him, raised by a family that also practiced "Freudianism" as a religion is coded in language about passing and movement between identities. The "kind that could pass up just as easily as passing down" is similar to Karen Brodtkin's theory of Jews being "shuttled back and forth" along racial and ethnic lines, belying the ways in which they are both coded as Jewish, with differing experiences with this sometimes *stranger* and sometimes peripheral insider identity.

While Doc is described as wearing whatever he wants with no consequences, Anna is described as "clumsy in her clothes" (31). While this may seem trivial, it is important in understanding the ways in which Jewish men's bodies have been accepted and assimilated as "acceptably white" (and therefore 'unmarked) and some

Jewish women's bodies are still in a precarious, *strange* hovering space where constant vigilance to appearance and performance is necessary. Anna tells Doc why this matters, saying, "Doc, I find these clothes so humiliating. These stockings are so expensive. Your toenail becomes your worst enemy" (31). Here Anna expresses the way that her economic and social life is based on her appearance and that her clothes must always be impeccable to make up for her bodily and behavioral inability to perform an acceptable white identity (coded as 'proper' and 'normal' workplace comportment for female sexed bodies).

Doc immediately observes and expresses, "They looked so much alike. Doc noticed that there was practically no difference except that Anna had to wear clothes that she hated and he could wear whatever he liked" (31). In this moment, Anna O, through "seeing herself" through the lens of inhabiting Doc, reckons with the reality of existing as a *stranger*. Further, as the reader learns Doc is also Anna O, they are pushed to examine their own assumptions about Anna and Doc--whom they have extended the most empathy, whom they have thought of most harshly.

Teaching *Empathy* in Women's Studies literature courses and lgbt literature courses has been illuminating in understanding reader's perceptions of Anna and Doc and the moment these characters are revealed to be one person, Anna O. I have been particularly interested in the reactions from beginning students in literature. Most students miss the moment in the text where Doc collapses back into Anna and ceases to exist for the rest of the text and when they learn of the 'twist' they flip through the book looking for any refutation to this claim (and there are loopholes in the text, one of the many things picked on by the critics). These are the same students that with

coaxing have been able to understand other difficult, post-modern texts, but the collapse of Doc, almost into the ether, is unimaginable. More acceptable to these students would have been Anna O 'transitioning' permanently to Doc, an easier explanation in line with the trans narratives most widely distributed at present by popular culture (though by no means necessarily the 'real stories'). More murky to understand is why Schulman creates an unreal 'character' portrayed as 'real' for the majority of the novel.

The ways in which Anna and Doc are differently understood by the world is not only exemplified by the ways in which their bodies are perceived. While Anna describes an increasing shutting down of her world and the possibilities she had in it as she grew up, Doc describes the ways in which his world widened as he grew. He thinks:

At the age of six her mode of inquiry had already been rejected. Doc's own experience had been quite the opposite. Especially in high school, when he suddenly became quite grandiose and unleashed some kind of attractive power. The other kids gave him their attention, demanding engagement on a wide range of passionate questions. They demanded that he tell them exactly how the world should go. Then they would argue with him forever about the details. The whole conversation was worth it from the beginning to end" (57)

In understanding this rendering of 'different' childhoods for Anna and Doc, despite them being the same person, we must suspend our belief systems about linearity and possibility.

There are several ways in which we can understand this description of a childhood that we know to have never happened. First, we can simply understand Doc's rendering of his childhood as Anna O's imagination of what her life would have been like had she been born a Jewish, straight male²⁵. Secondly, we can understand this childhood portrayal as Anna truly believing, at the moment she is speaking, that Doc exists. Thirdly, and perhaps most compelling, we might understand the rendering of Doc's childhood as the only way in which Anna can attempt to describe the 'queer' (and so understood as *strange*) experiences of her own childhood, particularly in relationship to other queer children.

If Schulman's experiences is 'unimaginable' and she is left to conjure narrative devices that might fully enunciate Anna O's experience in its entirety, then Doc is a clever receptacle for the parts of Anna O's experience that are 'unreadable' on her body. For instance, how can Anna O explain that as a child she started understanding people were listening to her less and trivializing her more as she grew up while also describing the experiences she had with other *strange* (and possibly queer) children whom she interacted with in a different manner than with the rest of the world that had begun to shut her possibilities down? However, those experiences, described through Doc become absolutely believable in a global sense (when if attached to Anna O the 'listener' might imagine her to be exaggerating).

Through Doc we grapple with Anna O's existential problems with the 'religion' she claims to have been born into: Freudianism. While Anna's story will

²⁵ Though I want to be careful not to trivialize Doc, and his described childhood, as Anna O's imagination is informed by her own experiences growing up with Jewish men (including her brother to whom she is close in age).

deal more with oppression and relationality, Doc will attempt to explain and understand his philosophy for living. Combining the two narratives, as we are instructed by the revelation that they are the same person, allows us to understand Anna as a fully fleshed out human being. Schulman shows us this is necessary by the ways we understand Doc and Anna separately and when they are joined.

Familial Homophobia, Empathy, Ties that Bind and Exile

While the proposal of the text, signified most succinctly by its title, *Empathy*, might seem a trite rendering of sixties philosophies, Schulman adeptly shows through Anna (and the paralleling of the AIDS crisis with the genocide of Jews in World War II) that empathy is no easy task, nor is the project of learning to 'listen properly' in order to achieve true empathy. Through Anna O we can see the ways in which the self becomes fragmented when only pieces of the whole are welcome in the room, as well as the ways in which traumatic matter might become tools of empathy. Through the rendering of the AIDS crisis we encounter characters introduced as quickly as they disappear through horrific deaths, victims of ravaging disease and the lack of empathy afforded the crisis and those it claimed. While the 'exiled' (unassimilated) Anna O's experience is traumatic, Anna O plans to make a home in this neither-here-nor-there world, as an ethical response to the encroaching gentrification (whiteness) attempting to overtake her and her neighborhood.

Though Anna O continues to live in the same neighborhood in which she was raised, she is in essence, living in exile. Jews (from all sects) fled the Lower East Side years before for the surrounding suburbs, while Anna O stays behind. When Anna O encounters her family (both in the immediate sense and her larger family, those related and tribally affiliated) she visits from another land, another class, another world of relationships--though her experiences remain a taboo subject. The time she spends with her family is spent fending off her mother's attempts to regulate her femininity as well as defending and hiding the realities of her life.

Sarah Schulman's book, *Ties That Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences*, published in 2009, contemplates the private ways in which familial homophobia effects queer people, disrupting the idea that inclusion, assimilation, and tolerance have lessened the burden of being queer in a homophobic society. Like in *Empathy*, Schulman attempts to get to the nuanced experience of being an oppressed person who does not have the respite of family life in which family members bear the same identity (making queerness different than many other oppression experiences). Throughout *Ties That Bind* Schulman sprinkles pieces of her own history, though often these 'tidbits' are vague, suggesting the problematics of 'airing one's own queer laundry' in a public forum and the familial repercussions. Though this information is not a complete biography of Schulman's own experience, it is helpful in understanding not only *The Ties that Bind* but also *Empathy*.

In "Homophobia and the Postcoloniality of the "Jewish Science," Daniel Boyarin considers the ways in which the application of Freudian thought, and its attendant hegemonies, differs dramatically from Freud's own experience of self/race. He uses the particularity of Freud's experiences to, by extension, argue against the universality of his theories, despite their present universal applications. He writes:

Seen from the perspective of the colonized, Freud might look like a white man; from his own perspective, as from the dominating Christian white, he was a Jew, every bit as racially marked as the Indian...designated as mulatto. The best denotation, then, for the "race" of the European Jew seems to be off-white. (174)

Similarly, though Schulman's *Ties That Binds* and *Empathy* attends to issues throughout queer communities, the book is also guided by her own particular experience as a queer *Jewish* American woman and therefore a reading of both texts need include this lens of experience.

In *Ties That Bind* Schulman sometimes offers biographical information, and sometimes this information is coded in hypothetical examples that are easily traced back to her life story. For example, Schulman recounts a story in which a lesbian's brother gets married and decides to exclude her because their parents are rampantly homophobic. Because it is his wedding and heterosexual privilege trumps her feelings of oppression, no one intervenes. "That he is human and she is not," Schulman writes:

And so they collude with excluding her, causing her great pain. If they approached the brother as a group and told him that they would not be manipulated into scapegoating the sister, he would not be able to carry out his plan...When the sister tries to read a novel or see a movie or play expressing this experience, there aren't any. If she tries to create one, she told by the publisher that it's beautifully written but that it is special interest, not for the general public" (13-14).

Here Schulman shows that the homophobia she (or the hypothetical lesbian in the story) experiences in the world is compounded by the homophobia and shunning she experiences from her family. The story, though hypothetical in this example, reads similarly to the other examples in the text where Schulman identifies the story as her own.

After recounting five separate instances when she was persecuted for being gay and no-one intervened (several of which were at the hands of her father and his homophobia), Schulman complicates matters further by rooting her own familial experiences in the ghostly matter that haunts them. She writes:

Looking back, I have to acknowledge that my father grew up in a household of people who were severely traumatized by war, anti-Semitism, and poverty. His adopted sister, with whom he was raised, was abandoned by her father to be killed by Czarist soldiers, but instead she witnessed her mother and brother being murdered by Cossacks as she hid in a fireplace. My father's mother grew up in a situation so profoundly deprived that her family was on the border of starvation and literally had no shoes...Neither of my father's parents had basic civil rights in their birth countries. They did not have the right to be educated, to own property, or to practice their religion. Clearly my father grew up among the profoundly traumatized, and he needed treatment himself to be able to emotionally reconnect enough to be able to love his lesbian daughter. (65)

Further, after recounting instances in which her mother shunned her and humiliated her with no reproach from her therapist who Schulman identified as the party responsible for intervening, she visits the world in which her mother was raised. She writes:

My mother also comes from a background of trauma, oppression, and mass murder. Her father also came here alone from Russia. His

sister was exterminated in the Holocaust at Baba Yar...and my maternal grandmother's two brothers and sisters were also murdered in the Holocaust...As a consequences of anti-Semitism and war, my mother grew up without an extended family and without grandparents. She had no example of familial longevity...As a young person, my mother was close to people who were victimized by the blacklist. I believe that those untreated and unacknowledged traumas made my mother fear difference, fear the disapproval of the dominant culture, which kept her from being able to love her lesbian daughter and my destiny to reproduce the race. (68)

Ever invested in nuance, Schulman warns against reading this 'understanding' as an excuse. "I don't excuse my parents, but I loved my father no matter what, and now that he is dead, I still love my mother. I deeply and fundamentally believe in the human responsibility to understand why people do what they do. No matter how cruel what they actually do is" (69).

She details how she has been excluded from knowing her nephew and nieces. Her mother agrees with the exclusion and with the fact that she is not allowed to be alone with them. "One of my motives for writing this book is so that my nieces and nephew will some day understand what happened in our family and why they do not know me. I hope that when this day comes, I will still be alive and that they will come to see me, so we can talk" (70). When Schulman was writing *Empathy*, in a sense a manifesto, battle cry, and memorial to living and genocide-victim *strangers*, she was a 31 year old queer Jewish woman with no way of knowing what the future would

bring. As she will say in *Ties That Bind*, this stance was not always successful, and the costs of losing her family devastating and life-changing. She is a ghost to her nieces and nephew who may, ultimately, she surmises, only know her posthumously for her work. And, yet, she attempts to make a home in this exiled *stranger* state, leaving a map for her nieces and nephew to find her, and her story.

She uses her personal story and the lack of intervention from her therapists to question the ways in which current therapeutic methodologies, along with therapists untrained to deal with the reality of the lives of queer people, reiterate societal homophobias and further harm the queer person. Further, she posits, the family loses the opportunity to recover from its homophobias because these homophobias are rarely addressed and the queer person is forced to learn to put up with the homophobia or have no family. In *Empathy*, Schulman, through fiction, shows the ways in which those lost opportunities to recover look for the person rendered a *stranger*, Anna O.

In *Ties That Bind* Schulman, years later, reiterates the main premise of *Empathy* in theoretical, expository form, a main premise informed as much by her experience as a Jewish woman as her experiences as a queer woman. The shunning Anna O experiences, and the shunning Schulman experiences are always inextricably linked to being Jewish and female and queer, including the reasons for being *estranged* and made a literal *stranger*. This informs Anna O's theories about empathetic therapies as much as Schulman's ideas about the devastating effects of shunning in *Ties That Bind*. Schulman writes:

Actually, knowledge about other people should *increase* your responsibility toward them...If you know that someone has been scapegoated, you don't scapegoat them. If you know that someone has been excluded from the children in his or her family, you don't promise the person a relationship with yours and then withhold it. And if you do, you don't blame them for being devastated...If you know that someone is being shunned, you don't shun the person. (97-98)

In *Ties That Bind* Schulman details a variety of different therapeutic settings in which she found herself re-traumatized by homophobia, particularly when it came to her therapists intervening in her families homophobia. This leaves Schulman alone in dealing with the experience of being rendered a *stranger*. In *Empathy*, a book Schulman reports writing with the least amount of control over the text out of her texts, Anna conducts therapy on herself through the creation of Doc because of the lack of any literal space in which to culturally grapple with the effects of homophobia, including the devastation of AIDS in her community. By extension, through the act of writing *Empathy* Schulman is able to undergo self-therapy in a certain sense, in the absence of assistance that would treat her with empathy, and subsequently, full humanity. By creating Doc as the child of practicing Freudians, a recovering Freudian himself, with Anna also being a child of Freudian's, Schulman is able to criticize (as well as poke fun of) Freudian theories while also using the aspects of the theories she finds useful. Further, Schulman, through coding liberal Jewish discourse/religion as the religion of Freudianism in text, comments on the place of the queer woman in Jewish ethnic culture.

While writing *Empathy* could have possibly served as a tool of self-therapy, necessitating much of the text is coded in self-referential language and example (accounting for the myriad of genres used in the text), Schulman's direct rendering of her experiences in *Ties That Bind* serves more as an intervention into the treatment of *strangers*, namely queer people. The experiences she describes, mostly in relationship with her biological family, always include all aspects of her identity. She describes a time, in her early thirties, when she arrived late to her parent's home for a family gathering. She was late because she went to visit a friend of hers, Stan Leventhal, who was dying of AIDS. While trying to explain this to her parents (in the midst of having already experienced the death of many friends to AIDS), her mother responded "You only like men when they're dying. I had always hoped that you would grow up to be a productive person who was community-oriented but instead you put yourself in this mess" (126). Her sister and her husband sat silently. Schulman was effectively annihilated here, her community obliterated metaphorically as it was being literally, the trauma of witnessing mass death ignored, and empathy unoffered. Schulman writes:

In this incident, my family members excluded me in a host of ways from their world of people whose feelings matter. They separated themselves from me. That is a punishment, and its consequences are brutal...Choosing to disconnect from others is either a pathological act of cruelty or a consequence of being on the receiving end of that cruelty" (127).

In this example, her mother's response is directly tied to her desire to be 'normal,' seamlessly white, and her drive for this type of normalcy decimates her ability to empathize with her daughter and also her ability to offer her full humanity.

At the end of *Empathy*, there is a description of a family Passover Seder with Anna O's family (whenever she describes her family to Doc she chooses to describe it in cinematic form) that is reminiscent of this incident described in *Ties That Bind*. In light of Schulman's description of writing *Empathy* as a much less controlled novel than her previous works, this is important. In *Empathy*, written many years before *Ties That Bind*, Schulman writes the scene as one might describe the experience of trauma to a therapeutic listener--through a cinematic lens, a dissociated moment that has become further dissociated in the reenactment of remembering. The writing of *Empathy*, then, allows for the writing of *The Ties That Bind*. Schulman creates a world where Anna is able to invent Doc and conduct a method self-therapy to deal with the effects of being rendered a *stranger*. Through this self-therapy Anna is able to reaffirm her belief that her identities (all of them) are not the problem, but that normalization expectations are a problem causing many effects, such as shunning. For Anna, (and for Schulman in *Ties That Bind*) this leads to a commitment to living in the interstices (or as the *stranger*, or the queer) as the ethical choice and position. Rather than work towards assimilation through attempting to empty herself of *strange* excesses and remainders, Anna makes a home in *strangeness* and attempts to work to end the shunning of *strangers*. In this way, writing *Empathy* paves the way for writing *Ties That Bind*.

The Passover scene comes at the end of *Empathy*, the last full chapter. It is important that Schulman creates this scene through script format, with Anna as the director of her family members. At the onset of the scene we find Anna accusing her family of being sexist because the women do all of the cooking and cleaning work for the Seder. There is also suggestion that her younger sister is anorexic. Her mother asks everyone to go around the table and say what wish they have (showing the ways in which this family is ethnically Jewish but not necessarily traditionally religious). Through her mother's 'wish' we understand that Anna sees her family as being liberal leaning (which makes their homophobia perhaps more confounding to Anna). Her mother says "I wish the Israelis would give back the land already. But only the West Bank. For years the Arabs threatened to bomb Israel. But only George Bush could actually make them do it. And that the whole family should be healthy and that I should have grandchildren while I'm still healthy enough to enjoy them" (176).

At once her mother espouses a fairly 'left-leaning' sentiment in her views on George Bush and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and a heterosexist imperative for reproduction (complicated by her familial history of annihilation). Her mother in a sense misses the trees for the forest--she is willing to have 'unpopular' beliefs for what she feels is right in a macro-political sense, yet when it comes to her own daughter she cannot see Anna's suffering nor can she really even 'see' her at all outside of her desire to 'normalize' her. In an earlier 'script' of another of Anna O's family gatherings (to attend a family friend's funeral--a 'visible' death as opposed to the deaths of Anna's friends dying of AIDS), Anna's mother scrutinizes and berates her (lack) of femininity, or, rather, her lack of adherence to white, middle-class, straight feminine

norms (*Empathy*, 38). Her brother subsequently polices, and disapproves, of her younger sister's femininity and Anna steps in to defend her (without getting any 'defense' in return when she is attacked) (*Empathy*, 39).

When Anna says, "I wish my friends would stop dying of AIDS," her family has the opportunity to intervene, to acknowledge Anna and her community's humanity, to offer compassion and empathy. However, they move on quickly, with no acknowledgement of Anna's experience or pain. Her father quickly moves on to pseudo-philosophizing why secular Jewish families continue to meet for holidays like Passover. He suggests it is "more a way of ensuring that the family psychology is kept dynamic. We all sit down together and get a good look at each other" (177). Her father misses the irony that by glossing over Anna O's experience he shows that, at least in this family, these gatherings serve as a way to check in to how well family members are working towards (or maintaining) being normal (assimilated) members of society²⁶.

As the Seder nears its end, Anna O's father is called off by a suicidal patient. Anna follows him to the elevator, attempting to refute the Freudian claims about lesbianism she knows her Freudian analyst father holds. Anna, to her father:

Pop, I want to tell you something...Pop, I just want to let you know that I realize you believe in Freud and everything, and I'm not going to go into that right now...But I just want to tell you that, despite what

²⁶ Perhaps this is a strategy that has been used by not-so-religious (or secular) Jewish families throughout the diaspora for hundreds of years, so in a way is actually a built in mechanism of such gatherings.

Freud says, the reason I am a lesbian is not because of wanting to hurt you. It's not about you in any way. I really love you, Pop. (179)

As Anna speaks her father interrupts her several times, proving her point that empathy becomes nearly impossible without listening. This scene, if examined through the lens set forth in *Ties That Bind*, shows the ways in which Anna O is shunned, made invisible, and made to accept others' homophobias and discomforts if she is to have family at all.

In *Ties That Bind*, Schulman describes ways in which queer people try to cope with the pain of homophobia, particularly familial homophobia. She describes three different variations, two of which are self-annihilating and one that is self-embracing, difficult, and often unsuccessful. She writes:

There is also a third intention: choosing to live in the subculture as a place to prepare to force change...Viewing our subcultural commitments as a way of strengthening ourselves for the task ahead of changing the big structures so that we can live inside them, alongside straight people, without being distorted by them. That is the most utopian, most difficult, and yet most inspiring option. So far, it has not been successful. (128-129)

However, though this 'third intention' (or living as a *stranger*) has so far been unsuccessful, Schulman continues to inhabit this space.

Like queer theorists such as Michael Warner and Judith Butler, Schulman questions the problematics of gay marriage. This is important, particularly in light of what we know Schulman's mother wishes for and therefore sees as a successful adult-

-a married one, one who procreates (and repopulates). If Schulman were to opt to assimilate 'better' she might marry and produce a child in whatever way she could. Schulman, true to form, refuses to have full humanity offered towards her only if she acquiesce, remediate, and normalize.

Describing this dissent on gay marriage, Schulman writes in *Ties That Bind*:

I recently had a dinner party at my house with four friends from San Francisco. Wine collectors. On bottle four, one of them, Alice Hill, said, 'Gay marriage is like abortion. Whatever you think of it, you have to have the right.' Okay, I can go along with that. But my enthusiasm ends there. What I really want is for the shunning to end so I can stop thinking about how I have to change myself to make the shunning stop when I know it's unjustified in the first place. I want to see you on the street and say, "How are you? and have you smile and let me know. I want my books to be equal to your books. I want my death to be equal to your death. I want my feelings to be equal to yours. (131)

It is important not to discount any part of Schulman's identity here, that the treatment Schulman has garnered has been related to her queerness, Jewishness, and femaleness. When she writes "what I really want is for the shunning to end so I can stop thinking about how to change myself to make the shunning stop," she is acknowledging the shunnings she has received in all facets of her life that were "unjustified in the first place". Through *Anna O* we can see that these shunnings are not easily placed in the different baskets of her identities, but weave each other into one coherent experience that is Anna, though she is also composed of Doc.

Schulman argues that visibility is not necessarily progress, nor something that makes good. This statement can hold true for both queer communities that have, as of late, become more visible, but also Jewish communities that have seen a resurgence of visibility and representation in more recent popular culture. She writes:

But, if the actual meaning and content of the specific representation is examined, many of these representations are retrograde. They often portray the gay person as pathological, lesser than, a side-kick in the Tonto role, or there to provide an emotional catharsis to make the straight protagonist or viewer a "better" person. What current cultural representations rarely present are complex human beings with authority and sexuality, who are affected by homophobia in addition to their other human experiences, human beings who are *protagonists*. That type of depth and primacy would force audiences to universalize gay people, which is part of the equality process. (6)

Anna O's mother's push to see her bear children is tied both to the fulfillment of the imperative to repopulate in light of Jewish genocide, and also her desire to have her, at least, be a 'good gay' rather than a 'bad queer' (as per Michael Warner's *The Trouble With Normal*). In *Ties That Bind* Schulman points out that "today, in an act of diminishment, gay people use having children as proof that we deserve rights, respect, and representation" (7). Therefore, choosing this "third intention" is a dangerous, perhaps frighteningly lonely place. For, to risk being shunned, or to have no choice but be in the danger zone, is to risk being dehumanized. Schulman describes shunning as "the removal of living, breathing people from recognition and

representation in daily life. It is a refusal to engage, recognize, negotiate, communicate. It is an exclusion from the conversation" (11). In this way Jewish American queer women who do not read as 'acceptable gays' have been shunned by the Jewish American assimilation story, even in its lesser known recent lgbt interventions, rendered *strangers* in every community they are identified within.

Shunning for Schulman, as exemplified in *Empathy* and *Ties That Bind*, for *strange* queers is pervasive in every area of one's life. "Shunning," writes Schulman:

is multiplicative. For example, in one week I can be excluded from a family event, be ignored by a publisher who has never published a lesbian novel, be disrespected by a theater that has never produced a lesbian play...And let me add, many of my weeks look like this. (*Ties That Bind* 11)

With the absence of societal and privatized (private social space) 'third-party' intervention, those relegated to the role of *stranger* are subject to shunning without many resources to stop the shunning other than self-remediation, if possible.

Schulman shows that therapeutic interventions often reify homophobia. She does not examine the ways in which therapy, for her, has reified the idea that Jewish Americans are completely assimilated and therefore her therapists approached her parents as assimilated Americans with the cultural heritage of a white, middle-class American. Much like Elizabeth Wurtzel's therapists continuously told her they could unearth the smiling, giggling, carefree girl she once was (conjuring an idyllic white, upper-class upbringing which had nothing to do with her own cultural, and thus situational, experience), Schulman's therapists do not understand the depth with

which her parents fear shunning (for shunning for them equals death) and thus, subsequently, how life-altering expulsion and exile is experienced by the recipient of such understanding of shunning and expulsion.

Ties That Bind not only helps readers of *Empathy* understand what happened 'after' the text ended, but also the realities from which Schulman was constructing Anna O (as Anna largely mirrors Schulman's life story) and the ways in which even Schulman ultimately excises the specificity of Jewishness from her theoretical text, but not her fictional one. As if Schulman imagines the queer Jewish female *stranger* does not need her own book--or, rather, maybe the text exists but no publisher has yet seen the place for it in any 'category' in the 'market'.

Perhaps it is the many worlds *Empathy* employs to create the character of Anna O that has left it relatively unexamined by critics--the messiness of genres colliding inexplicably into each other, becoming indistinguishable. However, sifting through the mess, unearthing the palimpsestic quality of homage, ventriloquism, and therapy may lead us to a more interesting story than the one-dimensional narrative of completed and successful Jewish-American assimilation in contemporary circulation.

Firstly, Schulman offers up a world that even while filled with death, destruction, drug addiction is also filled with queer *strange* people attempting to make a go of life in the interstices. Anna, rather than live in a world where she is penalized for being a *stranger* inhabits the world of *strangers*. This experience of exile, for Anna, helps her construct therapeutic theories of uninterrupted listening and empathy, rather than continuing to inhabit her family's world of continuous re-

traumatization. However, this only becomes possible for Anna through the method of conducting 'therapy' with Doc.

Through the trajectory of Anna's evolution, we can see the possibilities and problematics of living in the interstices for this Jewish-American queer woman. Her 'need' to not only take on the persona of Doc, but also conduct therapy on herself with his ghostly emergence, as well as her subsequent discarding of this persona when she no longer found him necessary for coping with inner and outer experiences of homophobic anti-Semitism's, shows us that not only do straight Jewish men (who look 'whiter') have a different relationship with assimilation (and gentrification as Schulman likes to call this phenomenon), but that in order to have a fuller picture of the workings and failings of assimilation processes these counterpoint voices must be accounted for and explored. It is not enough to tack on queer and women's perspectives in expanding a body of study like Jewish Studies, for example--it must begin to challenge its most basic assumptions of what 'has been happening to us' since we got here, and where have some of us been relegated to live and learn to call home.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

I have attempted in the previous chapters to illuminate the ways in which Jewish American assimilation narratives in the United States are in need of augmentation, as well as some of the materials that might be considered in this augmentation. This project is not intended to be an exhaustive report on the prevalence of *strangeness* and *strangers* in Jewish American women's contemporary writing and popular culture productions. It is intended to open a conversation, to perform an intervention of sorts, to begin. Within this work there have been unavoidable elisions, moments where the ghosts I mean to reveal get lost in the coding of my own writing, influenced by its own ghosts, silences, and inheritances.

In chapter two, "*The L Word* and its Evasions: Jewish Presence and Absence on the Queer Screen," I posit that there are similarities between Mia Kirshner's biography and the biography of the character she plays, Jenny Schecter, who is based loosely on Ilene Chaiken's biography. When the viewer watches Jenny Schecter develop in the six seasons of *The L Word*, the viewer is also watching the ghostly manifestations of Mia Kirshner (through her embodiment of the character), in the shadow of the even more coded ghostly manifestations of Ilene Chaiken. However, while Kirshner's own ghosts bleed into her performance of Jennifer Schecter, this is understood as Schecter's *strange* and excessive matter simply because Kirshner is only the actress, a highly invisible and visible vehicle to enunciate Jenny. Recently, Mia Kirshner's own voice was added to the list of Jewish American women writers concerned with the issue of the *stranger* and the consequences of being estranged, corroborating the ghosts I had imagined around her performance of Jennifer Schecter.

As the show ended its run, Mia Kirshner published *I live here*, a collage-like creative non-fiction text. Though Kirshner's life is not the subject of this work²⁷, many portions of the text examine her own experiences. These portions exemplify interest in the *stranger* figure and how this figure is received in the world. Kirshner left one project about exploring *strangerhood*, playing Jenny Schecter on *The L Word*, to write about the condition of *strangerhood* in *I live here*. As she writes about 'the lives of refugees and displaced people,' she also devotes passages to writing about herself, her inherited familial matters of genocide, displacement, *strangerhood*, and the ways in which these matters have shaped and ghosted her daily life.

The book, *I live here*, is described as:

a visually stunning narrative--told through journals, stories, images, and graphic novellas--in which the lives of refugees and displaced people become at once global and personal. Being witness to stories that are too often overlooked, it is a raw and intimate journey to crises in four corners of the world: war in Chechnya, ethnic cleansing in Burma, globalization in Mexico, and AIDS in Malawi. The voices we encounter are those of displaced women and children, in their own words or stories told in texts and images by noted writers and artists...Mia Kirshner's journals guide us

²⁷ The book itself is a palimpsest, coming in a large book that folds out to reveal four smaller books inside. *I live here* includes photographs, drawings, journals, newspapers, and fiction in its construction.

through a unique paper documentary brought vividly to life in collaboration with J.B. MacKinnon, Paul Shoebridge, and Michael Simons. (I live here)

The portions of the text where Kirshner speaks as herself evidence her own relationship with being a *stranger*. Kirshner, as mentioned in Chapter Two, is the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors and the daughter of a father born in a displaced person's camp after World War II. She describes childhood as an experience where "she was this 'strange' 'dark' child amongst blonde counterparts with the history of the Holocaust imprinted in her paternal grandparents cells and displacement and diaspora written into her Bulgarian maternal grandparents hearts" (Pfefferman). Kirshner continues to explore and report about the *stranger*, as the *stranger* and onlooker, simultaneously, in *I live here* and this seemed a good place to both end this examination and begin the conversation about Jewish American assimilation and Jewish ghostly matters.

In the first section of *I live here*, Kirshner writes about disappeared teenage girls in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. The book employs fictional journaling, interview, and collage in constructing its narrative. In the first paragraph Kirshner encounters the mother of Erika, a young woman missing already for quite some time. Erika's mother (who is not named) is described to be scrubbing the house clean while crying for her daughter, ammonia thick in the air. In the second paragraph, through the ammoniated air, Kirshner is moved to a ghostly reminder of her childhood, a memory of her own grandmother. She writes:

My grandmother on my father's side used to go to the hairdresser once a week, chauffeured by my grandfather in his Cadillac. She would come back with her hair frosted blond, sculpted wide and high. She was just so glamorous in her gold earrings and pink lipstick. Could she possibly be the most sophisticated woman that I had ever seen? Her apartment was scoured clean, smelling like ammonia. Her plastic-covered couch was always shiny, her collection of porcelain figurines--blushing ladies holding parasols next to small dogs--endlessly fascinating. Somehow, they began to represent what I hoped to be my entire family's future: blond, unfettered, and pure. Sometimes, though my grandmother would cry. At unexpected times, like when she was polishing the couch. It made me feel naked and wobbly. At the time, she was incomprehensible. (1)

In this paragraph, pieces of Kirshner's Jewish ghostly matter (reminiscent of Jenny Schechter) are revealed. Kirshner describes a grandmother attempting to assimilate, who still experienced unexpected hauntings of her traumatic past. As a child, Kirshner feels like a *stranger*, and attempts to make sense of her grandmother's *strange* breakdowns. Her present work with refugees and victims of genocide calls on her own familial past and the ways in which she desires to illuminate (and vindicate) the *stranger*.

Throughout the text Kirshner comes back over and over again to reflexive ruminations in which she expresses awareness of the ways in which her own familial ghostly matter creeps into her writing. In a passage where she is writing about

Claudia Ivette Gonzalez, a twenty-year old missing woman, she addresses her own matters becoming *strangely* intertwined in the writing process. She writes:

Claudia, I've written your story five times, scrapped every one of them. I was trying to explain things that I had no way of knowing. Now I know what the problem was. I was thinking of myself instead of you. How I wanted things to make sense, to find logic in the fragments. Your story is not logical. The story will never be finished. You are an object out of four hundred others, one that no one wants to touch. (17)

Here Kirshner suggests her own history is intertwined with her desire to tell Claudia's story, to piece together the fragments. Ultimately, she is finding there is no end to the piecing together, as Kirshner understands the magnitude of the disappearances she is describing, both in the present sense in Juarez, and in a ghostly sense, her family. Further, Kirshner also interrogates the ways in which inhabiting a *stranger* position as a girl or woman often means undergoing harsh, violent, and sometimes deadly disciplines meant to normalize gender. While this is not queer matter, in a definition that only includes lgbt people under its umbrella, it does amount to a queer gendered matter in this examination. For, the disciplining of *stranger* women's gender is directly linked to the reading of their sexuality, as I have shown here with the examples of some *strange* characters.

I do not intend to interrogate the success or efficacy of the project of *I live here* (or the philanthropic project of the same name that came out of the book project), though surely there are questions that arise concerning the problematics of

speaking for others when reading the book. However, I do intend to evidence the ways in which Kirshner's ghostly matters emerge even in the unlikeliest of places, despite the contemporary narrative of completed Jewish American assimilation suggesting she has no ghostly matter with which to contend. And, perhaps, Kirshner's ghostly, and seemingly *strange*, matters emerge in places like *I live here*--a text devoted to dire circumstances in which those who have been *estranged* have suffered violently--because these ghosts are given no other place to speak, so instead make unannounced, often startling and puzzling, appearances in *strange* spaces.

Sarah Schulman, Elizabeth Wurtzel, and Ilene Chaiken's works here illuminate not only the ways in which the Jewish American assimilation narrative is in need of augmentation, but also the necessity to 'tell the little secrets,' even the fragmented and seemingly unreachable. However, they also evidence the problems of transmitting these matters in the shadows of the currently accepted version of the Jewish American assimilation story. Schulman, Wurtzel, and Chaiken all develop strategies to attempt this translation, with differing degrees of success. In many ways the trauma, ghosts, and inherited anxieties they intend to transmit falters, despite the many ways in which they attempted to illuminate the *strange* matters encountered and experienced by their main characters.

Anna O, Jennifer Schecter, and Elizabeth Wurtzel are all pathologized for the behaviors they exhibit that are understood to be excessive. All are subject to psychiatric intervention, where they are disciplined by the language of pathology and urged to learn how to properly feminize their behaviors, gestures, and appearance (which is never divorced from the ways in which their sexual identities are

understood by others). These therapies fail in these texts because they fail to use therapeutic tools in which all of their identities, and what they carry, are engaged. Their therapists fail because they do not recognize the markers of traumatic matters manifest in everyday moments, nor do they understand the possible far-reaches of their inherited and self-experienced traumas. And, in many instances, despite continuous identification through the text, or television series, their Jewish matters are ignored--highly visible and invisible simultaneously.

On a recent episode of *Two Broke Girls*, Max and Caroline are hired to make cupcakes for an Orthodox Bar Mitzvah. Caroline, the socialite daughter of a fallen financial advisor modeled after Bernie Madoff (stripped of his Jewishness), believes she 'knows' Jews because in her former rich life she lived next to a Jewish family, the Klein's--Dr. Klein who would take care of her when she was sick and his wife who would make her chicken soup. When she and Max enter a pharmacy run by an Orthodox doctor and his wife (populated with religious Jews--rarely seen on network television shows, though often referenced in jokes), Caroline begins to throw out random Yiddish words while everyone in the pharmacy rolls their eyes. Meanwhile, Max is embraced by the doctor's wife who claims Max looks exactly as she did when she was young (noting particularly the similarities between their breasts, implicitly joking about zaftig Jewish women). During the episode, while Caroline continues to conjure stereotypes about Orthodox Jews and pepper her sentences with misused Yiddish phrases, Max is embraced, and absorbed, by the family, culminating in the grandmother cooking and feeding her chicken soup when she gets sick during the Bar Mitzvah. Max, during the show, is posited as a character who doesn't know her

lineage or her father, so throughout the episode we are supposed to laugh because we know she is 'pretending' she might be Jewish to get their attention and (overabundant and effusive) love. However, the informed viewer knows that the actress playing Max, Kat Dennings is Jewish, and watches Max, in this episode, *strangely* pass into an ethnic/cultural identity Dennings body already inhabit as quickly as she is thrust out of this identity when she feeds Grandma a non-kosher cupcake and then later confesses her 'sin' when she is pampered by the family.

Throughout the series Max is portrayed as a feisty, loud, crass, curvy, hyper-sexual but lovable working-class character. Max's performance of herself, full of behaviors that are *strange* to Caroline, the hyper-white fallen socialite, is explained as only attached to her class status, but in moments such as her Orthodox Jewish encounter in this episode, her own Jewish ghosts emerge--both Max's and Kat Dennings, simultaneously. In this way the character of Max is reminiscent of the character of Roseanne from the show of the same title, played by Roseanne Barr, though Kat Dennings body is noted as sexy curvy, and Barr's body was noted as fat and undesirable, belying the limits of Jewish American women's zaftig appeal²⁸, both characters attending to their Jewish matters and evoking Jewish humor while posing (and passing?) as working class white non-practicing Christians.

Roseanne Barr's stand-up has always included jokes about her Jewish identity, and her current writings, bid for President, and recent reality television show continue

²⁸ Popular culture and media portrayal of Monica Lewinsky debate either designated Lewinsky sexy or unappealing, belying the ways in which the Jewish women's body can easily shift in meaning in U.S. popular culture. Dennings is small enough to be Jewish sexy, Lewinsky's body is changeable in its reading, and Barr is imagined to be too big to be sexy.

this inclusion²⁹. Yet, her show *Roseanne*, a sitcom based on her life and writing (her control over the script grew as the show continued its run), is based on a working-class white, vaguely Christian family. Barr's character, Roseanne, resembles many of the figures populating Sonia Michel, Charlotte Baum, and Paula Hyman's *Jewish Woman in America*, and also Yidl in the play Schulman writes about, Yidl Midl Fidl. Though Jewish characters, figures, and ghosts move through the nine year run of *Roseanne*, including Roseanne Barr (Roseanne), Sara Gilbert (Darlene), and Michael Fishman's (D.J.) own Jewish identities. *Roseanne* is based on a working-class (and sometimes poor), white, mid-western family, similar to Roseanne Barr's own family, but the Connor's are not Jewish. Perhaps this is because Barr couldn't get a show based on a working-class Jewish mid-western family picked up by a network because working-class (and sometimes poor) Jewish American families do not exist in the schema of the ever-present Jewish American assimilation narrative.

In *Blonde and Bitchin'*, aired in November of 2006, Roseanne Barr addressed the ways in which her own identity as a working-class Jewish American woman has been perceived as *strange* and *unimaginable*. In order to evidence the ways in which her identity is imagined to be unreal as well as *strange*, Barr jokes:

I grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah (pause) and I'm a Jew, so I think that kind of explains my outsider, alienated, not fitting in (feeling/identity)...I don't know, I was weird, I never fit in and I never

²⁹ *Roseanne's Nuts*, Barr's recently aired reality television filmed at her Hawaii Macadamia Nut farm included an episode devoted to the celebration of Passover. The celebration goes terribly awry and is really based on no religious aspects, correlating it in some ways to the Passover scene in *Empathy* as a ritual for secular Jews related to religion, but also something cultural/ethnic.

dated, I didn't have time, I was too busy masturbating.

(Laughter). What, I was my own best friend, I had to be. My family was very poor, yeah, but we didn't know we were poor because we were stupid, too (laughter). But it was hard for my dad being a Jewish guy in Salt Lake City, trying to fit in. I remember my dad having a great big turquoise Star of David in a silver belt buckle, trying to fit in. I'd make fun of him--Where are you going dad? I reckon you're going out to the ole Bar Mitzvah corral to rustle up some corned beef, yippee
I oh Chai aye! (*Blonde and Bitchin'*)

The first part of Barr's joke illuminates the ways in which her audience may be unable to imagine a poor, Jewish girl growing up in Salt Lake City, Utah. It also further illuminates the reasons why *Roseanne* was based on Roseanne's life while masking over the Jewish aspects of her story. The beginning of her joke is understood as funny precisely because of the perceived implausability of her life narrative. If Barr's Jewishness was included in the writing based on her life in *Roseanne*, then the working-class elements of her story would be rendered unbelievable, so the family is necessarily named the Connor's and Barr's story is stripped of its Jewish elements, its ghosts still haunting the script and the show's actors. Though Barr, herself, speaks frequently of her Jewish identity, the character she created, and portrayed, Roseanne Connor couldn't because it is not believable in U.S. popular culture that she could even exist.

I end, then, with the work that needs to be done. Dismantling the completed Jewish American assimilation story as the only Jewish American assimilation

narrative is necessary to make Max from *Two Broke Girls* and Roseanne from *Roseanne* visible and believable³⁰. However, it may be necessary to find tools to make characters like Max, Roseanne, Anna O., Jenny Schecter and Elizabeth Wurtzel, as well as real *strange* Jewish women, visible in order show the ways the competed Jewish American assimilation narrative is in need of reconsideration and revision. Therein lies the conundrum--how to make visible the matters of those not imagined to be viable? How to disrupt a story with such relentless success in its dissemination? What possible narrative (whether in a novel or in a therapist's office) could illuminate the complicated matter carried by these characters rendered *strange* while also eliciting empathy and full humanity in the receipt of the narrative?

Ann Cvetkovich, in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, writes "I'm interested not just in trauma survivors but in those whose experiences circulate in the vicinity of trauma are marked by it. I want to place moments of extreme trauma alongside moments of everyday emotional distress that are often the only sign that trauma's effects are still being felt. Trauma discourse has allowed me to ask about the connection between girls like me feeling bad and world historical events" (3). Here, I have tried to show how trauma and its remnants trouble the waters of the completed Jewish American assimilation story in the texts I've examined. I have tried to look at the ways in which the "girls...feeling bad" in the Jewish women's writing examined here connects to Jewish histories of estrangements as well as current estrangements left out of the assimilation narrative. Through various examples, I have shown several different strategies Jewish American women

³⁰ And by extension Jewish women whose lives are also at odds with the narrative conveyed by the completed Jewish American assimilation narrative.

writers have utilized to attempt to become embodied in all their fullness.

Additionally, I have explored some *strangers* who attempt to rid themselves of their *strangeness* in order to escape the consequences of dehumanization. It is my hope that I have had some success making their matters apparent and, so, contributed to a growing conversation about Jewish *strangers* and what they have to tell us.

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