

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation / Thesis: **A STAGE FOR A BIMA: AMERICAN JEWISH THEATER AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION.**

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This dissertation examines how contemporary American Jewish playwrights and performers have presented Jewish identities in light of multiculturalism. Although American Jews have by large been supporters of the multicultural movement, in practice multiculturalism has been problematic for Jews because of its privileging of race and gender: are Jews different enough to be included in a multicultural portrait? Jews see themselves as outsiders to an American establishment, but are viewed as insiders. I investigate how contemporary Jewish voices in American theater have portrayed “Jewishness” as a permanent attribute of Jewish identity. In doing so, they articulate Jewish difference through the rhetoric of multiculturalism so that Jews are clearly positioned as distinct from an American mainstream. Contemporary Jewish playwrights have responded to popular culture’s schizophrenic representation of Jews, questioning its portrayal of Jews as everymen figures while revisiting its stereotypical representations of Jews that were intended to mark Jews as different from mainstream America. Though Jewish American culture has sought to escape stereotypes, Jewish playwrights continue to evoke them, even as they debate the value

of such tropes. If stereotypes disappear, does an articulated Jewish difference disappear with them? In chapter one, I discuss my theoretical approach and the difficulties in defining stereotypical “Jewishness.” In chapter two, I discuss how Jewish playwrights and performers have responded to the shifting definitions of race in their presentations of Jewish identity by portraying contemporary Jewish identity through the model of the African-American experience. In chapter three, I look at how Wendy Wasserstein has presented complicated female Jewish characters by rooting them, ironically enough, in the gender-based stereotypes that have surrounded Jewish women, stereotypes initially designed to differentiate Jewish women from idealized genteel American women. In chapter four, I discuss how playwrights Larry Kramer and Tony Kushner have linked Jewish and gay stereotypes and experiences in order to complicate contemporary political paradigms that tend to lump all traditionally disenfranchised groups under the same umbrella. Finally, in chapter five, I discuss how stage portrayals of Judaism have been associated with the body, a connection that denotes the problematic nature of defining Jews solely as a religious group.

A STAGE FOR A BIMA:  
AMERICAN JEWISH THEATER AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

By

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## Introduction: Performing Too Jewish

In his hilarious and insightful comic routine, Lenny Bruce splits the world into two categories: Jewish and *goyish*. Cuisine is easily categorized: “Kool-aid is *goyish*. All Drake’s Cakes are *goyish*. Pumpnickel is Jewish, and, as you know, white bread is very *goyish*. Instant potatoes—*goyish*. Black cherry soda’s very Jewish. Macaroons are *very* Jewish—very Jewish cake. Fruit salad is Jewish. Lime jello is *goyish*. Lime soda is *very goyish*.”<sup>1</sup> Locale defines one as Jewish or *goyish*: “To me, if you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn’t matter even if you’re Catholic, if you live in New York, you’re Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you’re going to be *goyish* even if you’re Jewish.” Likewise, non-Jews can be Jewish as well: “Negroes are all Jews. Italians are all Jews. Irishmen who have rejected their religion are Jews.”<sup>2</sup> Though tongue-in-cheek to be sure, Lenny Bruce has astutely defined Jewishness as a quality independent of birth. Although a strict interpretation of Jewish law defines a Jew as a child born to a Jewish mother (or a Jewish father, for Reform Jews), to possess Jewishness is something quite different and certainly much more difficult to articulate. Jewishness says more about how Jews are perceived than it does about law, ritual or religion. I hesitate to say that

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *The Essential Lenny Bruce* 41-42.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* 5.

Jewishness says very little about Jewish history, as well, for in fact many aspects of Jewishness are created out of a history of interaction with non-Jewish cultures.

(Would “Jewishness” exist if it weren’t always considered in its relation to a dominant culture? Would Israeli Jews, who are the dominant culture in Israel, agree with Bruce’s monologue? Would a Rumanian Jew?)

That macaroons and pumpernickel and black cherry soda, but not Drake’s cakes nor instant potatoes nor Kool-aid, can be Jewish is indicative of how Jews are perceived amongst themselves and by others in American culture. Quite obviously, no Jewish law classifies such foods as Jewish. The laws of kosher cuisine do not prescribe brand name groceries. Yet Lenny Bruce notes that some foods are “read” as Jewish by Jews and non-Jews alike. Partly from a sense “Otherness,” partly out of pride in Jewish difference, Jewishness – at least as conceived in American popular culture – is the cultural ambience, not the laws, surrounding what makes Jews different from a gentile norm. Lenny Bruce’s comedy revolves around the language of perception rather than reality: obviously, pumpernickel and black cherry soda are not Jewish, but a sense of Jewishness encircles them. Even though pumpernickel rye and black cherry soda can be found in most run-of-the-mill grocery stores, because these are commonplace products at kosher delis (and traditional store bought white bread is not), they are associated with Jewishness. Would non-Jews “read” black cherry soda as Jewish if they had never entered a kosher deli? Only so much as anyone would “read” a bagel as Jewish bread; one recognizes its Jewishness, but it is a Jewishness that has been become a staple of American culture. (Even some bagels are more Jewish than others. A blueberry bagel?)

The term “Jewishness” has entered American vocabulary, but its definition is nebulous. In their introduction to *Jewish Identity*, David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz attempt to define what Jewishness is: “To *be Jewish* simply by way of descent will differ from assuming a Jewish identity, from *affirming one’s Jewishness* as a matter of choice.”<sup>3</sup> Though Goldberg and Krausz imply that Jewishness is a conscious choice (too much so for my tastes), they articulate an essential distinction between being Jewish and seeming Jewish. A Jew must *seem* Jewish to *be* Jewish because they must satisfy a “consensual identification with the collectivity.”<sup>4</sup> Because one’s Jewishness is the product of how one is *perceived*; one must *perform* Jewishness, not necessarily by religious ritual, but by following a series of anticipated behaviors that signify Jewishness. In effect, Jewishness is less based in being Jewish, and more so in seeming Jewish.

Essentially, Jewishness is located in the cross-section where performance and audience reaction meet. Whether or not an individual is Jewish does not always factor into the equation. Instead, someone seems “Jewish” depending upon how certain performative behaviors are read, explaining why Nathan Lane, Valerie Harper, Jason Biggs, Alan Alda, and Robin Williams, all of whom have played Jewish roles, but none of whom are Jewish, are often read as Jewish, while Wynona Rider, Calvin Klein model Simon Rex, *Cosby Show* daughter Lisa Bonet, former San Francisco 49’ers lineman Harris Barton, and pop star Paula Abdul, all of whom are

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<sup>3</sup> Goldberg and Krawsz 6.

<sup>4</sup> Goldberg and Krawsz 6.

Jewish, do not fit categorical Jewishness.<sup>5</sup> But precisely what is it that designates Jewishness? Is Jewishness like pornography – you know it when you see it? And, most importantly, who defines what Jewishness is, particularly in America, where one’s Jewishness is very much mediated by how an American-Jew negotiates both sides of the hyphen?

Since my discussion focuses upon how Jewishness is perceived, I find it too easy, though sometimes necessary, to delve into anecdote to explain how one seems Jewish. However, by doing so, I fall into the damning error of using stereotype as evidence. As much as I want to relay sketches of Jewish life – when Jews serve food there are always leftovers, Jews don’t drink, Jews don’t watch or play football, Jews are usually loud and boisterous, all Jews love Chinese food – these silly generalizations are *bubbe meises*.<sup>6</sup> How do I know that I am not simply remembering incidents that fit perceived stereotypes about Jews? At the same time, I am less interested in answering whether these stereotypes are true or not (I know many Jews who watch football, some of whom do not like Chinese food), than in whether these stereotypes exist at all. As I discuss Jewishness, I am discussing a perception that

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<sup>5</sup> The most well-researched, comprehensive and up-to-date listing of famous Jews in popular culture is Nate Bloom’s Jewhoo.com. Perusing through the well-documented list of hundreds of famous Jewish (or part-Jewish) celebrities brings up some surprising results. How observant these celebrities actually are is inconsequential to the site’s editors. Instead, as the site suggests, it is “a site that celebrates the Jewish contribution to civilization.”

<sup>6</sup> I will be using the popular anglicized transliterations of Yiddish words rather than the correct transliterations. For example, the actual spelling would be *bubbe maynses*. As Yiddish words have become popular in the English language, the true spellings of the words has been overlooked; seeming Jewish has become more important than phonetic accuracy.

may or may not be found in reality. In fact, it is prudent to ask if there is a “real” sense of what a Jew “is” – can that question be answered without offering what is essentially another perception?

Anti-Semitism aside, there are many stereotypes about Jews that are not hateful. What Joyce Antler says about Fran Drescher’s *The Nanny* applies to Jewishness in American popular culture as well, “Jewishness is, then, an attitude, a phrase, even a set of clothes . . . . It is a shtick, a framing device that sets [the Jewish character] apart from the others in the cast. But it is an artificial, exaggerated Jewishness, drawn from anomalous images and negative stereotypes. . . [which are] mainly fictional in origin.”<sup>7</sup> Jews don’t always answer a question with a question, nor do they have more opinion on a given topic than the number of Jews in a room, but we are told that they do. We are left with the perception that Jewishness is derived from physical and behavioral characteristics, traits that seem more innate than religious practices. That such nonsensical, but defining, stereotypes exist is indicative of a group of people that is generally difficult to classify within existing terminology: Jews are no longer thought of as a racial group, nor does the U. S. Census classify Jews as an ethnic group. With a largely secular Jewish population that still identifies themselves as Jewish, “religious group” seems a problematic categorization as well. Is the best way to define who is Jewish by how well they perform such artificial traits that are pegged as “Jewish”?

In a phenomenological discussion of the way audiences watch Shakespearean actors, but one that could easily apply to how Jews (or any group of people) are

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<sup>7</sup> Antler, “Jewish Women on Television: Too Jewish or Not Enough?” 246.

“read”, Kent Cartwright writes that “We watch acting with a double intention: first to ‘get’ the character, that is to construe the signals of histrionic technique into a portrait, and second, to test the ‘fit’ of the acting itself to what it impersonates.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, as we watch a performance, we judge the character and also the actor’s portrayal of the character, two unique circumstances. The first deals with our reading of the character’s function within the social sphere of the play, but the second has to do with whether or not the actor can perform the character at a satisfactory level, a judgment which is determined by ascertaining if the actor is able to make the character seem plausible within the social sphere of the play. Consequently, the character’s plausibility is entirely dependent upon our first judgment: can the actor make the character fit the audience’s reading(s) of how the character should work?

As many performance theorists have argued, the boundaries between performance and real life are quite often blurred. Simply put: we are always performing. High school life teaches this well: the lovesick teenage boy behaves differently in front of the school cheerleader compared to his behavior in front of his pals or his own mother. Consciously or subconsciously, we continue this trend throughout our lives as we alter our behavior and presentation of ourselves as a response to our auditors and watchers. More importantly, we are not always conscious of our agency as performers because we are always being judged *as a performance* whether we are on stage or not. Taken to an extreme, performance exists when one is watched, regardless of one’s awareness of being watched or not. As Peter Brook argues in *The Empty Space*, “I can take an empty space and call it a

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<sup>8</sup> Cartwright 6.

bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and that is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.”<sup>9</sup> Within this model, actors are not necessary, but the audience is; theater exists because the audience is judging, interpreting, and fitting who they are watching into a narrative *as if the subject were a character*. “[A]ll we need is the audience,” writes Herbert Blau, “*projecting* there upon the empty space, where there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. After all, what is happening there—haven’t we been told?—is nothing but appearance.”<sup>10</sup>

When we look for “Jewishness” within a given performance or work, such a query has very little to do with whether the artist or character actually is Jewish by matrilineal descent, remains observantly Jewish, or is even Jewish at all. Instead, if their work conveys a sense of Jewishness, it is because their work fits an impression of Jewishness as it is imagined in American society. Jewishness, as it is performed within American popular culture, is not an attribute of an individual; it is projected *onto* that individual by auditors and watchers, an audience who comes with predetermined ideas of what Jewishness ought to be. This should come as no surprise, since audiences are always arbiters, judging how performance meets expectations. Susan Bennett has argued that since performance (broadly defined) is semiotic in nature, the audience (also broadly defined) reads bodies as signs. For this reason, she argues, a character can never escape the sign that he or she stands for. As an illustrative example, she writes, “The act of placing the drunkard on the stage

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<sup>9</sup> Brook 9.

<sup>10</sup> Blau 218.

incurs a shift from man to sign. By ostentation, he now represents the class to which he belongs. What we see are some of the essential characteristics of drunkards (red nose, frayed clothes, etc.) which have been established by social codes making what [Umberto] Eco calls an ‘iconographic convention.’”<sup>11</sup> What Bennett argues is that on some level characters are read not as individuals but by how well they fit societal expectations for how that type of character should act. Eco, in turn, writes that a character is first “. . . recognized as a real object, [and] is then assumed as a sign in order to refer back to another object (or to a class of objects) whose constitutive stuff is the same as that of the representing object.”<sup>12</sup>

Eco’s argument, that characters represent not only their immediate presence but also they are perceived as members of groups, is particularly appropriate in light of Lenny Bruce’s monologue. But what are Bruce’s cultural assumptions that he (and many others) projects upon his these categorically Jewish lists? “Jewishness” writes Maria Damon of Lenny Bruce’s monologue, “. . . stands as the reference point for all that is spontaneously creative, earthy, and Other.”<sup>13</sup> As absurd as it may seem, black cherry soda (which is not a “mainstream” soda like Coke or Pepsi), like pumpernickel bread (which is not white bread), stands for Otherness. For Bruce, Otherness is located at the core of Jewishness, so much so that Italians and African-Americans can be Jewish through their Otherness as well. At the same time, Bruce’s “Jewishness” is rooted in its uniqueness in comparison to “goyish” culture. “[B]ruce reduces

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Bennett 65.

<sup>12</sup> Eco 111.

<sup>13</sup> Damon 167.

‘difference’ to a matter of supermarket preference,” writes Sanford Pinsker, “and makes it clear that the Jews were hipper, smarter, superior, *chosen*—because they saw their corned beef through a rye, darkly.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, in Bruce’s world, when *goyish* culture tries to be unique, the result is hardly impressive. (Lime jello? Instant potatoes?)

In Bruce’s monologue, I see a rebellious response to an American trend that has cast Jewishness as something less-than-American, or to phrase it differently, something not-quite normal. For Bruce, Otherness is more remarkable than the normalcy (a credo the hipster Bruce lived up to) with Jews as the quintessential Others. Here, “Jewish” becomes superior to “*goyish*” so much so that other Others – Italians, African-Americans, secular Irishmen – can feed off the pre-eminence of Jewishness because they are different from a *goyishe*, WASP-y norm. Never mind that there are Italians, Irish and African-Americans who practice Judaism; for Bruce, their Jewishness is not based in observance: Jews in Butte, Montana are too *goyish* to be Jewish. Bruce, as the audience reading Jewish and American culture, conceives of Jewishness as conveying a “different” ambience than what surrounds white, rural, Protestant culture. Consequently, anything different from the American norm has a Yiddish flair to it. Otherness is cast as a Jewish value. Still, it is odd that, for Bruce, Jewishness sets the standard for Otherness. I say “odd” because in post-Civil Rights times Jews have not been constructed as the epitome of cultural difference in multicultural America. Indeed, the position of Jews as an “Other” is often unclear today. When conservative politicians offer their unmitigated support for Israel, when

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<sup>14</sup> Pinsker 92.

there appears to be a rift between Jewish-American and African-American communities and when there are more Jewish senators (eleven) than there are other traditionally underrepresented ethnic and racial groups how “othered” are Jews in comparison to other American minorities?

The history of Jews as “Others” is and has always been a perplexing one. In Europe, Jews were clearly outsiders in a Christian land. When Jews came to America, they were unsure if their reputation as the paradigmatic Other would continue. While anti-Semitism, particularly before World War Two, was widely practiced, the status of Jews as full-fledged American citizens was often debated more liberally than that of non-White minorities. In many respects, Jews were a metaphorical figure for illustrating dialogues surrounding assimilation because they were a “white” minority, easily assimilated into a predominantly white society. In essence, Jews have come to symbolize not Otherness but “Americanness” because America is a nation of others, or so it likes to assert.

In this respect, it is fitting that much debate over Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, often held as America’s prototypical play, has revolved around Willy Loman’s presumed Jewish background. The play, a borderline allegory, goes to great lengths with its suggestive realism so that Willy Loman’s individuality is broadened to become a thematic representation of the dismal failure of the American dream. Why, then, have critics insisted on stripping Willy Loman of his universality in order to peg him a Jewish character? In 1949, the year that *Death of a Salesman* was first staged, Diana Trilling noted that the character’s Jewishness is at once overt and muted. “Under our very eyes,” she writes, “we see the Wandering Jew become the

wandering man, the alien Jew generalizing in to the alienated human being.”<sup>15</sup> Mary McCarthy wrote that Willy Loman “seemed to be Jewish, to judge by his speech-cadences, but there was no mention of this on the stage. He could not be Jewish because he had to be ‘America, which is not so much a setting as a big, amorphous idea.’”<sup>16</sup> Jewish American playwright Donald Margulies has emphasized the Jewishness of *Death of a Salesman* in his wonderful transformation of the play, *The Loman Family Picnic*. In his introduction to Margulies’s collected works, Michael Feingold discusses *Death of a Salesman*’s Jewishness in light of Margulies’s Loman family, who are unabashedly Jewish. “Pretending that you have no ethnic identity is no use for purposes of transcendence. *Death of a Salesman* is a Jewish play too, for all of the little impulses on Arthur Miller’s part to make it more universal by making it abstract.” He continues, “What Miller wrote, in effect was the story of the Jewish spirit’s failure to find a home in the American system[.]”<sup>17</sup> The debate seems odd in light of the fact that the lead actors in the three major performances of Willy Loman – Lee J. Cobb, Paul Muni and Dustin Hoffman – were all Jewish.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Trilling 216.

<sup>16</sup> McCarthy xvi. Ruby Cohn has also argued for a Jewish Willy Loman in “The Articulate Victims of Arthur Miller.” Miller, himself, has commented on the unarticulated Jewishness that characterizes many of his plays, “Jews can’t afford to revel too much in the tragic because it might overwhelm them. Consequently, in most Jewish writing there’s always the caution, ‘Don’t push it too far toward the abyss, because you’re liable to fall in.’ I think it’s part of that psychology and it’s part of me, too.” Arthur Miller, “Arthur Miller: An Interview,” *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* 292.

<sup>17</sup> Feingold xi-xii.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield (rightly) notes that “a truly Jewish tang did not bubble to the surface of anglophone versions” until Dustin Hoffman’s 1984 revival, in which his

Ellen Schiff has found the pervasive critical attention to the “punitively latent Jewish elements” in *Salesman* to be “an unrewarding way to approach” the play.<sup>19</sup> Enoch Brater, too, has weighed in on the controversy before dismissing it: Miller’s work “offers us a prime example of a playwright subsuming the particular flavor of his own ethnic background within the broader context of a pluralistic American culture.” Brater, however, finds little reason to consider the range of Willy Loman’s crypto-Jewishness because “it demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the theatrical style of the work. *Death of a Salesman* is designed to show us life, not a slice-of-life.” Since no Jewish family (or any family) has “lived in multilevel, partially transparent sets with imaginary walls where flutes play at strategic moments,” there is little just cause to tie down Willy Loman to the particulars of a Jewish identity.<sup>20</sup>

Where it may be true that finding Jewishness in *Death of a Salesman* bears little effect on the analysis of the play and is, as Schiff and Brater suggest, misguided in respect to the play’s intentions, the debate over the Jewishness of the American stage’s quintessential drama does reveal how Jewishness has become a metaphor for

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vocal inflections and gestures suggested Willy Loman’s ethnicity. While Cobb’s performance on the American Stage, and Muni’s in London, were less deliberate in portraying Loman as an ethnic figure, Cobb was associated with the Group Theater, Christopher Odet’s theater group, and Paul Muni was even more closely connected with the Yiddish Theater. If the character was ambiguously Jewish, the actors were not, which as I will suggest later typically reflects upon the character. See Stephen J. Whitfield’s discussion of *Death of a Salesman* in his book, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* 118-120.

<sup>19</sup> Schiff, “The Greening of American-Jewish Drama,” *Handbook of American-Jewish Literature: An Analytical Guide to Topics, Themes, and Sources* 97.

<sup>20</sup> Brater, “Ethics and Ethnicity in the Plays of Arthur Miller,” *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen* 123,127.

American culture. Echoing Horace Kallen in 1924, who argued against the idea that Jews could escape their Jewish ethnicity, America “has a peculiar anonymity.”<sup>21</sup> Especially in the post-war years when Jews were able to integrate more fluidly into American society, there was an unending negotiation between two identities, both difficult to define. The struggle between an individual Jewish identity and a more anonymous American identity mirrors an individual versus society motif, the very trope that the everyman figure is founded upon. The everyman is at once an individual with no individuality. Along these lines, Joel Shatzky has responded to this everyman status that Willy Loman has endured. Shatzky argues that although Loman has acquired the cult of an everyman figure in American drama, his Yiddish-like syntax also pinpoints him as a “*pintele yid* behind the middle American.” In short, *Death of a Salesman* “would not have occurred in the work of a man who did not have a Jewish linguistic background.” Consequentially, Jewish heritage is “a factor that is central to the theme of the drama even though the playwright did not consciously exploit it.”<sup>22</sup> Shatzky does not deny Willy Loman’s universality, but he argues that it took a Jewish author to unintentionally portray such ambiguities. Jews, no longer able to articulate the difference between a Jewish and an American identity, become perfect candidates for portraying the misplaced everyman figure. In considering the Jew-as-metaphor phenomenon, Ellen Schiff argues that as “represent humanity in one way or another, they also demonstrate that the question ‘What is a

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<sup>21</sup> Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States* 51.

<sup>22</sup> Shatzky, “Arthur Miller’s ‘Jewish’ Salesman” 6-7.

Jew?” invites as diverse a range of legitimate answers as ‘What is a human being?’”<sup>23</sup> Jewish playwrights, consciously or unconsciously, conflate the search for an American identity with Jewishness. In the process, Jewishness becomes universalized, so much so that non-Jews, as they attempt to find their place in a larger, indistinct society, can become Jews. Schiff writes that this is “forceful evidence that Jewishness can be separated from the Jew.”<sup>24</sup> True enough: Jewishness is the product of seeming Jewish, not necessarily of being Jewish. Jewishness is the perception that American culture has constructed regarding what being Jewish seems to be like. Consequentially, Jews may not be mainstream, but Jewishness – since it is an American creation – has become so, even if (and perhaps because) it is as unarticulated, ambiguous and difficult-to-define as an American identity should be.

This begs the question: If Jewishness is quintessentially American, because of its association with Otherness, how “Othered” are Jews to begin with? To answer the question, we must take a step backwards and examine the history behind Jews being envisioned as symbols of American assimilation ideals. In 1908, Israel Zangwill, a British Jew who possessed a great fondness for American culture, wrote the four act drama, *The Melting Pot*, which was subsequently produced in the United States. Significantly, the play was first performed in the nation’s capital before moving to New York. While Zangwill did not coin the term “melting pot,” he popularized it, so much so that then-President Teddy Roosevelt asked Zangwill to dedicate the play to him. Zangwill’s play is the story of a Jewish-American, David Quixano, who

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<sup>23</sup> Schiff, *From Stereotype to Metaphor: The Jew in Contemporary Drama* 242.

<sup>24</sup> Schiff, *From Stereotype to Metaphor* 213.

discovers that the father of his beloved Vera Revendal took part in Cossack rampages against his family's village in Europe. Though initially David cannot rectify his love for Vera with his anger at her family, at the end of the play he comes to celebrate the similitude of American culture. In the famously preachy, final moments of the play, David and Vera stand before a burning sunset and envision an equally magnificent vision of America:

DAVID: There she lies, the great Melting Pot—listen! Can't you hear the roaring and the bubbling? There gapes her mouth

[*He points east*]

—the harbour where a thousand mammoth feeders come from the ends of the world to pour in their human freight. Ah, what a stirring and seething! Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian—black and yellow—

VERA: [*Softly, nesting to him*] Jew and Gentile—

...

DAVID: Ah, Vera, what is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared with the glory of America, where all races and nations come to labour and look forward!"<sup>25</sup>

The message of *The Melting Pot* is hardly a subtle one. However, for Zangwill – and for Teddy Roosevelt's America – the Jew becomes the perfect figure for emblemizing the idea because a Jew's non-mainstream identity epitomizes the idea that American nationality is rooted in its incorporation of outsiders as insiders. Paradoxically, because they are outsiders, Jews are the perfect examples of Americans as well; America is a nation of outsiders. However, a nation of outsiders only goes so far: Zangwill disturbingly argues in the afterword to the 1914 published version of his play that blacks will fail to assimilate because they show little resemblance to an American (white) amalgam. Though David mixes both "black and

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<sup>25</sup> Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot: Drama in Four Acts* 184-85.

yellow” into the melting pot, Zangwill has revisited this idea and rejected it. Though neither whites nor blacks have “succeeded in monopolizing all the virtues and graces in its specific evolution from the common ancestral ape,” Zangwill argues that intermarriage between blacks and whites is best avoided because “black traits are not easy to eliminate from the hybrid posterity.” Instead, the Jew is a better candidate. “The Jew may be Americanised and the American Judaised without any gametic interaction.”<sup>26</sup>

Zangwill exposes the limitations of assimilation; the boundaries of assimilation are culturally defined. Jews can assimilate because their European roots make them malleable enough. What Zangwill delineates is that only groups that are not too far removed from an idealized norm will be able to merge. Regarding blacks, however, only the offspring of an inter-racial marriage will be able to fuse but even then, as Zangwill suggests, cultural traits (not just racial) are dominant and “only heroic souls on either side should dare the adventure of intermarriage.”<sup>27</sup> Zangwill insists, however, that it is black culture more so than racial features which will be difficult to integrate. As an example of how black culture will dominate white culture, Zangwill draws upon the ragtime craze “and the sex-dances that go to it”, which were first introduced “to white America and thence to the whole white world.”<sup>28</sup> Where Jewish culture may influence American culture, black culture swallows it. Zangwell defines Jews not only in relation to white American insiders,

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<sup>26</sup> Zangwill 206-207.

<sup>27</sup> Zangwill 207.

<sup>28</sup> Zangwill 207

but through their difference from blacks as well. Jews are the perfect candidates for becoming full-fledged Americans because they are unlike blacks in that Jews can serve the dual function of outsiders and insiders, a characteristic that early melting pot theorists and later day cultural pluralists such as Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne have stressed as routinely American. As David Biale has noted of Zangwill's vision, Jews "will not so much vanish as a separate ethnic group as insinuate much of their own culture into the new America." There will always be something Jewish about Jews who assimilate, but unlike what would be the case with blacks, there will always be something non-Jewish about Jews as well. What are these Jewish and non-Jewish traits? Today we are still influenced by melting pot ideologies as we, like Lenny Bruce, delineate a difference between Jewish and *goyish* in our popular culture or when we ask the question, "Too Jewish?" The question implies that Jewishness is acceptable within the bounds of mainstream American culture (whatever that may be), but only up to a point.

Zangwill's *The Melting Pot* is an early answer to the question "Too Jewish?" David can assimilate easily because, bluntly, he is not too Jewish at all. David Biale notes that, "Zangwill's text became part of the process: a Jewish play as the vehicle for an ideology of Americanization."<sup>29</sup> True enough, but Biale's claim denotes a preference for the text over the performance, as if the writer shapes the "Jewishness" of the play more than the actor's embodiment of the text. The original production of *The Melting Pot* did not cast the lead role of David with a Jewish actor. Instead, the

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<sup>29</sup> Biale, "The Melting Pot and Beyond: Jews and the Politics of American Identity," *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* 23-24. See also Neil Larry Shumsky's "Zangwill's *The Melting Pot*: Ethnic Tensions on the Stage."

role was played by Walker Whiteside who starred in both the 1908 Washington, DC, premiere at the Columbia Theatre and also in the New York premiere at the Comedy Theatre. Though Whiteside would later star in several silent films (including *The Melting Pot* 1915), at this time, early in his career, he was most famously known as a Shakespearean, best remembered as “The Boy Hamlet,” tackling the role of the Great Dane at age twenty-one. While I do not wish to imply that only Jewish actors can play Jewish characters, I do suggest that actors themselves are a text, bringing a set of expectations with them as they take on a role. Their body is, in effect, the eventual venue that encompasses the words of the playwright, along with the vision of the play’s director. If it takes a Jewish Brit to author the idea, it is only popularized when embodied by a Protestant American actor from the Hoosier state, one whose career at this time was associated with the seminal role of the Shakespearean stage. Whiteside’s theatrical career, which he carries with him on the stage, helps to construct how the audience would receive David.

An audience’s perception of David is shaped by the actor who embodies him. The actor’s body is significant in the perception of Zangwell’s ideology as well for as the production is staged, abstract melting pot ideology becomes tangible in the form of the actors body. To overlook the power of the melting pot’s face is to fall into an error that David makes himself: David has written a symphony which he wants performed for a mass of immigrants on July 4<sup>th</sup>, a symbolic act for sure, one that will show “the real American has not yet arrived. He is only in the Crucible . . . he will be the fusion of all races, perhaps the coming superman.” This idea will serve as the

“glorious Finale” for his magnum opus.<sup>30</sup> However, David overlooks the effects of performance. He shows no concern over how his symphony will be shaped by who conducts it and assumes that the audience will perceive the emotions of the conductor with no regard for how a conductor might mediate such passions. While he does reject Quincy Davenport’s financial backing because Davenport proves to be an anti-Semite, he immediately accepts Pappelmeister as the conductor in good faith, though Pappelmeister never articulates his vision of the symphony. For example, when Vera asks the conductor to describe the symphony to her father he shrugs off her request because “Music cannot be talked about.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, though Pappelmeister eventually finds genius in the work, he admits at first glance, “I do not comprehend it.”<sup>32</sup> This is not to suggest that Pappelmeister has no business conducting David’s symphony – David selects Pappelmeister for his progressive ideals – but the famous maestro is known for his comic operas and his performances at Carnegie Hall. He is so well known that he is even able to attract top critics to attend the performance, even though it eventually is performed not in Carnegie Hall, but on Vera Revendal’s rooftop. David seems to feel that there will be no gap between his for-the-masses vision and Pappelmeister’s culturally elitist reputation, but will Pappelmeister’s prominence overshadow the symphony? Could the symphony be a popular success without Pappelmeister at its helm?

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<sup>30</sup> Zangwill 34.

<sup>31</sup> Zangwill 133.

<sup>32</sup> Zangwill 76.

Similarly, how does Walker Whiteside's performance of David shape the play in ways that Zangwill never expected? If David were played by a Jewish actor, would the play be taken as seriously as it was with a gentile actor at the central character who preaches melting pot dogma? Walker Whiteside's stage career move from Hamlet to David Quixano is a narrative in and of itself. Casting a Shakespearean actor as David strips it of any connection with traditional stage Jew stereotypical roles that were popular at this time and were largely played by Jewish actors. In his book *Staging the Jew*, Haley Erdman traces the development of Jewish stereotypes on the American stage during the heydays of immigration. From an exotic, sinister Shylock figure, the Jewish male morphed into a comic clown who posed little threat to an American norm because of the laughter he evoked. Erdman describes Jewish comic figures as exhibiting a "standard Hebrew getup [which] included stringy beard, long nose, and black derby pulled down tightly over the ears. Frequently, too, these characters had terrible posture; they walked with limbs below oversized coats that hung to the ankles. Their physical appearance was matched by their pseudo-Yiddish dialect, with its attendant comic butchering of the English language."<sup>33</sup> In effect, Jewishness was ritualized through stereotype, so much so that the Jewish vaudevillian actor David Warwick wore a putty nose when he played Jewish roles. In fact, as Erdman notes, the stock Jewish *shtick* on the stage at this time was essentially embodied by Jewish actors disguising themselves to fit the stereotype of the time.

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<sup>33</sup> Erdman, *Staging the Jew: The Performance of an American Ethnicity, 1860-1920* 104.

David Quixano can assimilate easily because, funny, he didn't look Jewish, at least in accordance with the standards of the time period when stage Jews were putty-nosed and spoke in unintelligible accents. Even his surname seems odd for a Jew of Russian ancestry, more reminiscent of Cervantes's knight of La Mancha, a seminal figure in the Western canon, than of Yiddish *shtetl* life. (The play mentions that David's family was expelled from Spain in 1492 and settled in Poland: not necessarily a unique family history, although, certainly one that calls attention to David's difference from stereotypical immigrants.) In essence, David Quixano is far removed from the popularized, and often anti-Semitic, performances of stage Jews, so much so that I am forced to ask if he would seem recognizably Jewish to begin with. He *is* Jewish, no doubt, but would he *seem* Jewish? Moreover, is Jewish difference lost on the stage when socially imagined stereotypes are stripped away? The play makes the assimilation process easy; Jews become part of the American norm because the performance refuses to entertain common preconceived ideas surrounding its lead character's Jewishness. Could David melt into the cauldron if he were conceived within the same vein as David Warfield's putty-nosed Jew or any of the number of the Jewish comics whose humor was drawn from the happy-go-lucky loser immigrant Jew stereotype?<sup>34</sup>

One scene in particular toys with the issue of stage stereotype and, surprisingly, it has received little critical attention. In a wonderfully ironic moment, the Quixano's brassy Irish servant Kathleen (whose strong Irish brogue and jovial personality mark her as a cardboard stereotype) appears on stage wearing what is

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<sup>34</sup> For more on stage Jews, see Erdman.

described as a “grotesquely false nose.”<sup>35</sup> At the sight of her, David blinks, and she explains that she wore it to dance a Purim jig for David’s grandmother. David has forgotten that it was Purim and is only reminded of the Jewish calendar when he sees the Irish servant in the false nose. Later, when David’s home is inhabited by non-Jewish guests, Kathleen enters the room looking for her nose and when she finds it, she puts it on. When one of the guests asks her why she wears the false nose, she says in a proud Irish burr, “Bekaz we’re Hebrews!”<sup>36</sup> Kathleen means to say that she wears it to celebrate Purim, but for the gentile houseguests (and the play’s audience), the nose has other connotations, too. The situation is comic but the joke is a telling one. Kathleen’s adoption of the stage Jew tradition competes with David’s avoidance of them. If Jewishness is culturally defined, who is the more Jewish of the two? For Kathleen, the act of putting on the nose is a Jewish act. Perhaps it is a Jewish act for audience members, non-Jews as well some Jewish audience members who have been indoctrinated with the idea that a putty nose, an incomprehensible accent, a derby and a dark jacket signal Jewishness. The scene, then, forces the audience to laugh at the idea that a prop nose makes a Jew, for if that was the case, Kathleen – the ignorant Irish stereotype – could easily become an ignorant Jewish stereotype as well.

*The Melting Pot* demonstrates that socially constructed perceptions of Jewishness are to be challenged. Though Jewish actors performed the often anti-Semitic routines in the standard costume of the stage Jew, if Jews are to seep into an American amalgamation they cannot be marked as “too Jewish.” I look to *The*

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<sup>35</sup> Zangwill 56.

<sup>36</sup> Zangwill 72.

*Melting Pot* to discuss a representation of Jews from a time when to become American, one could not be marked as an Other. *The Melting Pot* is a rare early play, however, because it is explicit in its goals for the direction of an American community. However, a more accurate representation of the stage history of Jews as Others is to broaden our focus and look beyond plays with such blatant Jewish content. For, indeed, if there is a Jewish American theatrical tradition, it is not merely rooted in plays that deal with Jewish subject matter. More likely, it is the collection of plays and performances that have negotiated Jewish identity, even by attempting to remove it. In fact, the theme of stereotyping seems to be a thematic link that oddly enough allows us to define Jewish American Theater as a genre. It is because of the tradition of stereotyping that we can discuss the very idea of a Jewish American theater. Otherwise, the concept of a Jewish American Theater would be difficult to delineate; only recently have scholars discussed the American Jewish Theater as a corpus of works.<sup>37</sup> A major difficulty in discussing the Jewish American Theater is that “Jewish” theater is too often viewed as synonymous with Yiddish theater, capturing the true spirit of a Jewish community. The reason behind such logic, as Ellen Schiff has noted, is that “American Jewish theatre can be seen as a challenge to Jewish exclusiveness. From its inception, the American Jewish stage faced in exactly the opposite direction from the Yiddish—outward. Where the

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<sup>37</sup> As recently as 1995, Ellen Schiff edited the first major collection of American Jewish plays. Her first volume, *Awake and Singing: 7 Plays from the American Jewish Repertoire* covers plays from 1920-1960. The second volume in the series, *Fruitful and Multiplying: 9 Contemporary Plays from the American Jewish Repertoire* presents plays from the last few decades.

Yiddish stage is particular, the American Jewish theatre is representative.”<sup>38</sup> I do not mean to imply that the Yiddish theater failed to challenge Jewish identity within a national context. In fact, the Yiddish theater and the American theater influenced each other greatly. Nevertheless, by its very nature, Jewish theater written outside the *mame loshen* (mother tongue) forced audiences to view Jewishness in relation to an American norm.

Jewish identity in early examples of American Jewish drama by Jewish playwrights was schizophrenic. Some plays featured Jewish characters whose names were obviously meant to imply a Jewish ancestry, but little else signaled Jewishness, such as in George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber’s 1924 play *Minick*. In *Minick*, the crop of characters may be Jewish, but the “Jewishness” quotient is non-existent. Conversely, Jewish playwrights also wrote plays in which characters seemed to be Jewish by situation, but little else designated them as Jewish. For example, George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart’s *You Can’t Take It With You* (1930) contained “pseudo-Jewish” characters: the Vanderhof family never identifies themselves as Jewish, but they are a *meshugena* family that seems to be pulled directly from the familial life depicted on the Yiddish stage. *You Can’t Take It With You*, and plays like it where Jewish characters are never identified, are not often discussed as Jewish plays, but their “Jewishness” is indisputable. Aside from the fact that the play’s authors were Jewish, *You Can’t Take It With You* presents a Jewishness that is based upon situational tropes. The Vanderhof family is undeniably “different,”—mother Penelope is a hack painter and playwright, father Paul spends much time in the cellar

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<sup>38</sup> Schiff, introduction, *Awake and Singing* xxiv.

setting off fireworks with an Italian immigrant who lives with them, daughter Essie is a klutz training with Boris Kolenkhov, a Russian ballet teacher, Essie's husband is a poor excuse for a musician, and Grandpa Vanderhof delights in watching his ineptly talented family live life to the fullest even though, as Kolenkhov says of Essie, the family "stinks" at what they do.<sup>39</sup> A New York family that takes in immigrants, enjoying their irregularity from genteel behavior, a grandfather's visions rooted in socialism—these are all traits that suggest, though vaguely, a Jewish background. Ellen Schiff sees this same ambiguity in other early American Jewish plays. She describes this practice "that continued well into the 1960s" (though it continues today – *Seinfeld's* George Costanza, for example) as perpetuating "transparent Jews," characters who seem Jewish, but are not identified as such.<sup>40</sup> Names like Grandpa Vanderhof and Penelope Sycamore are hardly typical Jewish names. However, a key characteristic of Jewish American plays is that unarticulated, but obvious, ethnicity is default Jewish. Just as melting pot ideologist and cultural pluralists saw Jewishness as metaphorically American, situational Jewishness allow these characters' abnormalities to be mainstream enough that they (and not the hoity-toity Kirbys) are the true Americans. The Kirbys are a stereotype of drawing room comedy snobs. John Stratton has pointed out that Protestant comedy seeks to teach behavior through example (think *Leave it to Beaver*) while Jewish comedy teaches behavior through

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<sup>39</sup> Kaufman and Hart, *You Can't Take It With You* (Staged 1930) in *Three Plays by Kaufman & Hart* 163.

<sup>40</sup> Schiff, introduction, *Awake and Singing* xvi-xvii.

irreverence (think *Seinfeld*).<sup>41</sup> Thus, what makes the Kirbys so not-Jewish is that they embody the idea that one must conform to a behavioral mainstream. What makes the Vanderhof family Jewish is that they show no interest in acting mainstream. At the end of the play, the Kirbys come to accept (and even adopt) the Vanderhofs *meshugine* ways and allow their daughter to marry the Vanderhof's son. The audience, too, for obvious reasons, relate more to the likeable Vanderhofs than the stuffy Kirbys. Thus, the Vanderhofs, through their zaniness, become everymen—or, perhaps, every-family—figures; the Vanderhofs, situationally Jewish, become the “American” figure. The underlying message of the play heightens this effect. Grandpa's philosophy, to “enjoy life,” is not necessarily Jewish, but certainly American enough, and thereby universal in nature.

Cultural assumptions may “trigger” an audience's recognition of these characters' Jewishness. These assumptions are based in stereotype, but not necessarily anti-Semitic ones. In fact, many Jewish stereotypes come from the Yiddish theater and were carried over into the American theater as many Jewish actors and producers brought with them their distinct styles as they took on roles and responsibilities within the American theater industry. Yiddish stereotypes, though extreme in their own right, often tempered the outrageousness of anti-Semitic entertainments. Jewish audiences in America theaters also came with certain expectancies regarding acting styles. This was reflected in a characteristic Yiddish acting style where, as Nahma Sandrow writes, “The actors move and gesture more broadly, the minor characters are close to caricatures and the roles are very often

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<sup>41</sup> See appropriate chapters in Stratton's *Coming Out Jewish*.

‘types’ of a specifically Yiddish sort.”<sup>42</sup> These Yiddish “types” fit quite well in light, showy comedies and two-dimensional, three-hanky tearjerkers; both types of plays were revered in the Yiddish theater. While Yiddish dramatists often debated the value of *shund* (trashy, fluffy theater) over more serious theater, theater that was too serious was unappealing, mostly because Jewish audiences “felt that the intellectually ambitious Yiddish theater was *goyish*,” too imitative of the modes and trends of what was found on the gentile stage, so much so that Jacob Gordin, the author of several sophisticated Yiddish dramas, was called an anti Semite.<sup>43</sup> In spite of this, Yiddish stereotype allowed Jews to laugh at themselves and were, in effect, commemorative rather than admonishing. Where imitating the traditions of non-Jewish Western drama was problematic on the Yiddish stage, comic Yiddish stereotypes were problematic on the American stage. As Yiddish stereotype moved into the American arena, Jewish audiences were nervous that their non-Jewish brethren would judge Jews by the foolishness such stereotypes often portrayed.

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<sup>42</sup> Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars* 406.

<sup>43</sup> Sandrow 408. The Yiddish theater community was very fearful that an outside American influence would change the Jewish flavor of not only the Jewish theater, but also the Jewish community in America as a whole. As Sandrow writes, “A scene in which a Jewish girl chooses a Jewish boy over the gentile whistling for her from his motorcycle in her parents’ driveway is a ritual affirmation of self, and it is none the less effective—perhaps it is *more* effective—when in reality the spectators live very differently from their own *mamale*, eat pork, and hear the motorcycle revving up outside the window for the neighbor’s daughter, or their own” (299). The fear that the Jewish community was becoming too Americanized is wonderfully expressed in the David Medoff’s 1923 comic musical response to Tin Pan Alley’s popularity. His song “*Gevalt! Di Bananas!*” (Help! The Bananas!) tells the story of a man trying to escape from hearing the silly ditty “Yes, We Have No Bananas” and seeks sanctuary in a synagogue, only to find the cantor singing it as well.

Consequentially, the purpose of such stereotypes changed as they were integrated into American performances. On the Yiddish stage, simplistic *shund* was ritualized in its “self-congratulatory reinforcement of values”<sup>44</sup> teaching a Jewish population threatened by Americanization to *keep* Jewish. However, stereotype on the American stage during the late immigration and war years served as a ritual that taught Jews how to assimilate, sometimes to the extent of buying into the stereotype. A case in point, Andrew Hoffman’s 1920 vaudeville comedy, *Welcome Stranger*, ends with Isidor Solomon, a Jewish character explaining to another character, perhaps with a wink to the Jewish members of the audience, “You can say all you want about prejudice. Yes—there is prejudice, but whether it’s going to against you or in your favor is entirely up to yourself.”<sup>45</sup> Here was the lesson that the earliest Jewish American playwrights taught: to show that Jewishness *is* performative implies that the Jewishness is protean in nature, offering an alternative to the race-based theories that ran rampant during the 1920s. Hoaky in its humor, and preachy in its message, Hoffman’s *Welcome Stranger* still holds as a complex representation of how the confused nature of performance will never permit stereotype to be completely erased. Even the play’s title suggests this: it is not *Welcome, Stranger* but *Welcome Stranger*. The play’s title, missing the appropriate punctuation, suggests that even after Isidor is accepted and made to feel welcomed into the rural community, he will always be marked as the welcome stranger.

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<sup>44</sup> Sandrow 299.

<sup>45</sup> Hoffman, *Welcome Stranger in Awake and Singing: 7 Classic Plays from the American Jewish Repertoire* 82.

Though *Welcome Stranger* is one of the earliest theatrical oppositions to anti-Semitism, it ultimately reinforces many of the anti-Semitic stereotypes it sets out to challenge. Its protagonist, Isidor Solomon, is a decidedly walking Jewish stereotype, albeit a philo-Semitic stereotype. The play begins with Isidor moving to a quaint New Hampshire town, whose inhabitants easily identify him as Jewish, not only from the obvious ethnic origins of his name, but also because of his Yiddish accent, his New York origins and his happenstance ability to wander into a vaudeville slapstick routine. In fact, even before his name or place of origin is learned, Hoffman's stage directions note that Isidor's Jewishness is meant to be obvious the moment he first speaks. Isidor's entrance at a New Hampshire Inn, the setting for much of the play, happens to coincide with the forced removal of Frankel, a Jewish visitor seeking respite at the inn during a cold storm. We are first introduced to Isidor with a slapstick routine, and only moments later, he speaks his first line, which apparently betrays his origins:

( . . . ISIDOR SOLOMON *appears at door at back. He manages to open the door—effect of wind and snow blow him in. Out of breath, ISIDOR staggers in. ISIDOR stands swaying and puffing. . . .*)

. . .

ISIDOR: Hello—Happy New Year. (*All recognize he is Jewish.*)

TRIMBLE: Another one—by the ever living jumping Moses.

ISIDOR: No, not Moses—Solomon—Isidor Solomon. Glad to meet you, boys. Excuse me while I get acquainted with the stove.<sup>46</sup>

Of this scene, Beverly Bronson Smith notes that Isidor's Jewishness is further articulated through staging. "Although the rest of the stage is open to Isidor's movements, markers clearly indicate territorial limits. . . . At no time do any other

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<sup>46</sup> Hoffman 13.

characters enter Isidor's territory; their territory becomes any place he is not . . . [.]"<sup>47</sup>  
Because Jewishness must be staged before a stage audience, it is ultimately mitigated by physical characteristics. Though the play seeks to discredit such stereotypes so that it may teach its audience that a good heart will always speak louder than Yiddish accents, the play perpetuates the very stereotypes it contests. Even as we are asked to look past Isidor Solomon's accent and comic nature, his Jewishness is reduced to such superficial qualities.

Towards the end of the play, the villain of the piece, Ichabod Whitson, who tries to keep Isidor from settling in town, is discovered to be Jewish. It is a secret that Whitson has been keeping, fearing that the town would shun him. Whitson's hypocrisy, along with Isidor's good nature, raises Isidor to the status of hero in the town's eyes. The revelation of Whitson's Jewish background, however, seems arbitrary. Even though we are told that Whitson is Jewish, he simply doesn't *seem* Jewish, especially in comparison to Isidor. Because the play taught us to find Isidor's Jewishness in his ticks and mannerisms, Whitson's Jewishness never seems believable. Whitson fails the Jewish litmus test that the play had already established, even as it tried to dispute it.

Whitson may be Jewish, but he isn't Jewish enough for anyone to regard him as credibly Jewish. Instead, it is Isidor who meets the performative criteria for Jewishness that the play has already established. When Isidor explains to Whitson that Jews must use prejudice "in favor of" themselves, he explains that there is advantage in meeting perceived stereotypes. Whitson is ultimately shunned by the

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<sup>47</sup> Smith 23.

village because he did what they did not want him to do: he passed amongst them. Instead, Isidor is ultimately accepted by the small, rural town because he still fits the bill as to what they assume a Jew is like. On the one hand, Isidor's Jewishness is quite firm. He refuses to lose the *yiddisher* gestures, look, and vocal inflections that mark him as Jewish throughout. At the same time, his Jewishness is reduced to fit audience expectations. He is limited in how he can behave as a Jew as he appropriates such expectations in his interactions with others. He is accepted because he is marked; he is marked because he is accepted. Paradoxically, as a social outcast, and so long as he remains a social outcast, he is welcomed.

Isidor's paradox is not unique as it was the very same paradox that popular Jewish entertainers found as they became a voice for Jewish difference. Jewish comedians and entertainers established their Jewish difference, but only so far as audiences—both Jewish and non-Jewish—had defined Jewish difference. As Lawrence J. Epstein puts it, "These immigrant Jewish comedians developed a 'double consciousness,' a sense of being Jewish but having to hide it to win approval and a sense of being American, but not fully so. Such a 'double consciousness' in many ways defined American Jewish life and the Jewish comedians who found success in America."<sup>48</sup> This phenomenon was, according to Adam Gopnik, "a certain kind of comedy, the comedy of assimilation, and a certain kind of courage, the courage to use your proximity to power, bought at the process of losing your 'identity' to save your kinsmen."<sup>49</sup> As they played towards stereotypes, early Jewish entertainers fit the

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<sup>48</sup> Epstein 51.

<sup>49</sup> Gopnik 130.

audience's perceived notions of Jewishness and blurred the lines between being Jewish and seeming Jewish.

And yet, anyone watching Mel Brooks's musical *The Producers*, a Jackie Mason routine, or an episode of *Seinfeld* will note that Jewishness is still commodified as entertainment today. The still-prevalent use of comic Jewish stereotypes in popular culture today suggests a need to hold onto conspicuous, *performable* characteristics that distinguish Jews as distinctly different. However, the reason behind the need for Jewish stereotype on the contemporary stage has changed. One would surmise that contemporary multicultural philosophies would be the impetus for more variety in Jewish performances and yet popular culture has ritualized *shitty* performances as the basis for a Jewish identity. Though we are still influenced by melting pot paradigms, contemporary multiculturalism is the converse image of melting pot ideology. Multiculturalism seeks to emphasize difference and deconstruct reigning dogmas that dictate a monolithic American identity. Michael Walzer puts it well: "In multicultural politics it is an advantage to be injured. Every injury, every act of discrimination or disrespect, every heedless, invidious, or malicious word is a kind of political entitlement, if not to reparation then at least to recognition."<sup>50</sup> Multicultural identities are, at least in part, rooted in victimization. However, traditionally disenfranchised groups have embraced difference as a source of strength rather than wound. Are Jews "victims enough" to be multicultural?

Today, Jews occupy a unique, but vaguely defined, position in American culture, a distinction that has been both a blessing and a sore spot in the development

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<sup>50</sup> Walzer 89.

of a Jewish American identity. On the one hand, Jews, like Italians, Irish, and all other “white” ethnicities, have gradually become accepted into the American mainstream and have been able to live prosperously in America today. The children of a generation of Jewish immigrants grew up to be better off than their parents, and their children’s successes in turn surpassed them as well.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, as multiculturalism, a movement which has primarily privileged race, but also gender and sexuality, has been mainstreamed as a necessary and important cultural philosophy in America today, Jews have found themselves left out of the big, multicultural picture. As Martha Brettenshneider writes, “[M]ulticulturalist politics is also often tricky for Jews. As identities become fair game in politics, Jewishness takes a beating from the Left in ways Jews more usually are accustomed to being attacked from the Right. . . . Despite our [the American Jewish] community’s apparent success, we remain marginalized from the majority Christian culture; adding insult to injury, despite our minority status and experience, often we are marginalized in multicultural circles.”<sup>52</sup>

Jews have been positioned as insiders – in league with a dominant, white majority – but still perceive themselves as outsiders because their source of

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<sup>51</sup> See Karen Brodtkin’s *How Jews Became White Folk and What That Says About Race in America*. As the title suggests, Brodtkin discusses how Jewish immigrants, first regarded as not-quite-white, were gradually accepted within American society because they, along with other European immigrants were given many of the post-World War II institutional privileges of white racial classification. Though Brodtkin’s evidence is convincing, and she is right to discuss the changing perceptions of race and their relationship to class as she develops her discussion of Jewish mobility, Brodtkin does not discuss the effects of the Holocaust upon America’s perception of Jews. The revelation of the Holocaust forced American’s to revisit their anti-Semitic assumptions, resulting in greater opportunities for Jewish social stability.

<sup>52</sup> Brettenschneider 1.

difference, their Judaism as well as their Jewishness, becomes lost within a Christian mainstream. Have Jews melted fluidly into the melting pot to the point that they are not different enough to be considered different? The crisis of identity has played out in the contemporary political scene. Customarily, Jews have overwhelmingly voted Democratic in twentieth-century presidential elections, siding with the party that has traditionally been the representative voice of minorities. Indeed, since 1928, Jews have predominately voted for the Democratic candidate over the Republican candidate in presidential elections. Since 1928, no Republican presidential candidate has achieved over 40% of the Jewish vote and in the last three presidential elections, the Democratic candidate received approximately 80% of the Jewish vote. This trend is apparent at the congressional level as well. Yet, in the last decade, Republicans have seen an increase in support at the local level from Jews in large cities that contain a sizeable Jewish population.<sup>53</sup> During then New York Mayor Rudolph Guilliani's reelection campaign, Guilliani received more than 70 percent of the Jewish vote, even while running against Ruth Messinger, the Democratic candidate, who also happened to be Jewish.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, there has been much speculation whether or not Jews will drift towards the Republican Party because of a surge in a post-9/11 Republican support for Israel. Jewish and evangelical Christian solidarity with Israel overlaps, for now, and American Jewry has been discussed as

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<sup>53</sup> NJDC, "The 2000 Jewish Vote in Historical Perspective."

<sup>54</sup> "GOP Hopes to Make Jews Forget FDR," *The Jewish Exponent*. Recently, Republican candidates have had an easier time garnering Jewish support than elsewhere in the country. Rick Lazio, Hillary Clinton's 2000 opponent for the United States Senate, and George Pataki, in his 2002 reelection campaign for governor, received more than 40% of the Jewish vote.

being at a political crossroads, one that cuts to the very core of American Jewish identity. While a recent Gallup poll has demonstrated that any switch in political alliance has been overstated,<sup>55</sup> that there is buzz suggesting a Jewish mutiny within the Democratic Party is indicative of a larger issue. Are Jews still considered “underdogs” or have they been warmly welcomed within mainstream Christian America? As Charles Liebman wrote in 1976, American Jewish liberalism depends upon “the continued state of Jewish estrangement.”<sup>56</sup> Do Jews still feel estranged today? More importantly, do they feel estranged in the same way that multicultural politics has defined estrangement? As Alan M. Dershowitz argues, Jews have become so integral to American society, that the threat to American Jews is no longer anti-Semitism. Instead, the danger to an American Jewish identity comes from an American mainstream which will unintentionally “kill us with kindness—by assimilating us, marrying us, and merging with us out of respect, admiration, and even love.”<sup>57</sup> Dershowitz’s conclusion denotes a problematic issue for American Jews. How do Jews become accepted in American society without becoming lost in

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<sup>55</sup> A Gallup poll released on September 16, 2002, found that “exactly half” of respondents who identified themselves as Jewish “gave their political orientation as Democratic. About a third say they are independents, and 17% are Republicans.” Looking back upon their data since 1992, Gallup concluded that “party identification of Jews appears to be remarkably stable.” The poll, however, demonstrated that post-9/11 support for President Bush had seen a greater increase amongst Jews than any other religious group. At the same time, Jewish support for Bush remained 26 points lower than Protestants, 22 points lower than Catholics, and 15-16 points lower than Americans of other religious beliefs. The poll did not compare Jewish political affiliation to other ethnic groups. “Gallup Poll Analyses – Just How Democratic Is the Jewish Population in America Today?” *The Gallup Organization*, 16 September 2002.

<sup>56</sup> Liebman 159.

<sup>57</sup> Dershowitz 2.

American society? Multiculturalism has made the issue more urgent. Has multiculturalism pushed Jews into that dominant mainstream, ignoring Jewish distinction, as it favors racial difference, but also gender, sexuality and class, as the primary groups who can claim estrangement?

Mitchell Cohen has noted the impact in liberal academic circles as well: in the recent anthology, *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, Jews are only mentioned “in passing” while any mention of Jewish studies “does not exist in it at all even in the essay entitled ‘Ethnic Studies: Its Evolution in American Colleges and Universities.’” I would add that anyone searching through the MLA Job market listings will notice that it is dubious whether universities seeking candidates who have a specialty in an “Ethnic American literature” would accept Jewish American literature as fulfilling that interest. If it is important for recent Ph.D. candidates on the job market to have an interest in literatures and cultures outside the standard Western canon, does Jewish literature and culture count? As Cohen concludes, “If some American Jewish liberals are wary of some advocates of multiculturalism, the reason is plain: it is not always evident that the multicultural ‘all’ includes Jewish culture.”<sup>58</sup>

In the process, Jews become enveloped within Christian dominance and the Judeo-Christian myth perseveres. Not only does the existence of a Judeo-Christian label imply that Jewish and Christian cultures are simple enough to conflate, but in the process Jewish identity becomes not only erased, but essentially condemned. Sara R. Horowitz has explained:

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<sup>58</sup> Mitchell Cohen 45.

[T]here is a mistaken apprehension that a Judeo-Christian culture is a shared culture, a hybrid product. Seen as part of a Judeo-Christian culture that has aggressively conquered and colonized other cultures, Judaic culture appears to bear responsibility for historical wrongs. This view masks the ways in which Judaism itself has been colonized or cannibalized by a more powerful culture that has absorbed but also reinterpreted its textual and cultural resources. The 'New' Testament retroactively interprets and rewrites the Old,' first by renaming, then by renarrativizing. It effectively negates rather than retains the Hebrew (Jewish) Bible, effacing its Jewish meanings in a competing hermeneutic, or system of interpretation, that claims absolute and singular truth. The Calendar notation currently in use in the West— B.C. and A.D.—imposes Christian teleological assumptions on all events it describes. For this reason, many Jewish scholars prefer to use B.C.E. and C.E.—'before the common era' and 'common era'— although even that seeming neutrality speaks for Christian rather than Jewish time constructs. Jewish culture and history easily dismiss the apocalyptic worries (and hopes) precipitated by the approaching millennium; the year 2000 (A.D.) is by Jewish reckoning the year 5760.<sup>59</sup>

As Jews find themselves uncomfortably lumped together with a dominant white Christian culture, and unwelcome alongside groups that are now considered multicultural Others, they find themselves in the precarious position of being othered Others. Not only are they Others in comparison to white Christian American society, but also they are Others in that they are no longer welcome to claim the status as an American Other. Ignored as both a member of mainstream and minority America, the wandering Jew may fluctuate between his status as both insider and outsider, but in either position he is othered nonetheless. This phenomenon was wonderfully captured in an ad campaign for Jewish Rye Bread in the 1970s. The campaign consisted of a series of full-page ads, one an African-American boy, another a stereotypical "Indian Chief," another an Asian-American male, another a WASP-y

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<sup>59</sup> Sara R. Horowitz 122.

ruffle-collared choir boy, all eating Jewish Rye Bread. The caption read in big bold print, “You don’t have to be Jewish to like Jewish Rye Bread.” The ad campaign was humorous, but the results mirrored Lenny Bruce’s monologue. While most of America has divided society into “white male” and “multicultural,” the Jewish Rye ad, like Lenny Bruce’s monologue, offered a growing and overlooked division within American culture: Jewish and *goyish* culture are distinct. The irony is, of course, that the ad campaign’s models *could* all be Jewish, since there are African-American Jews, Native American Jews, Asian-American Jews and, obviously, Caucasian Jews. However, as Jewishness is commodified in this ad campaign, it becomes embodied by what it is not. Both Jewishness and *goyish* performances are sold here, so much so that each defines the other. Can they exist independent of each other? The ad campaign obviously relies upon stereotypes. The *shtick* that is sold here is Jewishness, a Jewishness that is fashioned through stereotypes. The question essential to my study is this: are stereotypes necessary today so that Jewish difference remains distinct?

Of course *shtick* that evokes Jewishness does not necessarily mean a devotion to Judaism. As I have suggested earlier, Jewishness and Judaism do not always go hand in hand. As an illustration – another witty ad campaign: In the mid-nineties, Hebrew National hotdogs delivered a commercial that showed Uncle Sam eating a hotdog while baseball game organ music and stadium cheers were heard in the background. The camera then panned upwards and away from Uncle Sam, leaving an image of a bright, heavenly, picture-perfect sky, before the announcer read the slogan, “Hebrew National Hotdogs: We answer to a higher authority.” The campaign was a

hit because of its humor. The commercial established these hot dogs as distinctively Jewish. The irony is, however, that Orthodox Jewish communities still debate how kosher Hebrew National hotdogs actually are!<sup>60</sup> As Jewishness is commodified, the lines between Jewishness and *goyish* culture are both made more distinctive and less so. Here, when Jewishness is mass-marketed towards an audience that includes Jews and non-Jews alike, Jewishness is defined in relation to a *goyish* norm, symbolized by Uncle Sam. Jewishness is portrayed as identifiably different from a (non-Jewish) American norm, but in reality it is a distinction on *goyish* terms; these hot dogs may answer to a higher authority, but not an authority that is too-Jewish. Hebrew National hotdogs may sell Jewishness, but a Jewishness that is gimmicky: are these really Jewish hotdogs if their kosher label is questionable? When some Jews will not eat Hebrew National hotdogs because they do not follow strict dietary rules, it sounds as if the higher authority that the commercial refers to sits behind a large desk.

My study focuses upon how Jews have negotiated the dubious position of being trapped between a mainstream and a minority label. The question of whether or not multiculturalism has been good for the Jews remains difficult to answer, since Jews are unsure of where they stand in multicultural America. The succeeding chapters look at how the rising multicultural movement has affected the portrayal of Jews in American popular culture. Have there been any dramatic developments in how Jews are depicted in popular culture? The conclusion is this: not much has changed. As has been the case since Jews became a driving voice in early twentieth century American theatrical and media industries, nebbishes still chase after non-

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<sup>60</sup> “Here’s the Beef on Hebrew National: It’s Not Glatt,” *Kosher Today Newspaper*, originally posted in *The Forward*, 12 Jul 2001.

Jewish women, Jewish men are still envisioned as less-than-manly, Jews are still funny, *yiddishe* types, Jewish mothers still nag, nag, nag and Jewish identity is still little more than a stock performance. Why has so little changed? Why, even today in multicultural America, is Jewishness continually reduced to a gimmicky performance? One of America's most popular sitcoms, *Seinfeld*, features Jewish comedian Jerry Seinfeld and pseudo-Jews George Costanza, Elaine Benes and Cosmo Kramer, engaged in Talmudic-like debates over what has been described as "nothing." In the movies, recent teenage sex comedies such as the *American Pie* series, *Meet the Parents*, and *There's Something About Mary*, feature Jewish nebbishes lusting after a non-Jewish buxom babe. Their Jewish difference becomes part of the joke as Jewishness and "misfit" status are equated. In theater, the comedies of Neil Simon and Wendy Wasserstein are known for their superficially Jewish characters who don't always identify themselves as Jews except for the few Yiddish words sprinkled throughout their vocabulary. They border upon catering towards an imagined stereotype of overbearing Jewish mothers, nebbish sons, and *bubbies* and *zaydes* who speak wisdom, even in their senility. Not just comedies but serious drama, too, as I will discuss, typically has Jewish stereotypes bubbling underneath. Why are Jews continually portrayed as hapless *schlemiels* today?

A dependence upon traditional stereotypes, I argue, not only reflects upon multicultural movements that have indirectly erased Jewish difference, but also responds to the in vogue theatrical tradition of colorblind casting, which has sought to erase difference, but in many ways defined difference as based upon race (and sometimes gender). The irony is this: though Jewish American culture has sought to

escape the stereotypes that have surrounded American Jews in contemporary theater, as well as popular culture in general, Jewish playwrights continue to write in the tradition of such performances, even as they debate the value of such standard tropes. If the stereotypes disappear, does an articulated Jewish difference disappear with it? Can a character be Jewish if he doesn't seem Jewish? Does seeming Jewish mean that one must in some way call attention to a character's relationship to a stereotype?

Certainly, other avenues of presenting Jewishness have been shown to be possible. The 2000 presidential election, of course, featured Joseph I. Lieberman as the first Jewish vice presidential candidate on a major party ticket. He offered an antidote to existing stereotypes while keeping kosher. He presented a "Jewishness" before the American public that did not coincide with what popular culture has produced. Presidential politics is always performative and discussion of the political persona in a study of performance should come as no surprise; indeed throughout my discussion I will connect the performative with the political. As Joe McGinniss stated of Nixon's election in *The Selling of the President*, "We have to be very clear on this point: that the [public] response is to the image, not the man . . . . It's not what's there that counts, it's what's projected—carrying it one step further, it's not what he projects but rather what the voter receives. It's not the man we have to change, but rather the received impression."<sup>61</sup> With that, the "political stage" becomes less of a metaphor and more of a reality. Images, not people, are elected. Interestingly, while Lieberman's Jewishness was neither full of *shtick*, gimmick, nor stereotype, his Jewishness was not hidden either. Instead, he offered an alternative reading to the

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<sup>61</sup> McGinniss, *The Selling of the President*, 1968 29.

performed Jewishness that we have become used to in popular culture. While my final chapter will discuss Lieberman's Jewishness in greater detail, particularly in light of the Jewishness that contemporary popular culture evokes, I will suggest here that alternative performances of Jewishness do exist. The continuation of stereotypical Jewishness in contemporary culture is neither necessary nor absolute.

Instead, I argue that when stereotype is embraced it becomes an outlet for establishing Jewish difference, a difference that resists gradual erasure in multicultural politics. If tradition has defined certain stereotypical ticks and mannerisms as Jewish difference, today we see a remarkable continuation of that display of traditional stereotypes in order to keep Jewish difference from getting lost. Consequently, my study of Jewish stereotypes is Janus-faced in that it looks at the past as much as it does the present. Even though my discussion of Jewishness remains contemporary, these contemporary traditions are always informed by precedent. Too often a study of popular culture is criticized for its immediacy and for the inability of the critic to observe his subject with a historian's objectivity. However, such an assumption is based upon the ill-conceived idea that historians are in fact distanced from their subjects to begin with. The fact remains that any critical examination is arbitrated by contemporary modes of thought and any analysis is shaped likewise. In short, studies of popular culture are studies of history. Popular culture represents modern myths and narratives that are always shaped by historical trends. Thus, to study popular culture is to connect the past with what is urgent. As Carla Freccero says, to fail to study popular culture is a failure to create exigency, and instead focus "exclusively on forms of cultural production that are not widely shared

in public culture.”<sup>62</sup> As I discuss performances of Jewishness, it will always be necessary to revisit the past under the assumption that our individual perceptions, whether we are aware of them or not, are shaped by already established cultural traditions. This is an obvious point, to be sure, but one worthy of emphasis, since contemporary ideas are always the flowers of historical seedlings. Moreover, as I discuss Jewishness in popular culture and the resounding effects that multiculturalism has had upon it, it will be impossible to separate the cultural manifestations from the political since multiculturalism has been an important cultural as well as a political philosophy. To study popular culture is, as Freccero states bluntly, to become “politically literate.”<sup>63</sup> The shift between political and theatrical performances is an easy one, because they are one and the same.

As I look at multiculturalism and its effects upon a so-called Jewishness, I am invariably discussing the traditions that have shaped such perceptions of Jewishness and of multiculturalism as well. I am particularly interested in studying the effects that multiculturalism has had upon representations of Jews in the theater, where Jewish presence has been abundant not only in the role of producers, writers, actors and composers. Most significantly, Jewish presence has also been quite strong as audience members as well. Jewish involvement in the theater community is and always has been disproportionately high since the immigration era.<sup>64</sup> As the Yiddish

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<sup>62</sup> Freccero 5.

<sup>63</sup> Freccero 3.

<sup>64</sup> While no specific studies have been conducted regarding this fact, William Goldman approximated that Jews made up fifty percent of the seats in a Broadway audience in 1968 and characterized this speculation as a “conservative estimate”

theater replaced the synagogue as the center of Jewish life,<sup>65</sup> the American theater gradually became another outlet for Jewish social gathering, a phenomenon that continues today. Because of a large Jewish presence, the American theater serves as a unique location for studying how attitudes towards multiculturalism and Jewish identity are mediated. Are the barriers of political correctness dropped in the theater, allowing Jewish playwrights and directors to critique multiculturalism? Does Jewish nervousness over multicultural ideals work its way into performance space? Do Jews apply the rhetoric of multiculturalism to its representation of Jewish identity?

Because cities play host to theater districts, theater audiences tend to be to the left of the mass-marketed audiences of film and television. Thus, the theater is a unique location in which to look at the clash between multiculturalism and Jewish

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(149). Though a Jewish presence in Broadway theaters is quite high, the Jewish theater-going audience is in itself a defined group of individuals in respect to a similar socio-economic status, educational level and religious and cultural upbringing. It should not be assumed that Jews who attend theater religiously are representative of American Jews across the country. The notably high proportion of Jews in theater audiences was played for laughs in Mel Brook's musical, *The Producers*, where Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom devise a musical designed to flop – *Springtime for Hitler!* The musical, meant to offend, was viewed as a satiric masterpiece even though they assumed otherwise because, as they sing, “half the audience were Jews!” (Brooks and Meehan 194).

<sup>65</sup> See Sandrow's *Vagabond Stars*. She writes that Jewish immigrants interchanged the stage for the synagogue as they “used the theater building unceremoniously, as a meeting place, just as their fathers had used the little synagogue back home to study, gossip, pray, drink schnapps, and eat black bread with butter” (91). Also see Sarah Blacher Cohen's “Yiddish Origins and Jewish-American Transformations” in *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen* 1-17. Cohen writes that “Its [Yiddish Theater] self-ordained playwright-preachers—the Gordons, the Pinskis, the Aschs—became their New World rabbis whose moralizations replaced Old World Torah instruction and spiritual counsel. The Yiddish theater generated such a consuming passion for works of the imagination that it became their secular temple where they regularly worshipped the aesthetic” (1).

uneasiness over such ideologies. As Jews embrace multicultural philosophies, but have been apprehensive about its practice, the theater provides an opportunity to study the staging of divided politics. The editors of *Insider/Outsider*, David Biale, Michael Galchinsky and Susannah Heshel, have summarized the debate as such: “Many Jews believe that the replacement of the Enlightenment ideal of universalism with a politics of difference and a fragmented ‘multicultural’ would constitute a threat to Jewish achievement. At the same time, they recognize the dangers of a homogenous ‘monoculture’ for Jewish particularity.”<sup>66</sup> The Jewish response to multiculturalism has been schizophrenic to say the least.

The theater serves as a unique case for studying such contradictory attitudes towards multiculturalism because Jewish artists can be assured that a large portion of their audience will be Jewish themselves. If, as I suggest, stereotypes have become the dominant modes in which to express Jewish difference, particularly in comedies, it should not be assumed that a Jewish audience would find them offensive. In some respects, it is no wonder that such stereotypes have been embraced. Many American cultures that have been plagued by offensive stereotypes have challenged such stereotypes by adopting them as symbols of unity. African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and gay communities, for example, have all integrated some of the stereotypes from outside the community into their humor and popular culture. So long as these stereotypes remain within the community, they are a rejection of such hatred by robbing the stereotypes of their intent to harm. In addition, they create a

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<sup>66</sup> Biale, Galchinsky and Heschel 7.

sense of group identity because only those within the group are “allowed” to evoke such stereotypes. Thus, such stereotypes are challenged as well.

But the use of stereotype on the contemporary stage serves another function. As I discussed earlier, Jewish portrayal has achieved an everyman status in popular culture in so far as Jewishness—the ambience of difference—becomes open to all Americans. In other words, Jewishness may be distinctive from *goyish*, but it is no longer specifically Jewish. Stereotype, the embodiment of Jewishness, is used today to reclaim Jewishness as a Jewish trait. Like gay and lesbian theater, Asian American theater, and African American theater, American Jewish theater negotiates the power of stereotype by embracing stereotypes as quintessentially their own in order to reemerge as a definitive minority in multicultural society. At the same time, these stereotypes have been challenged. Yet an affront to stereotype is an acceptance of its personal association as well. As Sander Gilman has written:

It is vital to understand that Jews (like all other groups who are labeled as different) must acknowledge the world in which they are geographically and culturally situated. This response is structured by the conception of the Jew (which may or may not be itself structured by “realities” of the self-labeling of any given Jew or Jewish community). This response may, however, take a wide range of forms. It may be internalizing and self-destructive (self-hating) or it may be projective and stereotyping; it take [*sic*] the form of capitulation to the power of the image or the form of resistance to the very stereotype of the Jew. But there is the need to respond, either directly or subliminally.<sup>67</sup>

Performance, as I see it, is a powerful way in which Jews have responded to stereotype. As Jewishness becomes physicalized through performance, it becomes the vehicle for shaping and reshaping stereotypes that have plagued Jews in the

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<sup>67</sup> Gilman, *The Jew's Body* 6.

modern era. From its earliest incarnations to the present day, as Jewish-American identity is staged and both sides of the hyphen are negotiated, the very stereotypes that face Jews are both reconsidered and enforced as they are necessarily embodied and staged. No Jewish American play can escape considering how Jewish identity functions within an American community, an American community that holds its own expectations of how Jews are envisioned. Just as important, because performance is a physical art, on some level Jewishness by necessity must be embodied. Given the history of how much anti-Semitism since the fin-de-siècle has been rooted in its physicalization of Jewishness, I admit cautiousness in suggesting the slightest similarity between the American theater and racially based anti-Semitic practice. Rather, because the body plays an important role in the theater as well as in multicultural discourse, I want to look at how Jewish identity has been constructed through the visual language of bodily representation.

My discussion of performed Jewishness will focus on three key elements:

*Race:* Because racial minorities have been the primary concentration of the multicultural movement, Jews have moved towards pronouncing their minority status by adopting the discourse of race-based difference. In the past few decades, a remarkable number of plays have connected the Jewish experience with racial discrimination, particularly prejudice against African Americans. As I discuss Jewishness and race, I ask why anti-Semitism must be considered in light of racism? After all, is it not simplistic to assume that racism and anti-Semitism are the same? Does the conflation of these two forms of bigotry ignore the difference between race and ethnicity, or race and religion?

Playwrights who write about the prejudice, particularly prejudice in America, are confronted with the shadow of the Holocaust, which, as Karen Brodtkin writes, “gave Jews a degree of critical distance from mainstream American whiteness, a sense of otherness even in the midst of being ardently embraced by the mainstream.”<sup>68</sup> While the Holocaust forced Americans to reconsider their attitudes towards anti-Semitism, it also enforced the stereotype that Jews were humanity’s habitual victims—Chosen People chosen for punishment. Jews are chronic victims—however, they are historical victims. Today, attitudes towards American Jews as victims are inconsistent. The presentation of anti-Semitism on the stage, particularly in light of the tragedy of the Holocaust, ultimately “others” the Jews as victims, even as dramatic presentation seeks to efface the anti-Semitism it exhibits. Yet, the evoking of anti-Jewish sentiment on the stage, and the immediate connection, even if not expressed, with the Holocaust, recreates a Jew-as-victim label, even as Jews try to escape this status. Hence, the path that Jewish American playwrights have taken is to connect anti-Semitism with prejudice against blacks. By linking anti-Semitism with racism, Jews position themselves as separate from a white majority. They also avoid the stigma of a Holocaust-induced victimization: they dispute the perception that Jews cling to the horrors of their history in order to defend their status as victims today. By associating Jewish performance with African-American struggles, Jewish victimization is shown to be urgently contemporary. In the process, Jews are staged as a legitimate heir to multicultural difference.

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<sup>68</sup> Brodtkin141.

*Masculinity:* In American popular culture, positive portrayals of Jewish women are few and far between. More likely, Jewish women are bossy, nagging, overbearing mothers or loud, materialistic, controlling Jewish American Princesses and their sons and boyfriends wimpy, neurotic and weak. Until recently, independent Jewish women have ceased to exist in the media and on stage. This is partly due to the perception of Jewish men as a limp shadow of a robust, all-American masculine norm. Television, theater, and the cinema have all ritualized the Jewish male's quest to justify his masculinity by wooing a non-Jewish woman, the trophy which proves his prowess as a man. Jewishness is rendered as an effeminately masculine trait.

What is the role for Jewish women in this scenario? In the struggle for representation, Jewish history and culture is gendered male. Describing how scholars have failed to understand gender-based dynamics within the Jewish community, Riv- Ellen Prell writes, "Internal stratification, whether by class or gender, is thus seen to be less compelling than the way that Jews—as a group—are different from other groups."<sup>69</sup> In other words, it has been too frequently assumed that there is no division amongst Jews (gendered or otherwise) in comparison to how Jews are different from non-Jews. Yet, if all Jews are men, and all Jewish men are womanly, where does that leave Jewish women? In order for Jewish women to have a role in American popular culture, the stereotype must be combated head-on so that they may carve a role for themselves within American popular culture. In other words, narratives that focus on Jewish women invariably focus on the stereotype that Jewish men are effeminate.

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<sup>69</sup> Prell 79.

They must “prove” the inadequacy of the stereotype so that they can unearth a role for themselves within American culture.

Similarly, gay men are confronted with the effeminacy stereotype (and the perception that overbearing mothers caused their effeminacy) just as Jewish men are. Historically, anti-Semitic discourse envisioned Jews not only as womanly, but also as homosexuals. Women, Jews and homosexuals fell under the same umbrella as if they were all essentially one and the same. Similarly, as modern politics has dichotomized the political sphere into conservative and leftist ideologies, traditionally underrepresented groups get lumped together under the same heading. In the process, and as gay Jewish plays have fervently shown, group-specific issues are often left unaddressed, as it becomes assumed that the cultural left speaks unilaterally with no dissention. Gay plays, I argue, have constructed Jewishness as a metaphor for showing the complexities of multicultural politics. Since, contemporary constructions of Jewishness have helped cast Jews as insiders and outsiders, Jewishness shows that Jewish issues sometimes speak in tune with progressive politics, and sometimes depart from them. The fight for gay rights rests upon the idea that gays are not best represented by a monolithic leftist voice, just as identity is never monolithic either. Consequentially, to show that gays are like Jews is to show that gays must avoid traditional conservative versus liberal paradigms, which tend to hinder, rather than help, the advancement of gay rights.

*Faith.* Popular culture has rarely depicted Jews as a religious group, even though Americans tend to define Jews as such. Even in the theater, Jewish playwrights have chosen the route of presenting Jews as ethnics. The construction of

Jews as a religious group has been a phenomenon of Christian America. Jews, however, are more willing to see ethnic differences between Jews and Christians. However, is either label appropriate? Supposing that ethnic Jews and religious Jews exist in this dualistic form (which they do not), an ethnic Jew is further removed from a Protestant identity than a religious Jew simply because while Protestant America can be religious, it cannot be ethnic. If Jews are strictly a religious group, it keeps the Judeo-Christian paradigm intact. On the other hand, an ethnic label dismantles the Judeo-Christian paradigm and complicates the very definition of an American religious group. The final section of this study argues that religion brings Jews *closer* to the mainstream, while a focus on ethnicity stages more discernable differences. Playwrights have stressed Jewishness over Judaism in order to create, rather than dismantle, a Jewish identity that fashions Jews as a minority group. In fact, when playwrights do focus upon Judaism, that is to say the Jewish faith, more often than not they use the same visual, bodily language of Jewishness to represent religion.

Indeed, Jewishness is a language, one that embodies (and thereby creates) Jewish difference. As I focus on perceived Jewishness in American culture, I must stress its theatricality. In his conclusion to *In Search of American Jewish Culture*, Stephen Whitfield writes, “As an ethnic group, Jewry can erect little if any defense against assimilationist pressures. As an ethnic group, its customs will seem increasingly quaint and replaceable.”<sup>70</sup> Faith is fundamental and without faith, Jews, “are reduced to another American minority group.”<sup>71</sup> I do not entirely disagree.

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<sup>70</sup> Whitfield 240.

<sup>71</sup> Whitfield 240.

However, American Jews partly base their politics upon their identification as an American minority. As multiculturalism has altered what constitutes a minority, performing “too Jewish” provides an embodiment of Jewish difference, a difference that may be rooted in imagined perceptions, but one that helps include Jews as part of a multicultural portrait by establishing Jews as essentially different.

## Racing and Erasing the Jewish Body

In Charley Rosen's comic sports novel, *The House of Moses All-Stars* (1996), a professional Jewish basketball team travels cross-country in the heyday of the Great Depression, challenging amateur squads in order to earn some extra cash. At one point, low on energy, the team searches for a place to grab breakfast and comes across Phoebe's Food Emporium, a dive situated on the outskirts of Albany, New York. To their consternation, they discover it to have a large sign in their window that reads "White Trade Only." Short on funds, food and gasoline, the team decides that they have no choice but to eat there. The unlikely sports team, most wearing *yarmulkes*, *payis* (sideburns) and long beards, enter the joint and find themselves to be the local spectacle:

A thin sour-pussed waitress gives us the once-over while we're waiting to be seated. She wears a large pin on her right breast that says, "HI," and her white uniform is immaculate. "You white?" she asks Leo.

Leo leans forward and pretends to unbuckle his belt. "Honey," he whispers, "my ass is whiter than yours and I'm ready to prove it."<sup>72</sup>

Are Jews white? The question may seem simple but the answer is remarkably complex. In a 1993 *Village Voice* article aptly titled, "Jews Are Not White," Michael Lerner argues what the title explicitly suggests. "[T]o be 'white'" he states, "means

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<sup>72</sup> Rosen 56.

to be the beneficiary of the past 500 years of European exploration and exploitation of the rest of the world.”<sup>73</sup> Yet, race, whiteness and blackness are terms whose definition has shifted throughout history. Arguably, it is slightly easier to ask, “Are Jews white *now*?” While definitions of race have shifted across the centuries, so has the classification of Jews. As Sander Gilman has discussed, Jews came to be considered a racial group in the eighteenth century. At that time, and for many decades to follow, the “Jewish race” was associated with blackness. Interestingly, Gilman shows that with great frequency Jewish skin color was described by various eighteenth- and nineteenth century anthropologists as black, dark, swarthy or black-yellow. However, he found that skin color was not the only litmus test for a Jew’s “blackness.” Many times, cultural scientists concluded that a Jew’s facial features, centering upon the nose and lips—characterized as larger than the Aryan norm—were signs of his blackness. Blackness, in effect, did not always depend upon the color of a Jew’s skin. Instead, a Jew was “black” because Jewish features were rhetorically situated as non-Aryan. Blackness became nearly synonymous with difference. In essence, blackness came to mean more than just color, just as difference became physicalized as color. Moreover, blackness physically symbolized an imagined inferiority. Gilman discusses how in one breath blackness came to signify skin color, stereotypical facial features, race, and Jewishness, so much so that by the middle of the nineteenth century, “being black, being Jewish, being diseased, and being ‘ugly’

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<sup>73</sup> Lerner, “Jews are Not White” 33.

[came] to be inexorably linked.”<sup>74</sup> Though much of Gilman’s analysis centers upon fin de siècle perceptions of Jewishness, his conclusions are timeless:

[The] sense of difference impacts on the Jew who is caught in the web of power which controls and shapes his or her psyche and body. The assignment of difference to aspects of the body shapes how individuals understand their own essence. The desire for invisibility, the desire to become “white,” lies at the center of the Jew’s flight from his or her own body. . . . The Jew, caught up in such a system of representation, has but little choice: his essence, which incorporates the horrors projected on to him and which is embodied (quite literally) in his physical being, must try, on one level or another, to become invisible.<sup>75</sup>

As Gilman discusses the Jewish body, he notes that Western society has essentially constructed the Jewish body on behalf of Jews. As Jews seek to integrate into mainstream society so that they may become “normal” they ultimately must fashion themselves to fit the ideals of an imagined mainstream. In the process of becoming normal, signified by whiteness, they become invisible – seeking to erase the perception of a Jewish difference. Consequently, Jews must first accept a physicalized representation of Jewish difference in order to surpass it. Though physical actions can be taken to modify such a perceived difference, such as the proverbial nose job, becoming “white” is rooted more in perception than actuality. As Gilman writes, “[B]odies have a way of being seen again and again in the past, and identity—whether that of Jews or blacks or Hispanics or women—always has to perform a perilous balancing act between self and Other.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* 173.

<sup>75</sup> Gilman 235-236.

<sup>76</sup> Gilman 243.

While anti-Semitic representations of the Jewish body certainly came from outside the Jewish community, the construction of Jews as a race also came from within. As Eric L. Goldstein has shown in fascinating detail, nineteenth-century American Jews, more so than their European counterparts, were willing to define themselves as a distinct racial group. The rhetoric of race in America provided Jews with a framework in which they could establish themselves as the true descendants of the original Chosen People by physicalizing their inheritance. At the same time, Goldstein argues, the rhetoric of race conveniently helped establish Jews as white and thereby as Americans.<sup>77</sup> Categorizing Jews as a race, however, has not lasted. Contemporary America no longer defines Jews as a racial minority, and instead positions it as a religious group. However, Jewish difference is still habitually represented by the body. Though the status of a religious group would imply that all races can become Jewish, contemporary Jews are repeatedly defined by their physical representation, be it images consciously or subconsciously based in anti-Semitism, such as large noses and small chins, or reductive images, such as portraying an image of a Hasidic rabbi to represent all Jews. Such physically based representations ultimately counter the idea that Jews are strictly a religious group. At the same time, this is not to suggest that Jews are solely a religious group, for many Jews find that categorization limiting as well. With its emphasis on family and generational history

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<sup>77</sup> See Goldstein, “Different Blood Flows in Our Veins”: Race and Jewish Self-Definition in Late Nineteenth Century America,” *American Jewish History* 29- 55. Goldstein also notes that the term “ethnic” was not used until the 1920s. In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* did not recognize the term until 1933. For a history of the term “ethnic,” see the opening page of Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan’s study, *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*.

and, in more orthodox communities, patriarchy, Judaism at times follows a rhetoric that can be seen as closer to a race-based idiom. To position Jews as a religious group implies that a belief in Judaism is the sole criteria for being Jewish, yet some atheists still consider themselves to be Jewish, even though they do not practice Judaism.

The purpose here, however, is not to situate Jews as either a race-based or religious group. In fact, such a polarization of classification does not take ethnicity into account. (Ethnicity, too, is a term that when applied to Jews is equally limiting.) Instead, I emphasize that over time the categorization of Jews has shifted in relation to the transformations in definitions of race. Often such definitions are imposed upon Jews; at times they are even adopted by Jews. In various times and eras, they have helped and hindered Jewish social advancement within outside communities. Such summations are not surprising, as Jews have been a people who have lived within non-Jewish communities for most of their history. The shift from an Old European race-based categorization of Jews towards an American restructuring of Judaism as a straightforward religious group has allowed for Jews, at times, to negotiate their own representation within and apart from the outside communities. A quintessential characteristic of American Jewish history is that the weaving back and forth between representations. No label offers an accurate means of classifying Jews, Jewishness or Judaism. All are limiting in their own respects. Nonetheless, race and religion are categories that are deeply rooted in American rhetoric and Jews have had to adjust accordingly. As a result, the representation of Jews has drawn from such rhetoric.

Here I wish to consider the ramifications of representing Jewishness according to existing perceptions of race, specifically blackness.

As I look at how blackness has been represented along side Jewishness, I break away from traditional scholarship which has examined Jewish identity in relationship to a majority culture. In such paradigms Jews are positioned as the imagined Other, and Jewish identity is built in response to such reductive constructions. Here, however, I look at how Jews have constructed Jewishness in relation to another Other, specifically blacks. As I look at how blackness has been constructed in American Jewish theater, it is important to remember that blackness is fashioned to alter Jewish self-definitions and/or respond to the ruling majority culture's perceptions of Jews. Just as Jewishness is a perception, easily moldable, hardly grounded in any tangible reality, blackness too is subject to the mutability of representation. Its presentation in American Jewish theater is hardly a recreation of any reality and, as blackness is shaped in accordance with Jewish self-representations, its presentation is often offensive, even if at times, I will show, intentions are well meaning. Nevertheless, examining how blackness and Jewishness have been constructed sheds light on the nature of Otherness: while racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric can often overlap, as Jews imagine blacks, they do not adopt the same virulent language in their depiction of blacks. As Hasia Diner articulates, looking at how the Yiddish presses discussed African-American experiences, Jews "may have made the Blacks 'objects,' but Jews nonetheless included themselves in their vision

of the situation of the ‘other.’”<sup>78</sup> Like White America, blackness was fashioned, but unlike other Whites, Jews were fashioning blackness to understand their own sense of “otherness.” Blackness – even as it is imagined upon the stage – becomes a visual means for understanding Jewish status in American culture when the American rhetoric of race and religion do not seem to accurately categorize Jews.

To alter how one is represented requires a sharp awareness of the histrionics of representation.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, it is not surprising that Jews have been so heavily involved in the American theater as well as the Hollywood movie industry. As was the case for much of the twentieth century, the theater and the cinema were prime arenas for reshaping the Jewish body so that Jews could be perceived as more like whites and less like Others. Because the stage cannot rely upon the imaginative special effects and cinematic camera angles that shape film’s narrative, the theater is especially rooted in its use of the body as the conduit of meaning. Judging by the number of Jewish performers who appeared in blackface during the heyday of minstrel and vaudeville comedy, Jewish performers discovered the opportunities that the theater offered them to reinvent the Jewish body. More specifically, they adapted the racial implications of blackface to realign the Jewish body against a white norm.

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<sup>78</sup> Diner, “Drawn Together by Self-Interest: Jewish Representation of Race and Race Relations in the Early Twentieth Century” 35.

<sup>79</sup> While this chapter does not touch upon the image of blacks in Ancient and Medieval Jewish thought, Abraham Melamed’s examination of blacks in rabbinic Jewish literature notes that reshaping Jewish identity against the black body. The “identification of the Jew as inferior other by the majority culture – be it pagan, Muslim or Christian – increased the psychological need to define and confine the other’s other” (224). See Melamed, *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture: A History of the Other*.

Al Jolson, Fanny Brice, Sophie Tucker, Eddie Cantor and George Jessel all monstrously mimicked the slave's character under the burnt cork mask. Jews were so prominent in the blackface arts that by the end of its popularity nearly all blackface performers were Jewish. For Jews, it was ironic that proving one's whiteness meant assuming blackface. But, the logic is clear: if whites were white because they could don the blackface, then Jews, too, were white as well.

This is not to propose that Jews sought to mock blacks through their misrepresentation of blackness. Though blackface allowed Jewish performers to become white by exploiting the image of the black body, paradoxically, blackface also showed adoration for and kinship with black culture. In his aptly titled book *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott has written that blackface—an “investiture in black bodies”—was “a manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of ‘blackness’ and demonstrates the permeability of the colorline.”<sup>80</sup> Lott argues that minstrelsy began in more egalitarian working class circles where blacks and whites were more prone to interact. For Lott, blackface minstrelsy was carnival-esque, turning traditional hierarchical structures topsy-turvy where laboring whites, who were not of the privileged bourgeois class, could mock elitist authority. Lott does not deny the racist consequences of blackface performance; the prejudicial implications of blackface performance are self-evident. However, his theories regarding why blackface was so readily adopted on the stage cast light on why Jews were willing to adopt it as well. Jews, like laboring men and women, were hardly members of the

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<sup>80</sup> Lott 6. On the topic of blackface and social hierarchy see also Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* 131-38.

privileged class. Blackface served as a visual language for Jews that bespoke a subversion of the system. Not only were Jewish entertainers granted the authority that comes with standing on a stage before a live audience, but as entertainers who spread the burnt cork make-up over their faces, they also became performers who could engage in transgressive behavior, spinning social hierarchy in upon itself, all the while becoming white in the process. Jews, whose bodies had been depicted as closer to the black man than the white man, understood blackface to be a means of taking control over the molding of their own body. If blackface transformed white into black, for Jews it turned black into white.

Nevertheless, Jews were not always pleased that their fortunes were often mediated through blackness. In her autobiography, *Some of These Days*, Sophie Tucker discusses her first appearance in blackface. Dubious of the plus-sized comedienne's ability to sell a lusty torch song, her manager saw to it that Tucker's face was blackened before she appeared on stage. Though she was furious that she had to wear the blackened cork make-up in order to earn the audience's acceptance, she went on anyway. At the end of her song, however, Tucker turned up her glove to reveal her true skin color underneath. She writes later in her autobiography that she would "wave to the crowd to show I was a *white* girl."<sup>81</sup> Though Sophie Tucker's removal of her glove was an act of defiance against social customs that required a heavy-set Yiddishe Mama to wear blackface in order to sing risqué siren songs, she classified herself as a "white girl" in opposition to "blackness." In this illustration,

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<sup>81</sup> Tucker 33-35.

Yiddishe Mamas, who were initially somewhere in between white and black, became categorically white.<sup>82</sup>

Certainly, other ethnic groups smeared on blackface as well, as Werner Sollors has discussed,<sup>83</sup> and for many of the same reasons. Irish Americans in particular helped popularize the blackface arts. However, as Michael Rogin has mentioned, blackface distanced the Irish from African-American communities. In contrast, he notes, Jews showed a continuous pattern of representing blackness, not only through blackface, but also through jazz music and the incorporation of black cultural trends into the Broadway musical. The attraction to black cultural life, albeit a misrepresentation, was only the beginning of a century-long association between Jewish and black culture. Jewish entertainers found black culture to be in many respects quite *heykish* (familiar). Blackness symbolized the struggles that Jews had with the assimilation process. In many ways, blackface “signif[ied] (in the senses both of standing for and playing with) a Jewish/black alliance” in that it represented “the dark side of the American melting pot. . . . [B]lackface American Jews exposed the contrasting situations of Jews and blacks that allowed Jews to rise above the people whose cause and whose music they made their own.”<sup>84</sup> The alliance that

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<sup>82</sup> “My Yiddishe Mama” was one of Tucker’s most famous songs and the nickname “Yiddishe Mama” became associated with the singer. As the song suggests, the Yiddishe Mama is a nostalgic figure, a reminder of *heykish* (familiar) times gone by. She is the loving Jewish mother who does everything for her children so that they will be better off than she was and she wants her children to retain Jewish values in the face of assimilation so that, in effect, they do not become “too-American.”

<sup>83</sup> Sollors, “Literature and Ethnicity” 656.

<sup>84</sup> Rogin 68.

Rogin discusses is what allowed Jews to reinvent blackness so that it became popular. If Jews were well received because black culture (albeit an imagined black culture) was well received by the mainstream, then Jews were essentially accepted by default. Jewish entertainers could transform black culture into a commodity suitable enough for the mainstream, if not to accept socially, at least to find culturally unique enough to be catchy. Surely Jews, who were discovering themselves to be closer to the mainstream than blacks were, would be accepted also—a histrionic manifestation of a *kal v'khomer*, the rabbinic parlance that teaches that if large variances are acceptable, small variations will undoubtedly be suitable as well. If Jews could popularize black culture, or what was idealized as black culture, and “blackness” could speak for all Americans, so then could “Jewishness.” In the process, blacks and Jews were united as groups unaccepted by an all-American norm. Albeit a bastardization of black culture, Jewish entertainment in the persons of—the Gershwins, Irving Berlin, Al Jolson, George Jessel, *et. al.*— saw itself as helping to bring black life into the mainstream. This was not only a celebration of Jewish progressivism, but a celebration of theater as well: performance had redemptive qualities.

In many respects, a Jewish partiality towards the black experience was not an entirely Jewish American phenomenon, as European Jews also saw kinship with blacks. As early as 1902, in Theodore Herzl’s utopian novel, *Altneuland (Old New Land)*, Herzl creates a parallel between Jewish and black identities as he draws the blueprint for a Zionist state. Though the novel’s narrative predates the founding of Israel by nearly half a century, Hertzl doesn’t see his utopian vision ending with the establishment of a Jewish state. Instead, as one character suggests, “There is still one

problem of racial misfortune unsolved. The depths of that problem, in all their horror, only a Jew can fathom. I mean the negro problem. . . . now that I have lived to see the restoration of the Jews, I should like to pave the way for the restoration of the Negroes.”<sup>85</sup> Hertzl’s discussion of “the Negro” demonstrates an affinity for universal acceptance, an empathy that would be a bridge between American Jews and blacks throughout the Civil Rights era and beyond, in spite of any rifts between the two communities. While Hertzl’s comments may show that European Jews were willing to equate Jewish and black struggles, the Jewish immigrant’s arrival in America complicated that construction. While America certainly was no haven for either group, Jews did not encounter the vicious brutality that they did in Europe, and they found that blacks, not themselves, were the most oppressed group in America. How similar were the Jewish and black experiences if the treatment of Jews, though often rough at times to be sure, was still one step above the treatment of blacks?

In Europe, Jewish identity was based, in part, on Europe’s exclusion of the Jews, creating a distinct “us and them” dichotomy.<sup>86</sup> In America, however, Jews gradually became a subset of the white race, complicating the construction of Jewish identity. Hasia Diner has shown that as Jews took on a role as political and financial supporters of the black population in the pre-World War Two decades of the twentieth century, they were inevitably defining their identity against the very people that they were defending. Their political advocacy as “mouthpieces” for blacks

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<sup>85</sup> Hertzl 170.

<sup>86</sup> See Howe 5-15.

helped shape their identity as a Jewish group that was white enough to serve as advocates for blacks.<sup>87</sup>

Were Jews aware that their interest in promoting black culture aided the advancement of their status as a white minority, one step closer than blacks to being considered American? Looking at the appearance of blacks in American Yiddish poetry, Merle Lyn Bachman has argued that Yiddish poets often commented upon how blackness shaped their own whiteness—significant in that the Yiddish language allowed Jews to speak freely about cultural politics without the self-regulation in Jewish writings in English that would often accompany having a non-Jewish audience. Bachman writes that “Yiddish poets take race—in its American construction as color, stigma, and division—and rewrite it, instead, as a construction of displacement—a condition that they understand as shared by Yiddish immigrants and Black Americans.” And, yet, in a period “when Jews’ own racial status was uncertain,” many a Yiddish poet used blackness “to solidify his own white status.”<sup>88</sup> The fact that Jews crafted their identities against the image of the black body suggests that Jews not only sought to define themselves as whites to non-Jews but also within the Jewish community as well. Their positioning of themselves as whites implied that they were Americans-to-be. Though Jews saw a parallel between their social oppression and the subjugation that blacks were encountering, the process seemed to create a hierarchy between blacks and Jews; to speak for blacks, about blacks, and

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<sup>87</sup> Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935*, especially 35-50, 239 (quoted).

<sup>88</sup> Bachman 23, 12.

through images of blackness meant that, as Toni Morrison has written, a “move in to mainstream America always meant buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens.”<sup>89</sup> Was there really a hierarchy of “Otherness”? As Jews considered Blacks as the quintessential American Other, such an assumption did not mean that Jews were stripping themselves of their own Otherness. Rather, blackness served as a model for describing Otherness, one that Jews looked to in order to create self-definitions of Jewish identity.

Of course, such movements into the mainstream based upon whiteness and blackness suggest the relativity, not the universality, of the meanings of these terms. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *The Jazz Singer*, a narrative that is self-reflexive about Jewishness, blackface and performance. *The Jazz Singer* is best known as the first talking motion picture, as well as the movie that crystallized Al Jolson as a seminal figure in American film history. It is lesser known as a Broadway production, which starred George Jessel (1925) in the Al Jolson lead role (1927). In its basic plot, the film stays true to the stage extravaganza: Jackie Rabinowitz, known in the vaudeville circuit as Jack Robin, must choose between a successful stage career and his dedication to his Jewish upbringing. His father, a cantor, is dying and his mother begs for her son to sing Kol Nidre services on his behalf. The catch: Yom Kippur falls on the opening night of a gaudy Broadway extravaganza that features Jack in a starring role—a role, incidentally, in which he will wear the burnt cork mask. Thus, *The Jazz Singer* portrays the struggle between tradition and assimilation,

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<sup>89</sup> Morrison 124.

a theme heightened in its cinematic version where its star, Al Jolson, too, was born a cantor's son.

It is in the finale of *The Jazz Singer* where the film departs from the stage production. In the movie, Al Jolson's Jack Robin gets to follow both paths. The film suggests that the cantor's son (both the character and the actor) can have his cake and eat it, too. First, he sings the Kol Nidre service before heading to the Winter Garden Theater to sing the movie's finale ultimo, "My Mammy," to his mother, with a broad toothy grin shining brightly and whitely underneath his darkly disguised face. The song is unique in that a Jewish man masked in blackface sings a black song to his Jewish mother. Sara Rabinowitz, Jack's "Mammy," ultimately applauds, with tears in her eyes, and accepts him for what he represents: with a little modification, her Old World Jewish son can refashion himself into an American success. However, this scene does not occur in the Broadway play and, in fact, we are left unsure what choice Jack Robin will ultimately make. While the film may offer, as Mark Slobin writes, "mythic muscle" in its "endorsement of the emerging doctrine of cultural pluralism" the play shows that Samuel Raphaelson, playwright of *The Jazz Singer*, "flirted with a heretical statement" that perhaps the best decision for Jack "may be to reject success."<sup>90</sup> Though Raphaelson understood the power that performance afforded not only Jews but all white ethnics, it came at a price. As Raphaelson writes in the preface to the printed text of *The Jazz Singer*:

In seeking a symbol of the vital chaos of America's soul, I find no more adequate one than jazz. Here you have the rhythm of frenzy staggering against a symphonic background—a background composed

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<sup>90</sup> Slobin 38-39.

of lewdness, heart's delight, soul-racked madness, monumental boldness, exquisite humility, but principally prayer. . . . Jazz is prayer. It is too passionate to be anything else. It is prayer distorted, sick, unconscious of its destination. The singer of jazz is what Matthew Arnold said of the Jew, 'lost between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born.' In this, my first play, I have tried to crystallize the ironic truth that one of the Americas of 1925—that one which packs to overflowing our cabarets, musical revues and dance halls—is praying with a fervor as intense as that of the America which goes sedately to church and synagogue. The jazz American is different from the dancing dervish, from the Zulu medicine man, from the Negro evangelist only in that he doesn't know he is praying.

Though the Jewish jazz singers are “Jews with their roots in the synagogue,” in that the music that they offer is the prayer of “minstrels who create and interpret [the songs they sing], they overlook the religion background of the music they chant.”<sup>91</sup> They are entertainers without an understanding of the purpose in what they do, trapped in chaos. Raphaelson's use of the word “minstrel” is deliberate. Jewish Jazz men, America's minstrels, may sing the gospel of America through frenetic, improvisational melodies, but they are only permitted to sing as a minstrel, that is, in the costume of the slave, a costume so removed from the performer that there is essentially nothing Jewish about it. Within the reinvention of the self comes the death of one's substance. If a Jew can only be accepted behind a mask, is the acceptance real? The minstrel, the Jewish songbird of America in masquerade, is an apt metaphor when the self must paradoxically be reconfigured. The film suggests that blackface is the symbolic disguise that allows Jack to fashion himself as he pleases, free to follow in the rituals of the Old World or play in the swift paces of the New World.

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<sup>91</sup> Raphaelson 9-10.

The stage version, however, is not nearly as optimistic. In the play, blackface may allow Jews to mask themselves and enter mainstream America, but it also suggests that once the burnt cork is worn, it can never be removed. Instead, as blackface performers wear a mask, it is difficult to tell the Jew from the gentile. Raphaelson's unwillingness to show the audience what choice Jack makes shows that Raphaelson recognizes the gains and losses of each possible outcome. Paradoxical as it may seem, Raphaelson sees a "sameness" characterizing blackface performance. As blackface makes a Jew white, is he still distinctly Jewish? It is no surprise to find that while the film was marketed to a mass audience, the stage version—with its ending that questions the value of assimilation—was marketed as part of "a massive promotional campaign aimed mainly at the Jewish community." It was successful in its promotion; the audience for each show was estimated to be ninety percent Jewish.<sup>92</sup>

While the theatrical version of *The Jazz Singer* may have shown that blackface can stamp out Jewish distinctness, paradoxically, blackface allowed Jews to expose America to Jewish culture its Jewishness was disguised. Jewish entertainers and jazz musicians who adopted black culture, and found success in doing so, suggested that Americanizing one's identity did not mean that one needed to assimilate completely. As Joel Rosenberg has discussed, offering an alternative to Michael Rogin's reading of *The Jazz Singer*, blackface was not "the indispensable passport to assimilation, for in truth Jews fared far better by means of Jewface—

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<sup>92</sup> Carringer 14. See also Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* 104.

Yiddish dialect, schlemiel humor, Borscht Belt ironies. In such a way Jews assimilated America to themselves rather than the reverse.”<sup>93</sup> Blackface put the Jew in the position where he “declares by his minstrel image that he is, in truth, [the audience’s] slave. By placing his own marginality (and that of African Americans) on display in this way, he is also saying, ‘I am you’—that is: I am the diverse social order that you often deny but which is the greatness of this land. I am a reminder of your own arrival on these shores as refugees from persecution in other lands.”<sup>94</sup>

What Rosenberg suggests is that the blackface scene in *The Jazz Singer* is ultimately transgressive. It forces the audience to recognize how the immigrant body is reshaped in order to coincide with an American norm. The blackface calls attention to the warping of the immigrant self to the extent that it redefines an American identity to a performance as well. To be American is to engage in performance, suggesting that Jewishness or blackness may be truer than “Americanness.” As Rosenberg notes, *The Jazz Singer* may have been the first film in which the spoken English language was heard, but it was also the first film where an audience heard Yiddish; its narrative would make little sense without the Yiddish musical and dialogue sequences. For Rosenberg, the ludicrous idea of a Jew in blackface, an entertainment spectacle that was on its last legs in 1927, essentially calls attention to Jewishness more than it hides it. He writes, “While the film’s story will make jazz

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<sup>93</sup> Rosenberg 40.

<sup>94</sup> Rosenberg 43.

and Torah seem like opposites, it will also affirm their unity—and thus, to some degree, the uneasy unity of modernity with its own prehistory.”<sup>95</sup>

Arguably, blackness did not ultimately disguise Jewishness in the least. Barbara W. Grossman has noted in her biography of Fanny Brice that the comedienne was famous for her coon songs (among many other routines), yet she only performed in blackface once. Instead, Brice—who was not a native Yiddish speaker—decorated the conventionally black songs with Yiddish humor. Grossman writes, “Instead of wearing blackface and singing raucously, as coon shouters commonly did, [Brice] relied on the eccentric movements and facial expressions associated with Yiddish dialect comedy.”<sup>96</sup> In essence, blackness did not—as Rogin has argued—mask Jewish difference, fostering the assimilation process. Blackness promoted diversity in performance. Because coon singing was considered a black performance, it allowed Jews to expose variations of differences from the mainstream and to the mainstream. Brice, in effect, performed her Yiddish shtick through the metaphor of blackness. Just as Roman comedy allowed the slave to offer biting political satire against the ruling patriarchy, blackface allowed the performer to resist behavioral norms. In the costume of the black slave, Jews were free to bring Jewish culture into the mainstream.

Accordingly, it is clear why George Gershwin would set the lyrics of Sportin’ Life’s song from *Porgy and Bess*, “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” to the jazzed-up melody of the Torah Blessings. The results are striking: an African-American man sings a

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<sup>95</sup> Rosenberg 46.

<sup>96</sup> Grossman 32-33.

song about Old Testament stories that is set to the melody of the Torah Blessings, but the melody is syncopated—a jazz piece: jazz, a musical movement that began in African-American circles but became fashionable due to the success of Jewish performers, so much so that it grew to be the central genre of American popular music. In fact, Gershwin’s original intent was to write an opera based on S. Ansky’s *The Dybbuk* before turning to a musical piece based on DuBose Heyward’s *Porgy*. It was only after Gershwin discovered that an Italian composer named Lodovico Rocca was writing an opera on the Yiddish gothic drama that he focused his attention upon *Porgy and Bess*. Just as he planned to immerse himself within Jewish folk music in order to compose *The Dybbuk*, Gershwin traveled to South Carolina to live among the Gullahs to practice their rituals and take part in their lifestyle. This move from a study of Jewish heritage to a plunge into the African American lifestyle of Folly Beach, South Carolina, was typical of Gershwin, according to musicologist Jeffrey Melnick. “His career relied on an ability to sell Jewishness as a flexible modality—and one particularly suited for absorbing African American music.”<sup>97</sup>

Truth be told, blackness may have masked Jewishness while Jews became white, but it also allowed room for Jewish expression as well. Melnick describes blackness as an appropriate metaphor for showcasing a performer’s Jewish identity. Jews, who found themselves less a signified Other as they were in Europe, and more of an unarticulated in-between, could take the position as both insiders and outsiders to American popular culture. Melnick writes that, “The ethnic novelty songs of

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<sup>97</sup> Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* 75.

[Irving] Berlin's early career or the 'racy' sound of Gershwin's 'Swanee,' then, could serve as proof that Jewish composers were the best suited of all to give voice to all of the 'pluribus' now making up the American urban 'unum.'" Of Gershwin, whose *Porgy and Bess* became the quintessential American opera, Melnick notes that he, "had the confidence to tell the *New York Times* that his work in *Porgy and Bess* exemplified 'the typical American proletariat point of view in its fundamentals, regardless of race or color.'"<sup>98</sup> The manipulation of black culture was a vehicle for preserving Jewish identity even while it disguised it. Maria Damon writes, "It was an arena in which one could succeed, and in fact attract considerable attention to oneself, but not in ways that appeared to spell compromise and assimilation."<sup>99</sup>

While much has been made of Jewishness and blackness as depicted by minstrelsy and jazz, it seems that as minstrelsy and jazz have declined in popularity so has the scholarship. Do the models of the past, in which Jewish whiteness was constructed through a representation of blackness, still exist today? In order to answer this question, we must bridge the gap between the past and the present and explore the reasons behind the growing rifts between black and Jewish communities, rifts that, oddly, were not present during the jazz age to the degree that they are today. Debatably, Jews have assimilated more or less seamlessly into American culture and do not continue the pattern to fashion themselves as white as they did in earlier parts of the century. However, the paradigm for defining Jewishness by first defining blackness is still present upon the American stage, but for different reasons. No

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<sup>98</sup> Melnick, "Tin Pan Alley and the Black-Jewish Nation" 38.

<sup>99</sup> Damon 168-69.

longer do Jews need to define themselves as white to the degree that they did in the era of *The Jazz Singer*. In fact, quite the opposite is true: as we look to the contemporary stage the situation has reversed. Given the onslaught of black-Jewish narratives on stage and film, are Jews trying to show themselves to be “like blacks” in order to reclaim a minority status, one which reigning multicultural paradigms have been reluctant to grant to Jews?

Even though the relationship between blacks and Jews has changed dramatically, Jewish plays that feature African-American characters also tend to have characters that rediscover their Jewishness by identifying with the African-American experience. We see a number of Jewish characters who must first learn that the Jewish experience and the African-American experience are almost interchangeable before they come to accept their own Jewish identity. The seeds of such a narrative trope can be seen as being planted during the 1940s (and carried into the 1950s) when melting pot ideology, in congruence with wartime patriotism, stressed that all Americans, in theory, had the same public identity. Cheryl Greenberg has written, “The heyday of black-Jewish political cooperation, the 1940s and 1950s, was an era of pluralism transcendent. Both blacks and Jews (broadly speaking) endorsed a version of pluralism that posited the right of individuals to free choice of employment, housing, and social life, protected against discrimination.” Philosophically, Jewish and African-American views of their status as American citizens overlapped. Greenberg summarizes the core philosophy of both groups as: “In private one could choose to be, and celebrate being, a Jew, an African American, but in public one was, and must be treated as, only an American. . . . The key issue

then was freedom—freedom to choose and to celebrate who one was and at the same time freedom to enjoy equal access to all the opportunities others enjoyed without reference to one’s background.”<sup>100</sup> What Greenberg suggests is that during the World War II and the immediate post-World War years, the rhetoric that called for Jewish and African-American civil rights often overlapped and took on a near universalist approach. It is no surprise, then, that by the 1940s the NAACP had achieved a coalition with the country’s major Jewish groups, the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, the Jewish Labor Committee and the American Jewish Congress. Arguably, such groups saw the NAACP as their best vehicle for promoting social transformation.<sup>101</sup> Civil rights issues important to Jewish groups were not so particular that they could only be vocalized by Jewish voices.

In the 1949 film *Home of the Brave*, for example, we can see a generalized focus upon prejudice that ultimately is not dependent upon race or ethnicity. The film is based upon Arthur Laurents’s 1945 play of the same title. Examining where the film departs from the play demonstrates important constructions of black-Jewish dynamics. The play featured a Jewish soldier named Peter Coen serving in the American army in the South Pacific. In the close quarters of the battlefield, “Coney” discovers the hidden anti-Semitic assumptions that his fellow soldiers hold. Coney is unable to shake the idea that he will always be read as a signified Other throughout his life, and internalizes the prejudice to the point where he becomes physically immobile. Perversely, Jewish difference becomes embodied to such an extreme that

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<sup>100</sup> Greenberg 65.

<sup>101</sup> See Carson 178.

Coney's paralysis will always mark him as Jewish. Significantly, the film changes Coney to Mossie, an African-American, but follows the same plot. Thus, this film shows that even in 1949, in spite of the immediacy of the Holocaust, anti-Semitism and racism are interchangeable, just as an African-American body and a Jewish body are easily substituted for each other. In some ways, however, this is an unsurprising result, as racism and anti-Semitism in America at this time often went hand in hand. Anti-Semitic aggressors were often the same groups of individuals who were likely to take violent action against African-Americans; both the NAACP and the Anti-Defamation League at this time kept watch on the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi groups (and still continue to do so today).

Yet, the film is groundbreaking in placing a black soldier in an all-white troop. As Michael Rogin points out in *Black Face, White Noise*, this film appeared a year after Civil Rights groups argued against the continuation of Jim Crow laws in the military. The NAACP that year even considered draft resistance amongst black recruits.<sup>102</sup> Though the film substitutes a black soldier for a Jewish soldier, the replacement only heightens Moss's status as an outsider. Neither in wartime nor in any cinematic or theatrical depiction of wartime had a black man fought as part of an all white troop. And yet, it also universalizes Moss to the degree that his experience with prejudice is not race specific. His inclusion in the film as "arguably the first dignified, erect, nonstereotyped, intelligent black leading man to appear on the Hollywood screen" ultimately emphasizes the "larger issue of why we fight. How

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<sup>102</sup> Rogin 232.

can America be the home of the brave, the film asks, if it is not the land of the free?"<sup>103</sup> Mossie's plight against prejudice is also American's plight as well.

In Arthur Laurents's play, Coney's altruistic doctor, Captain Harold Bitterger, a gentile, must nurse the Jewish soldier back to health, attempting a variety of strategies, first by evoking the very bigotry that Coney has internalized, and later, nurturing Coney step by step until he feels confident enough to confront anti-Semitism. In the process, Captain Bitterger discovers that Coney's best friend, Finch, was about to make an anti-Semitic remark before he was shot. Coney's paralysis is due to guilt – a nagging, disheartening realization that he could have saved his friend from getting shot. But the guilt stems from the awareness that he briefly hesitated in helping Finch because, for a fleeting moment, he felt his friend deserved it. His brief reluctance to assist Finch, Coney internalizes, cost Finch his life. Paradoxically, he reasoned afterwards that if he wasn't born Jewish, he wouldn't have been offended by anti-Semitism, and following through on this logic, Finch would still be alive. In order to heal Coney, the Doctor must dismantle the wall of Jewish difference that Coney has constructed. He must teach Coney to realize that he is, in fact, no different from any other soldier:

DOCTOR: Peter, I want you to listen to listen hard to what I'm going to tell you. I want you to listen harder than you ever listened to anything in your whole life. Peter, *every soldier in this world* who sees a buddy get shot has that one moment when he feels glad. Yes, Peter, every single one. Because deep underneath he thinks: I'm glad it wasn't me. I'm glad *I'm* alive. . . . (*Gently.*) You see the whole point of this, Peter? You've been thinking you had some special kind of guilt. But you've got to realize something. You're the same as anybody else. You're no different, son, no different at all.

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<sup>103</sup> Rogin 233.

CONEY: I'm a Jew.

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DCOTOR: Peter, don't you understand?

CONEY: Yes! Sure! I understand! I understand up here! But here—  
(*Indicates his heart.*) deep in here, I just can't. I just can't believe it's  
true. I wanta believe, Doc, don't you know that? I want to believe  
that every guy who sees his buddy get shot feels glad. I wanta believe  
I'm not different but I—I— . . . It's hard, Doc. It's just damn hard.<sup>104</sup>

Coney, a perfect test case for any Freudian, punishes himself by envisioning himself as the embodiment of Jewish difference, so much so that he physicalizes his difference through his paralysis. The Doctor responds to Coney's neuroses by convincing him that no Jewish difference ever existed to begin with. Is this true? Was Coney's reaction to his friend's murder the same as any other soldier's reaction? Has Coney wrongly identified himself as different from the other soldiers in his troop?

The film makes a crucial adjustment to the Doctor's character that changes the relationship between doctor and patient dramatically. In the play, Doctor Bitterger is not Jewish, meaning that he guides Coney through his ordeal from the perspective of an all-American military insider. Significantly, the Doctor who guides Mossie towards strength is now the film's sole Jewish character and it is the Jewish character who now becomes the healer. Mossie's Jewish doctor must coax his young patient away from self-punishment. The Jew, formerly the patient, is now the patient's doctor, leading the African-American soldier towards emancipation from his bondage. The Doctor now speaks from the position of someone on the inside, an officer within the military, but someone who is outsider enough to understand Mossie's obsessions with embodied difference. In his discussion of the film version

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<sup>104</sup> Laurents 436-437.

of *Home of the Brave*, Michael Rogin evokes the Jewish-black relationships depicted in earlier blackface extravaganzas, seeing the film as a continuation of the Jewish voice speaking on behalf of the black man. Of the film's now-Jewish doctor, Rogin writes, "In forcing words and tears from the black face, the Jewish doctor, imitating the jazz singer before him, is effectively putting on blackface. He is making the black face and body perform emotions forbidden to his (male, Jewish) self."<sup>105</sup> What Rogin does not stress, however, is the change in audience between the film version of *Home of the Brave* and its theatrical predecessor. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the theater attracted a disproportionately Jewish audience. The mass audience of the cinema, in comparison, was more egalitarian in its make-up. If *Home of the Brave* demonstrates an America ideal that acknowledges private difference, but stresses public uniformity, the film demonstrates a shift in direction in which African Americans, not Jews, embody the public/private metaphor before a mass audience. In the previous chapter, I discussed the Jewish male as an everyman figure, one that represents the human struggle to understand one's identity and make something of one's self in a disapproving world. When the struggle involves blatant prejudice, however, African Americans rather than Jews become the everymen figure. Focusing upon a single unit of soldiers, the film of *Home of the Brave* shows that the African-American experience is more indicative, or universal, of the struggle with prejudice in America.

While America has always designated African Americans as "natural" Others, it is telling that a 1949 film based upon a 1945 play changed the subject from anti-

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<sup>105</sup> Rogin 234.

Semitism to racism. While in 1945 the details of Hitler's Holocaust were not fully known, in 1949 they were much more widely recognized. Could it be that the switch from the victimized Jewish World War Two soldier Coney to the African-American Mossie was done to avoid touching upon anti-Semitism, an issue that would trigger images of death camps, gas chambers and mass burials? Can anti-Semitism ever be discussed without mention of the Holocaust? By replacing a Jewish soldier with an African American, the film is able to keep Mossie's encounter with prejudice at a universal level, an impossibility were Mossie to remain Coney because Coney's experience with anti-Semitism would take on a whole new meaning: for the well-intentioned, non-Jewish Doctor gently to counter Coney's anxiety over anti-Semitism by claiming that Coney was, "the same as anybody else. . . . no different, son, no different at all" would seem highly suspect.<sup>106</sup> Where Coney paralyzed himself for hating Finch over an anti-Semitic remark, the truth of the matter was that with the discovery of the Holocaust, anti-Semitism was indeed paralyzing. *Home of the Brave* may have been a groundbreaking movie for featuring a robust African-American actor in a complex leading role, but with the substitution of an African American for a Jewish soldier wounded by bigotry, the issue of prejudice is generalized to the point where Mossie need not be African American: he can be Jewish, Asian, Hispanic – with a little substitution, the plot still works.

Just as important, Mossie's presence in place of Coney's also avoids the stereotype that has plagued Jews since the Holocaust: that Jews are, were and always will be victims. In fact, this stereotype is contradicted with the presence of Mossie's

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<sup>106</sup> Laurents 436.

now-Jewish doctor. *Home of the Brave* positions the Jew against the victimized African-American body. The movie reconstructs the image of the wounded, victimized Jew into the form of a healer by positioning the African-American soldier as an everyman's victim.

The Holocaust, even when it is absent in narratives about Jews and prejudice, is always present. Because Jews were victims of the most horrendous crime of the twentieth century, it added fuel to the perception that Jews were too effeminate to stand up for themselves. As the Holocaust became a part of the public's conscience, it marked Jews in ways that went beyond existing racial, religious or ethnic rhetoric. When Americans learned of the Holocaust, it forced them to rethink anti-Semitism as socially fashionable, but it also perpetuated the perception that the Jew was the perennial sufferer. The implications of such an assessment carried with it insinuations about Jewish masculinity. If Jews were habitually the victim, they were chronically weak as well, significant given the importance that American patriotism places upon a healthy male body. Though the healer is typically regarded as a traditionally feminine role, the fact that *Home of the Brave* positions a Jewish doctor as the figure who nurses an African-American soldier back to health reworks the stereotype. The Jew is no longer weak, but healthy. In the process, however, the African American becomes the essential victim.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> For more on African-American and Jewish relationships in the movie industry see Cripps' "African Americans and Jews in Hollywood: Antagonistic Allies," *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States* 257-274.

I do not mean to suggest that the sole reason for the portrayal of African Americans as victims was to relieve Jews of the stigma of victimization. Such a statement is obviously reductive and ignores the emphasis in Jewish culture to look beyond its own community and champion the rights of others. The importance that Jews have placed upon social issues helped foster natural alliances with other traditionally disenfranchised groups. Nevertheless, the Holocaust did shape the perception of Jews as the quintessential victims, a perception that complicates Jewish identity: how much of Jewish identity in America is rooted in the idea that Jews are victims of oppression?

As popular culture of the forties and fifties universalized the concept of prejudice, the African-American male came to stand as the symbol of bigotry in America. During the Civil Rights movement of the sixties, Jews largely stood alongside African Americans, but the Civil Rights movement helped particularize Jewish struggles as well. As Stuart Svonkin writes, by the 1960's, Jewish civil rights agencies were being accused of being more "American" in outlook, than "Jewish." In response, "the national Jewish agencies began to reemphasize more particularly Jewish priorities. . . . As the discrepancies between Jewish interests and the interests of other minority groups became increasingly apparent, Jewish leaders began to reconsider the conceptions of anti-Semitism, prejudice, and intergroup relations that had shaped their policies and programs during the 1940s and 1950s."<sup>108</sup> This by no means implies that Jewish organizations became isolationist in their philosophies. Rather, they reasoned that the Holocaust, a growing intermarriage rate, and Israel's

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<sup>108</sup> Svonkin 8.

survival forced them to rethink any universals that linked Jews with other minority groups. While Jewish civil rights were becoming more distinctly Jewish, at the same time, they could not be defined independent of African-American civil rights; as the Civil Rights movement showed Jews and blacks coexisting, the movement as a whole supplied the rhetoric from which Jewish civil rights was drawn. In fact, this trend still continues today. As Civil Rights inspired the multicultural movement, Jews have struggled to adapt to the rhetoric of multiculturalism by negotiating between a distinctly Jewish experience and a rhetoric that links Jews with other minorities, most specifically African Americans.

The progressive politics of the theater helped to position Jews as such. In October of 1968, Howard Sackler's *The Great White Hope* opened in New York. The epic drama is about the first black heavyweight champion named Jack Jefferson and his relationship with a young white woman. The play features a sympathetic relationship between Jack and Goldie, his Jewish manager. Goldie, older and perhaps wiser than Jefferson, remains loyal to Jefferson, offering unconditional support as he watches the prizefighter get castigated by the press as they expose Jefferson's relationship with Ellie. In 1967, the same year that the Supreme Court overturned the illegality of interracial marriage, the play opened at Arena Stage in Washington, DC. In fact, it premiered on December 7, only a day before Richard Nixon expressed concern about the effects race dynamics would have on America's involvement in Vietnam. With its then-controversial scene that showed a black man in bed with a white woman, the play touched a nerve in 1967, one that propelled Sackler's play to New York in 1968, the first time a regional theater sent a production to Broadway. It

also launched the careers of its leads, then unknowns, James Earl Jones and Jane Alexander. The very same year *The Great White Hope* won the Pulitzer Prize.

In *The Great White Hope*, Goldie, the Jewish character, is in the supportive, guiding role, not unlike the relationship between doctor and patient in the film version of *Home of the Brave*. While Goldie does not reject Jefferson and Ellie's relationship, he also understands the shock that it will surely have upon white America:

GOLDIE: So you don't know the score, huh?  
Well, I'll tell you the score, right now I'll tell you.  
And you should listen too, miss.  
I can see you're a fine serious girl, not a bum,  
Better you should know, so there's no hard feelings here.  
First, Jack, they hate your guts a little bit—OK!  
You don't put on gloves everybody should like you  
Then they hate your guts some more—still OK!  
That makes you wanna fight, some kinda pep it give you.  
And then they hate you so much they're payin through the nose  
to see a white boy maybe knock you on your can—  
well, that's more than OK, cash in, after all,  
it's so nice to be colored you shouldn't have a bonus?  
But, sonny, when they start in to hate you more than that,  
you gotta watch out. And that means now—  
Oh, I got ears, I get told things—  
guys who want to put dope into your food there,  
a guy who wants to watch the fight behind a rifle,  
OK, cops we'll get dogs, that we can handle.  
But this on top of it, a white girl, Jack,  
what do I have to spell it on the wall for you,  
you wanna drive them crazy, you don't hear what happens—<sup>109</sup>

Throughout the play, Goldie shows no objection to Jefferson's interracial relationship. Rather, he speaks of the rabid bigotry that Jefferson, as a black man who has literally conquered numerous white men in the ring, will evoke. In fact,

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<sup>109</sup> Sackler 35.

Goldie recognizes that the public sees Jefferson's fights as race wars: black versus white. The public may view Jefferson as having the audacity to beat any white man who chooses to fight him, but that's "OK" to Goldie, because it brings in a "bonus." On the one hand, it is disturbing that Goldie makes a quick buck because of the racially driven ruckus over Jefferson's success. However, Goldie sees the economic gains as a transgressive act. Though a bigoted world casts Jefferson as a representative black man in the ring, in Goldie's terms, the fact that Jefferson makes money off such simplemindedness is another form of subverting the system that wishes to reject him. In other words, by arranging fights for Jefferson against white men, Goldie is challenging assumptions about American masculinity and white dominance.

Like a Jewish entertainer in black face, Goldie can only challenge social norms through Jefferson's blackness. As the public searches for a "Great White Hope" that can topple Jefferson, Jefferson's sheer brilliance in the ring squashes any chance that the "Great White Hope" will emerge. Jefferson ritually destroys any chance for a white champion. But the situation forces Jefferson to be viewed as a black man first and a boxer second. Goldie, through Jefferson, may challenge white dominance, but he does so on white man's terms: by arranging fights for Jefferson in the boxing ring, a metaphor for race wars, Goldie aids in the construction of Jefferson's blackness as the preeminent trait that defines Jefferson.

In marketing Jefferson, he uses Jefferson's blackness to delegitimize white dominance. Jefferson's blackness becomes commodified. It is not surprising, then, that Goldie expresses grave concern over Jefferson's relationship with Ellie. While

Goldie sees nothing wrong with helping Jefferson market blackness to acquire fame and attention nor does Goldie see anything wrong with capitalizing upon the public's fear and bigotry, he recognizes that putting Jefferson's white girl before the press would ultimately cater to the public's biggest fear: that black men—especially Jefferson whose “masculinity” is insurmountable—will seduce white women. Taking a much coveted title is one thing, but Goldie reasons that taking a white woman as a lover would be seen as too threatening.

That these words of caution come from a Jew, rather than a fellow black man, suggests that Jefferson's situation is more universal than it first appears, a suggestion that Jefferson immediately refutes, pointedly recommending to Goldie that Ellie, “put black on her face” and “puff her mouth up[.]” Jefferson evokes the image of the minstrel performer “so's nobody notice Ah took nothing from em[.]”<sup>110</sup> He models Ellie after a minstrel entertainer, but a minstrel performer whose burnt cork mask fools others about her whiteness rather than calls attention to it. In doing so, Jefferson reveals the emptiness of his own fame: his blackness is created out of a literal opposition to whiteness. He is slave to the white man, even as he defeats him. Goldie, in effect, is the true winner here, though he may not recognize it. As the white and Jewish manager of a black champion, he can have his cake and eat it too: he earns the prestige of aligning himself with the fighter who has proven himself worthier than any white heavyweight fighter, and at the same time, as Jefferson's blackness is emphasized, Goldie's whiteness is constructed as well.

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<sup>110</sup> Sackler 36.

It is ironic that after Jefferson suggests that Ellie put on blackface, this scene is followed by a blackface entertainer who tells racist jokes and croons coon songs to casino patrons. In the 2000 Arena Stage revival of *The Great White Hope*, the blackface entertainer was played by a black actor, highlighting that definitions of “blackness” and “whiteness” are rooted in what they are not. The character who has the most control (but by no means complete control) over his identity is Goldie because he can reap the rewards of being, figuratively speaking, both black and white.

Sackler’s *The Great White Hope* may seem to follow *The Jazz Singer* and *Home of the Brave* in its depiction of a Jewish character making social gains through blackness, but it is significant that the Jewish character sees this as a rebellious, not an assimilatory, action. Goldie’s push to guide Jefferson towards success is designed to spit in white America’s eye. In the process, however, he cannot speak for himself; he must express his opposition through Jefferson and by doing so, he shapes Jefferson’s blackness in light of his opposition to mainstream Christian America.

While *The Great White Hope* shows a black-Jewish relationship that positions the Jewish character as a mentor to the black protagonist tragic-hero, more contemporary Jewish plays show an inversion of the narrative trope, reversing the teacher-student relationship that earlier plays have ritualized. In post-Civil Rights black-Jewish “unlikely buddy” plays, black protagonists seem to know their Jewish friends better than the Jewish characters know themselves. The plotline is similar throughout: the Jewish protagonist, typically elderly or near death, has become old in outlook as well as in age and is in need of severe rejuvenation. A charming friendship ultimately develops with a black character, and with his or her

encouragement, the Jewish character finds a new lease on life. Howard DaSilva, Felix Leon and Harold Rome's musical, *The Zulu and the Zayda* (1966), based on Dan Jacobson's short story, is set in South Africa and shows a maturing, unusual friendship between a Yiddish-speaking grandfather and his Zulu caregiver. At first, Zayda objects to having a personal houseboy, but Paulus eventually wins him over, learning to speak Yiddish in the process, and Zayda discovers that the two have much in common, finding that Jewishness and blackness seem to overlap. Though Paulus and his friends are shown to be victims of apartheid politics, Zayda finds himself allying with them against the white ruling class, even going to jail for standing up for Paulus's rights. Though the play takes place in South Africa, it thinly parallels the Jewish involvement in the explosive Civil Rights movement that shaped American ideologies for years to come.

In Henry Denker's *Horowitz and Mrs. Washington* (1980), based on his novel by the same name, Horowitz suffers a series of unfortunate events – prejudice, a mugging in which his face is slashed, and a stroke. His black nurse, in collaboration with his Jewish daughter, guides him through his regeneration and cures him of his depression. Ultimately it is the wisdom of his nurse, if not the humorous antics of his daughter, that free him from his slump. More well-known, however, is Herb Gardner's *I'm Not Rappaport* (1987). Gardner's play presents the quirky friendship between two octogenarians, one black, one Jewish, who share a Central Park bench. Old and feeble, Nat and Midge come to rely upon each other for protection from Central Park's pickpockets and thugs. Though their relationship is at times caustic, the two characters are inseparable. Judd Hirsch, the actor who created the role of Nat

on Broadway, described the irascible old man as a “Jewish Don Quixote,”<sup>111</sup> an apt allusion given Nat’s preference for fantasy. Nat (if that is his real name) tells tall tales of his upbringing to an often dubious Midge, who wonders if Nat truly believes the fantasies he spins. The title of the play is an allusion to a Yiddish joke, which Nat ascribes to the 1930’s Jewish comic Broadway star Willy Howard; Nat instructs Midge in the routine:

NAT: Whatever I say to you, you say to me, “I’m not Rappaport.”

You got that?

MIDGE: Yeah.

NAT: O.K., picture we just met.

MIDGE: O.K.

NAT: Hello, Rappaport!

MIDGE: I’m not Rappaport.

NAT: Hey, Rappaport, what happened to you? You used to be a tall, fat guy; now you’re a short, skinny guy.

MIDGE: I’m not Rappaport.

NAT: You used to be a young fellah with a beard; now you’re an old guy without a beard! What happened to you?

MIDGE: I’m not Rappaport.

NAT: What happened, Rappaport? You used to dress up nice; now you got old dirty clothes!

MIDGE: I’m not Rappaport.

NAT: And you changed your *name* too!<sup>112</sup>

In fact, we know very little about who Nat is, other than he is *not* Rappaport, nor is he any of the other identities he adopts: not Schwartzman, nor Hernando, nor Rothman, nor Gould. Nat moves seamlessly from identity to identity, baffling a flabbergasted Midge as he does so. Rarely can we ever be sure when Nat is telling the truth about who he is. Yet in one atypical, revealing moment, when a startled Nat spots the neighborhood punk, Nat mumbles to Midge, “You choose who you need for

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<sup>111</sup> Quoted in *Herb Gardner: The Collected Plays* 230.

<sup>112</sup> Herb Gardner, *I’m Not Rappaport* 252-253.

the occasion. An occasion arises and one chooses a suitable person[.]”<sup>113</sup> Midge has no chance to respond to Nat’s mantra, as he too is frightened by the punk.

Just as Nat is not any of the personas he adopts, most importantly, Nat is not Midge. Nat’s self-fashioning, his malleable identity, is dependent upon Midge staying put. Nat’s protean shenanigans only work if Midge is movingly inflexible. In other words, if opposites attract, it is because when Nat changes masks, Midge stubbornly remains the same. Were Midge to view identity with the same elasticity that Nat does, the relationship would fail. Nat’s inventions are contingent upon Midge’s willingness not to pull the same *sh\_ticks*. At the end of the play, Midge learns to accept that his role in the relationship is to remain static so that Nat can reconstruct himself before his very eyes:

NAT: I felt I owed you an apology; also the truth. My name is Nat Moyer; this is my actual name. I was a few years with the Fur Workers’ Union, this was true, but when Ben Gold lost power they let me go. I was then for forty-one years a waiter at Deitz’s Dairy Restaurant on Houston Street; that’s all, a waiter. I was retired at age seventy-three; they said they would have kept me on except I talked too much, annoyed the customers. I presently reside, and have for some time, at the Amsterdam Hotel; here my main occupation is learning more things about tuna fish than God ever intended. In other words, whatever has been said previously, I was, and am now, no one. No one at all. This is the truth.

...

MIDGE: (*quietly still shaking his head*) Shit, man, you *still* can’t tell the truth.

NAT: (*continues moving away*) That was the truth.

MIDGE: Damn it, tell me the truth.

NAT: I *told* you the truth. That’s what I was, that’s *sall* —

MIDGE: (*angrily, slapping the bench*) No, you wasn’t a waiter. What was you really?

NAT: I was a waiter . . .

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<sup>113</sup> Gardner 264.

MIDGE: (*shouting angrily*) You wasn't just a waiter, you was *more* than that! Tell me the truth, damn it—  
NAT: (*he stops on the path; shouts*) I was a *waiter*, that's it! (*Silence for a moment; then he continues down the path on his walker. He stops after a few steps; silence for several moments. Then, quietly:*) Except, of course, for a brief time in the motion picture industry.  
MIDGE: You mean the movies?  
NAT: Well, *you* can call it the movies; *we* call it the motion picture industry.  
MIDGE: What kinda job you have there?  
NAT: A job? What I did you couldn't call a job. You see, I was, briefly, a mogul.  
MIDGE: Mogul; yeah, I hearda that. Ain't that some kinda Rabbi or somethin'?'<sup>114</sup>

As the curtain slowly descends, the conversation continues, and Midge freely consents to his role, engrossed in Nat's fantasies, granting Nat the agency to recreate himself and become something more than he really is. Graciously, Midge is willing to play along, preferring to dub Nat's fictions as the truth and Nat's truths as fiction. Thus, the play is subtle in its depiction of the Jewish/African-American friendship. While the play is not heavy-handed in its depiction of an explicitly universal black or Jewish experience, whatever that may entail, the play would not work if Midge was white, nor if Nat was Christian. Both characters must be outsiders, looking at a world of opportunities unavailable too them. Moreover, Nat's phony personalities are dependent upon Midge being restricted from experiencing what Nat pretends to have done. The roles that Nat plays – a lawyer, a therapist, a spy, a mob boss, movie mogul – all depend upon a pretending to be a part of a social status that the poor African American near-blind janitor has only observed, but never experienced for himself. Because by and by large African Americans did not have the opportunities

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<sup>114</sup> Gardner 298-299.

towards social advancement that whites did, Nat can safely assume that Midge won't be able to offer details from experience that would contradict Nat's stories.

Within the context of black-Jewish theatrical relationships, *Rappaport* plays upon the tired narrative of the Jewish performer reformulating the self by using blackness as a stepping stone for advancement. Yet *Rappaport* inverts the relationship, calling attention to its emptiness. Midge knows full well that Nat is fabricating stories, and is he willing to play Nat's foolish sidekick. Likewise, Nat knows that Midge sees through his cock-and-bull fairy tales. The silent truths are suppressed so that Nat can envision himself as the hero that he never was, the powerful figure that an elderly Jewish man never had the opportunity be in his youth. Midge realizes that there is little to be gained by forcing Nat to be truthful. In reality, both are victims, not only of the youthful punks that roam Central Park, but of the openings towards a grander life that never came their way. Both Nat and Midge are stuck on their park bench, telling stories to keep from sulking about the flamboyant histories that society never let them possess. On the park bench they remain because they were never able to get anywhere else. In effect, *I'm Not Rappaport* ends on the note that Nat and Midge are really very much alike, even as Nat pretends otherwise. Unlike the histrionics of the Jewish performer seeking to advance by comparing himself to blacks, maneuvering his way into the mainstream, the play ultimately positions Nat and Midge as outsiders. Gardner shows that Nat and Midge are perfect companions because essentially they are very much alike. This unlikely pair is a very likely pair because Midge's experience as an African American man and Nat's Jewishness make them inseparable.

Thus, the contemporary black-Jewish buddy play is significant in that it locates Jews outside of the mainstream. Because Jews are presented “like” blacks, Jews are established as an unquestionable “Other,” heirs to the rights of a multicultural identity like other American minority groups. Moreover, it is significant that the Jewish characters are not youthful. They carry with them a history that did not offer them the social advantages that more youthful characters may have been privy to. As Jews are positioned as outsiders, it is nostalgic Jewishness that represents the Jewish experience and not the more contemporary, arguably more socially accepted, Jewish identity of a youthful generation. As contemporary black-Jewish buddy narratives routinely present the Jewish character as lonely, old and/or dying, it only emphasizes where our sympathies should lie; the aged Jewish character is to be seen as a victim. The most well known example of this narrative is Alfred Urhy’s *Driving Miss Daisy* (1987). A Pulitzer Prize winning-play, *Driving Miss Daisy*, which later became an Oscar Award-winning motion picture (1989), portrays an elderly Southern Jewish woman who unenthusiastically hires a black chauffeur. At first, Daisy resists her son Boolie’s insistence that she take on Hoke Colburn, an African-American grandfather twelve years her junior, to be her personal driver, but eventually Daisy is won over as she and Hoke foster a connection that surpasses Southern racist social mores of the time. While the play spans several decades, it begins in 1948, a year that Eliza Russi Lowen McGraw points out is significant to Jewish history – the founding of Israel. It is also a significant year for Southern history as well, the year that Strom Thurmond ran for president heading the Dixiecrat party, whose national platform stemmed from pro-segregation politics. Both events

fostered a radical shift in Jewish and Southern identity. She writes, “[I]n the wake of these salient events, southern Jewishness strove to define itself, even as it remained bound by its American traditions of simultaneous assimilation and distinction. . . . As Israel and the Dixiecrats fight for independence and validation, so does Daisy.”<sup>115</sup> Most importantly, Southern and Jewish independence are at odds. As a Jew from the state of Georgia, Daisy would have lived through, and remembered, the Leo Frank case that exposed the underlying anti-Semitic (and anti-northern) sentiments in the South. The Leo Frank case demonstrated that Southern pride and New York Jewish identity mix like oil and water. (In fact, Alfred Urhy used the Leo Frank story as the subject of his 1998 musical, *Parade*.)<sup>116</sup> Although the play begins with Daisy in the final years of her life, as a Southerner and a Jewish woman, she is also in the center of an unresolved identity crisis. As a Jewish woman living in the South, she has little chance of social advancement; her status is restricted because her Jewish background keeps her from becoming part of the Southern elite. Daisy’s exclusion from the Southern aristocracy, likewise, also shapes a distinct Jewish identity for her. At the beginning of the play, Boolie attempts to persuade his mother to hire a driver because her “friends have men to drive them,” a line of reasoning to which Daisy responds,

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<sup>115</sup> McGraw, “Driving Miss Daisy: Southern Jewishness on the Big Screen,” 46. As the title of the article suggests, McGraw’s article focuses on the cinematic version of *Driving Miss Daisy*. Nevertheless, the film remains close to the original script in dialogue and in theme. The film departs from the play, however, in that the play is an example of minimalist theater.

<sup>116</sup> The book for *Parade* has never been published, although fragments of the script appear in *The Best Plays of 1998-1999*, ed. Otis L. Guernsey, Jr.

“They’re all rich.”<sup>117</sup> Daisy’s insistence that she is not rich is a motif throughout the play. On the one hand, her assertiveness in proclaiming her lack of wealth is a resistance to the anti-Semitic stereotype that Jews are miserly. At the same time, Daisy’s underdog social status and a powerlessness to become part of the Southern elite is part of what allows her to define herself as Jewish. She wants it on record that she is not a member of the southern elite. Yet, in an exchange between her and Hoke, the chauffeur notes that wealth is relative:

HOKE: Yassum. And my other opinion is a fine rich Jewish lady like you doan’ b’long draggin’ up the steps of no bus, luggin’ no grocery-store bags. I come along and carry them fo’ you.

DAISY: I don’t need you. I don’t want you. And I don’t like you saying I’m rich.

HOKE: I won’ say it then.

DAISY: Is that what you and Idella talk about in the kitchen? Oh, I hate this! I hate being discussed behind my back in my own house! I was born on Forsyth Street and, believe you me, I knew the value of a penny. My brother Manny brought home a white cat one day and Papa said we couldn’t keep it because we couldn’t afford to feed it. My sisters saved up money so I could go to school and be a teacher. We didn’t have anything!

HOKE: Yassum, but look like you doin’ all right now.<sup>118</sup>

Jewish wealth is a motif that Hoke echoes throughout the play. When Boolie first interviews Hoke, he reveals his preference for driving Jews rather than Christians. “I’d druther drive for Jews. People always talkin’ ‘bout they stingy and they cheap, but doan’ say none of that roun’ me.” His experience tells him that the stereotype is inaccurate; he mentions that a previous employer, a Jewish judge, gave him a suit and necktie while a non-Jewish employer sold him old shirts, “nasty like

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<sup>117</sup> Urhy, *Driving Miss Daisy* 3.

<sup>118</sup> Urhy 10-11.

they been stuck off in a chifferobe and forgot about.” Still disgusted that the employer tried to sell him wares for “twenty-five cent apiece” that “ain’ worth a nickel!” he exclaims, “Them’s the people das callin’ Jews cheap!”<sup>119</sup> Hoke is more willing to trust his own experience over the cultural stereotypes that are dictated to him. As Hoke reveals, he has a keen understanding of the southern elite’s hypocrisy. Consequently, he sees an obvious connection between himself and his Jewish employer. Both are, essentially, too often in danger of being defined by others as Others. The danger is quite serious—life threatening, in fact. With Daisy in the backseat, Hoke finds himself stuck in a traffic jam and carefully explains the reason why – someone had bombed a synagogue ahead. Horrified Daisy naively asks, “Who would do that?”

HOKE: You know as good as me. Always be the same ones.

DAISY: Well, it’s a mistake. I’m sure they meant to bomb one of the conservative synagogues or the orthodox one. The temple is reform. Everybody knows that.

HOKE: It doan’ matter to them people. A Jew is a Jew to them folks. Jes’ like light or dark we all the same nigger.<sup>120</sup>

In Hoke’s eyes, the gap between his Jewish employer and her black chauffeur is a thin one, as they are both hated by the same people. Following the logic that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, Hoke sees an obvious alliance between blacks and Jews. In fact, the synagogue bombing hits close to home:

HOKE: I know jes’ how you feel, Miz Daisy. Back down there above Macon on the farm—I ‘bout ten or ‘leven years old and one day my frien’ Porter, his daddy hangin’ from a tree. And the day befo’, he laughin’ and pitchin’ hoes shoes wid us. Talkin’ ‘bout Porter and me

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<sup>119</sup> Urhy 6-7.

<sup>120</sup> Urhy 38.

gon have strong good right arms like him and den he hangin' up  
yonder wid his hands tie behind his back an'the flies all over him.  
And I seed it with my own eyes and I throw up right where I  
standin' .<sup>121</sup>

The connection seems obvious to Hoke. The personal horror of finding his friend's father to be the victim of a lynching sits with the same unease that Daisy has in hearing about the synagogue bombing. For Hoke, prejudice, ironically enough, spans race, religion and ethnicity. The undeniable bigotry that ignites bombs in a temple is the same spirit that lynches an African-American man. Daisy, however, adamantly resists such a parallel.

DAISY: Why did you tell me that?

HOKE: I doan' know. Seem like disheah mess put me in mind of it.

DAISY: Ridiculous! The temple has nothing to do with that!

HOKE: So you say.<sup>122</sup>

To accept Hoke's analogy, that a temple bombing is the same as a lynching, is to accept that Daisy has more in common with her black chauffeur than she does with white Southern folks, a conclusion that she is not willing to admit. Whatever social advancement Daisy has assumed is erased if she is to accept that she, as a Jew, can fall victim to the same prejudice that is used against blacks. However, Daisy's take on Jews as a minority is more complicated than it first appears. Though Daisy does not want to admit that Jews can fall victim to the same bigotry that faces blacks, she does adopt the credo that it is dangerous to appear too Jewish in public. Daisy sees Jews as having to work at appearing more like the Southern mainstream. Her surprise that a reformed temple was targeted in the bombing, and not a conservative or

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<sup>121</sup> Urhy 38.

<sup>122</sup> Urhy 38.

orthodox synagogue, reveals that she views Jews as tolerable in the Southern mainstream if they are willing to adjust their public appearance so that they do not appear too far removed from Southern normalcy. In Daisy's eyes, if Jews are willing to assimilate, they may pass without harm among those who hate Jews.

Still, Daisy is not willing to surrender her Jewishness entirely. She shows blatant disgust with her daughter-in-law, Florine, who not only shuns any connection with a Jewish community, but also celebrates Christian holidays. In fact, as Daisy and Hoke discuss, Florine overcompensates for a fear that she won't be seen as "normal" enough. Amazed by Florine's extravagant Christmas decorations, Hoke marvels at how Florine "got 'em all beat with lights" and wonders if she has the "biggest tree in Atlanta." Daisy notes that she "stick[s] a wreath in every window she's got" and has an embarrassingly "silly Santa Claus winking on the front door." Daisy denounces Florine for turning her back on Jews, "[S]he'd die before she'd fix a glass of ice tea for the Temple Sisterhood!"<sup>123</sup> (In fact, Florine wishes to separate herself from Jews to such a degree that at the end of the play, which culminates in 1973, she's gone to Washington to become a Republican National Committeewoman. Daisy is aghast to hear the news, "Good God!"<sup>124</sup>)

For Daisy, being born Jewish is something that you can never escape. In fact, she is even willing to buy into some anti-Semitic physical stereotypes to prove that this is the case. "If I had a nose like Florine" she says, "I wouldn't go around saying Merry Christmas to anyone." Even though Florine wants to have nothing to do with

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<sup>123</sup> Urhy 22-23.

<sup>124</sup> Urhy 50.

her Jewish past, the fact that she was born Jewish makes her Jewish. When Hoke says that he enjoys Christmas at Boolie and Florine's, Daisy snaps, "I don't wonder. You're the only Christian in the place!" To be Jewish is a family affair – born a Jew, raised a Jew, die a Jew. "If her grandfather, old man Freitag, could see this! What is you say? I bet he'd jump out of his grave and snatch her baldheaded!"<sup>125</sup> In this one instance, Daisy expresses her outrage using Hoke's words. It is here that we see that Daisy is gradually willing to find similarities between the experiences to which blacks and Jews are subjected.

In her article looking at the inadequate range of roles for African-American males, Patricia A. Turner denounces *Driving Miss Daisy's* Hoke for being part of a pattern in the entertainment industry, an "apparent 'love affair' with a limited variety of roles for its Black leading men. . . . [T]he character of Hoke Colburn represents only a small step forward."<sup>126</sup> For Turner, Hoke is emblematic of the limitations placed upon black masculinity as depicted upon the silver screen. To be sure, Turner focuses her attention upon African American roles in the cinema; if she included roles available to African-American actors on the stage, she would arguably find a slightly larger variety of parts, although certainly not as large a range as are available to Caucasian actors. Regardless, Turner is right to point out that Hoke's character shadows a stereotype. He is modeled after a series of stage and screen characters that depict African Americans as content domestic help, pleased to be serving the head of the household. Even as the *Driving Miss Daisy* tries to repudiate the stereotype, the

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<sup>125</sup> Urhy 23-24.

<sup>126</sup> Turner 352.

play ultimately reiterates it because it shows that Huck's masculinity is restricted. In fact, as Turner mentions, Daisy's car symbolically encases Hoke's masculinity:

[T]he cars belong to Miss Daisy—a fact she rarely lets him forget. She tells him what streets to use, where to park, how fast to go . . . . Predictably, a confrontation occurs when his need to 'make water' during one of their road trips interferes with her already aborted timetable. Oblivious to the fact that the gas stations they have passed have not contained restrooms open to Blacks, Miss Daisy forbids Hoke from stopping the vehicle by the side of the road to perform a natural bodily function. For the first time Hoke then verbally asserts himself, leaving her alone in the car and taking the keys with him. This scene is symbolic of his efforts to establish his own automotive autonomy, as is the fact that Hoke purchases each of Miss Daisy's trade-ins when Boolie buys her another car. As a concession, however, Hoke assures Boolie that, should Miss Daisy not adapt readily to the new car, he might let her ride in her former one from time to time.<sup>127</sup>

In fact, Hoke mentions to Boolie that he bought the car from "Mist' Red Mitchell at the car place" and not directly from Miss Daisy because she is in his "business enough as it is."<sup>128</sup> Turner is correct to point out the use of cliché in the crafting of Hoke's character. As a narrative that demonstrates that bridges can be built between even the most unlikely of individuals, surpassing race, it seems troubling that Hoke is largely complacent with his servitude. As Turner studies *Driving Miss Daisy*, she places it within a canonical spectrum of storylines by white authors that depict the relationship between white employers and their black servants. However, Turner does not look at *Driving Miss Daisy* within the context of an American Jewish narrative. While I do not deny that Hoke's character is pulled from a long line of black servants to the point where such characters are interchangeable

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<sup>127</sup> Turner 347-348.

<sup>128</sup> Urhy 26.

(Turner mentions a variety of films that follow such a trope), Daisy comes to understand Hoke as a bridge to being more Jewish. Where traditionally, in order to be white, Jews define themselves as unlike blacks (and, by syllogistic reasoning, therefore white), here the narrative of the black-Jewish buddy play presents the reverse. Jews are “like” blacks to prove that Jews, too, are minorities. Yet, like the minstrel performer creating blackness to suit the purposes of social advancement, blackness here too is imagined. The black-Jewish buddy play first must create blackness, often monolithically. In other words, to show that Jews are restricted, and that Jews belong alongside blacks as a multicultural Other, black characters must always be limited in their power and their ability socially to advance. In the black-Jewish buddy play, blacks must be shown as being shut out from a mainstream, limited in their range of opportunities, so that Jewishness may echo the same burdens.

A Jewish Otherness is thereby dependent upon restricting black characters first. The range of black characters (like the range of Jewish characters) in black-Jewish buddy plays is necessary limited, as well as awkwardly stereotypical: if the Jewish experience can be compared to the African-American experience, and African-Americans are restricted, then Jews, too, are shut out from an American establishment. Of course, the small range of roles available in black-Jewish plays is reliant upon an imagined blackness. Is it any wonder, then, that in Neil Simon’s 1997 play, *Proposals*, the African-American servant tells us that she isn’t real to begin with? The plot of *Proposals* illustrates the classic storyline of the black servant who knows the family that she works for better than they know themselves. Clemma is warm, giving and loving; she seems to treat Bert and Josie Hines, a Jewish father and

daughter, as if they are her family. *Proposals* takes place in the 1950's at the Hines' summer cottage in the Poconos. The family has *tsores* (troubles): Bert, we discover, is prone to heart attacks and will die in November. Moreover, he's still madly in love with his ex-wife who left him for another man. Josie still holds hard feelings towards her mother. In addition, she has just broken off an engagement to discover that she is actually in love with her fiance's best friend. It is Clemma's role, as their faithful African-American housekeeper, to be the glue that holds the family together.

*Proposals* is narrated by Clemma, but her story is one where she is entirely satisfied when things turn out well for those that she works for because, in effect, it proves that she has done her job well. The oddity is, however, that Diggins speaks to us from the beyond the grave. Clemma tells us:

Now this all goes back some forty, fifty years ago . . . countin' time the way living folks do. . . . The world was different then . . . some ways better, some ways worse. At the time, I was a Negro . . . could have been Colored, don't remember. . . . Don' know *what* they'd call me today . . . But right now, this night, this minute I am what I was then. Just a hard workin' woman tryin' to save the life of a good lovin' man from fallin' outta the sky before his time.<sup>129</sup>

As socially accepted labels change from "Negro" to "Colored," and the language of identity changes, Clemma is left to conclude "this minute I am what I was then," a self-pronouncement that when elaborated upon means that her identity is found through her "good lovin'" employer, content to work "hard" for him and, in fact, to "save" him from hardship. She is the proverbial mammy, satisfied with her position in life, cheerful domestic help who is emotionally dedicated to her employer. And yet, as Clemma constantly reminds us, she is a ghost – a memory, in fact. Did she

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<sup>129</sup> Simon, *Proposals* 5.

ever truly exist? How real is the story that appears before our eyes? And though her existence is questionable, she exists because we have seen this character before. She is the black servant who is always mindful of her employer, knowing him better than he knows himself. Though Clemma is a beloved character, she is embedded in stereotype. As the American theater ritualizes socially driven assumptions about blackness, Clemma's character is part of this perpetuation of stereotype. The only difference is, or perhaps the crucial similarity, is that she – like the stock characters that came before her – does not truly exist. She is part of a tradition whose basis is found in years of bastardized representations rather than in reality. In Simon's later works, the playwright demonstrates a curiosity with revisiting the past; the retelling of history bridges the gap between reality and fiction, a theme not only present in *Proposals*, but all his "serious" later works, *Lost in Yonkers* (1991), *Jake's Women* (1992) and *Laughter on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Floor* (1993). In *Proposals*, Simon revisits the image of the 1950's family whose troubles are lessened by a black servant. The image, ingrained in the American consciousness through its perpetuation in popular culture, is as ghostly as Clemma is. Simon's device, Clemma-the-ghost as narrator, calls the entire storyline into question. Blackness, as it has been presented, is an imagined characteristic, a characteristic far removed from reality, one that nearly, if not completely, ignores African-American communities' constructions of their own identities. The realities behind the representations of blackness only exist in that they have been perpetuated time and time again, ritualized in their appearance upon the stage as a means for defining whiteness, and as I have shown, in defining Jewishness as well. In fact, the final lines of the play call attention to this habitual performance:

JOSIE: I wonder what it's going to be like up here in a hundred years.  
CLEMMA: Well, you just come back and find out.  
JOSIE: I'll be gone in a hundred years, Clemma.  
CLEMMA: May be . . . but that's no reason to stop you from coming back.<sup>130</sup>

The fact of the matter is that Clemma has come back – again and again – as the last one hundred years of American drama has made such a character routine. Her function has changed, though her role has not: by comparing Jews to socially restricted African Americans, Jewish theater in the contemporary multicultural era reconfigure Jews to be solidly categorized as a minority. Jewishness and blackness are inevitably linked as they are embodied and performed. As the theater perpetuates an imagined blackness, it serves as the marker against which Jewishness is configured.

This is not to say that such a paradigm is unilateral. The playwright who has presented the most vivid rejection of this precedent is Wendy Wasserstein, whose 1996 play *An American Daughter* portrays the first major African-American Jewish character. “I wanted to mix things up a bit,” she writes in the preface to the published version of the play, mentioning a number of characters that violate expectations, including a gay conservative, a backstabbing feminist, and an established senator who pushes abortion restrictions but remains quite supportive of his pro-choice activist daughter, Lyssa Dent Hughes, the play's major character.<sup>131</sup> Oddly, she does not mention Dr. Judith B. Kaufman, a successful, but unhappy, single forty-two year old

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<sup>130</sup> Simon 122.

<sup>131</sup> Wasserstein, “Preface,” *An American Daughter* x-xi.

physician, who just so happens to be both African-American *and* Jewish. Early in the play, she is quizzed on how Jewish she actually is:

JUDITH: She [my mother] was a Baptist piano teacher from Tuscaloona, Alabama. Her family never forgave her for moving north with a Freedom Rider Jew.

QUINCY: So you're not technically Jewish because you're [*sic*] mother isn't.

JUDITH: I am, technically. I was bat mitzvahed at Garfield Temple, Garfield Place, Brooklyn, New York. Today I am a woman.<sup>132</sup>

The debate over technicalities is left at that – no mention of a conversion ceremony – but such debates seem academic since Judith is unwavering in her commitment to a Jewish identity. In fact, she is easily the most religiously observant character in the play, Christian or Jewish, especially in comparison to Lyssa's non-practicing Jewish husband. "Judith is Jewish," Walter Abrahamson states, then nearly echoes Judith's earlier proclamation of her Jewish identity: ". . . I was Jewish until I was bar mitzvahed. Today I am a man. I choose to be agnostic."<sup>133</sup> Though Judith is not the central figure of *An American Daughter*, the play does challenge existing definitions of Jewishness, a staple theme in the majority of Wasserstein's work, by noting how Jewishness implies racial assumptions. Which character seems more Jewish – the non-believer, who is white, or the observant African-American? The play leaves us with little doubt, as the play makes a large issue of Judith's Jewish identity and stresses it even more so than her African-American identity. At one point, Morrow, the gay reactionary, invites Judith to dinner, and snips, "I'm just

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<sup>132</sup> Wasserstein, *An American Daughter* 8.

<sup>133</sup> Wasserstein 34.

looking for dinner or a conversation between Christians and Jews now and then.”<sup>134</sup> Significantly, he makes no mention of it also being a conversation between whites and blacks. Though Judith is identified as “a walking Crown Heights”<sup>135</sup> she is never identified as simply an African American. In other words, her Jewish identity is never ignored, perhaps because it is what makes her most unusual – but thus belies the point: it is her devotion to Judaism that makes her most different. Through the black body, already a sign of difference, Jewishness becomes equally estranged from the mainstream.

Even in a play that actively seeks to challenge stereotypes, *An American Daughter* likewise evokes them: the African-American body physically connotes difference. Following multiculturalism’s privileging of race as the primary standard of Otherness, blackness is the litmus test upon which all differences are to be compared against. Just as Jewish performers of yesterday became white by showing that they were not black, Jews become a clear minority when blackness and Jewishness can be easily compared, if not equated. In the process, blackness and Jewishness are interdependent and completely imagined. The ramifications are clear. Where assimilation depended upon presenting blacks from entering the mainstream, contemporary Jewish drama that seeks to include Jews in multicultural conversations has done the same. If climbing into the mainstream means agreeing with the perception that blacks are the real aliens, moving out of the mainstream means the same thing as well.

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<sup>134</sup> Wasserstein 79.

<sup>135</sup> Wasserstein 34.

However, the implications are troubling, as well. Can a Jew be represented as a minority without adopting the typically race-based symbols of multiculturalism? After all, as Wasserstein's *An American Daughter* shows, a Jew cannot be a politically recognizable minority group without first being black. The only other Jewish character, Walter, has lost his Jewish identity, an identity that he spurns, but one that is warmly claimed by Judith, the sole African-American character, a Jewish identity that differentiates her from the other characters as much as her skin color does, if not more so. If Jews are to be recognizably "different" must they first negotiate their Jewishness through blackness? As Jewish difference is depicted, must it be simplified through the visual language of skin color? "Has not the American Jew replaced the Black American as this nation's true 'invisible man?'" asks Seth Forman who has argued that unlike African-Americans, American Jews have "failed on their own to define new cultural forms capable of securing Jewish communal sustenance."<sup>136</sup> I began this chapter with the question "Are Jews white?" However, if defining Jewish difference means that Jewish difference must somehow be mediated through the language of blackness, perhaps the more appropriate question is "Are Jews black?"

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<sup>136</sup> Forman 20.

## **Jewish Mothers, JAPs and Nice Jewish Boys: Gendered Performances**

A recent *Newsweek* “My Turn” column lamented the trials of being a single Jewish woman. Its author, Wendy Aron, posed that a middle-aged single Jewish woman “might as well plan [her] own funeral.” As she explains, because Jewish mothers desperately want their Jewish daughters to get married – quickly, “no one can imagine that a single woman might choose to stay single.”<sup>137</sup> The response to the column was hostile; *Newsweek* printed a series of letters to the editor that chided the author for identifying Jewishness as the source of her family’s disappointment with her single life. In one letter to the editor, the reader responded, “If I want to read an angst-filled rant on Jewish families, I’ll pick up ‘Portnoy’s Complaint.’ At least Philip Roth has a sense of humor.” Another wrote, “My Irish and Italian Catholic friends have bemoaned the same pleas. However, their complaints are logically directed at the source of the irritation: their family members, not the Vatican.”<sup>138</sup> Although the middle aged bachelorette identified her family’s frustration with her as a Jewish problem, readers saw nothing particularly Jewish about a family that was discontent with their single daughter.

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<sup>137</sup> Aron 14.

<sup>138</sup> Letters to the Editor, *Newsweek* (8 Sept 2003): 16.

The “My Turn” column suggested that above all else Jews want their women married with children. Whether that is the reality or not is inconsequential; American popular culture has presented precisely the image of Jewish women that the “My Turn” column bewails. In examining the most popular representations of Jewish women in American popular culture – that of the Jewish mother and that of the Jewish American Princess – the range of portrayals of Jewish women is unquestionably limited. The idea of the Jewish mother – loud, boisterous, nagging, domineering, a little *meshugene* – is the subject of ridicule in much Jewish humor: a boy arrives home from school and tells his mother that he got the role of the Jewish husband in the school play. His mother fumes, “Go back and tell your teacher you want a speaking part.” Though the Jewish mother is a common appearance throughout Jewish humor, she has become an equally well-known figure American culture as well. She is a nostalgic figure, but she also is a domineering one and her presence helps perpetuate the image that Jewish men are not masculine enough. Likewise, the other prevalent image of Jewish women – the image assigned to single Jewish women – is the JAP, the Jewish American Princess. She is materialistic, spoiled and irritating. She gravitates towards Gucci, Benetton and Chanel (but ignores Kedem or Manishevitz).<sup>139</sup> Like the Jewish mother, she immobilizes men, a running gag most recently seen on the television show *Friends*. Though Janice, formerly Chandler’s on-again/off-again girlfriend, is never said to be Jewish, she embodies the standard tropes of the Jewish American Princess, as Joyce Antler has noted:

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<sup>139</sup> Karen Brodtkin has made the intriguing argument that the Jewish American Princess is a reflection of Jewish male anxiety over their own assimilation. See *How Jews Became White Folk and What That Says About Race in America* 183.

[Janice is a] stereotypical portrait of a Jewish woman, with her grating voice, generally obnoxious manners, and material concerns; her annoying laugh mirrors that of Fran Drescher on *The Nanny*. In one episode, Chandler tries to lose Janice, even buying a plane ticket to Yemen to escape her. Janice, horribly overdressed in a cheap leopard-skin outfit (a frequent JAP costume that [Fran Drescher's Nanny] often wears) and with her usual nasal white, is shown on the same screen with the beautiful, ethnically unmarked, not-really-Jewish Monica and Rachel. The contrast could not be more revealing. Monica and Rachel (both refugees from Long Island who apparently renounced their JAP pasts) are sought by many men; Jewish Janice is the girl to date and dump. How could Jews and non-Jews alike fail to get the message that the Jewish woman is essentially unloveable?<sup>140</sup>

*Friends* leaves little option for Jewish single women. Because female Jewishness is presented negatively, Jewish single women are the girlfriends from Hell. They become more attractive, however, if they desert their Jewish background: Monica Geller and Rachel Green are both sought after, but their Jewish identity is all but absent. Though we know that Monica is Jewish because her brother Ross is Jewish (he discusses his Jewish identity more frequently), Monica decorates a Christmas tree each December in her home and always hosts the Christmas party. Rachel has never been explicitly revealed to be Jewish, but the suggestion has always been there: one episode revealed that Rachel had a nose job when she was a high school student at a Long Island high school.

The NBC comedy has always been in the top ten in the Nielsen ratings since its debut.<sup>141</sup> Consequently, it has helped mainstream the narrow representations of Jewish single women, though it is a symptom, rather than a cause, of the problem. If

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<sup>140</sup> Antler, "Not 'Too Jewish' for Primetime," *Television's Changing Image of American Jews* 62.

<sup>141</sup> Peyser 48.

Jewish women are limited in the roles available to them – Jewish mother or JAP, it is because Jewish men in American culture have been perceived as being not manly enough. “In the collapse of Jewish masculinity into an abject femininity,” writes Anne Pellegrini, “the Jewish female seems to disappear.”<sup>142</sup> When Jewish men are perceived to be not manly enough, where does that leave women? If the stereotypes are our guide, the only way for a Jewish woman to be genteel is to abandon traits that have been pegged as “too Jewish.”

In *Coming Out Jewish*, Jon Stratton notes the absence of single Jewish women in American popular culture and illustrates the problem by discussing the portrayal of Jewish masculinity on television and in the movies. He considers this general trend: Jewish men in American popular culture are typically neurotic, wimpy and dote upon non-Jewish, typically blonde, women. Jewish women, when they do manage to make an appearance, seem more “gentile” than “Jewish.” *Friends* illustrates this scenario well. On *Friends*, Ross seems Jewish but his sister Monica does not. In addition to the fact that Ross is played by Jewish actor David Schwimmer and Monica is played by the non-Jewish beauty Courtney Cox, Ross’s dorky masculinity confirms his Jewish identity. Ross is the *schlemiel* of the six friends from the same mold as Jewish leads on popularized on *Murphy Brown*, *Northern Exposure*, *Mad About You* and *The Wonder Years*). He is socially awkward and unathletic – he *kvetches*. Additionally, he is a paleontologist (read: Jewish doctor) who for several seasons secretly carried a heavy crush on Jennifer Aniston’s Rachel.

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<sup>142</sup> Pellegrini 109.

Though Rachel's Jewish background may be insinuated, the show has gone great lengths to suggest that she has rejected any ties to a Jewish upbringing. (The show's premiere began with Rachel leaving her fiancé—a Jewish dentist—at the altar, and Rachel successively tried to “un-learn” her materialistic impulses by taking up a job at the coffee shop.) The show functions around a cliché storyline: the ill at ease Jewish nebbish dotes after the all-American girl. Ross needs Rachel to validate his masculinity. As the series progressed, Ross's affections for Rachel were matched and thus the cliché was carried through so that, as Stratton writes, “no matter how big a *schlemiel* . . . the most desired white women . . . will give them social acceptance . . .”<sup>143</sup>

Though the plot line involving Ross is an all-too-familiar stereotype, Monica does not “seem” Jewish because no similar cliché has been established for Jewish women which would establish her as Jewish. Likewise, Rachel does not “seem” Jewish because she has removed herself from any mythical Jewish female traits, so much so that she can transform into the role of the all-American sought after by the Jewish male. This leaves Ross “seeming” Jewish because the scenario that we are presented with has been established as an American Jewish male scenario, cliché and stereotypical as it is. No such tradition has been established for single American Jewish female characters.

Indeed, American popular culture has been ripe with Jewish men who have been dubbed not masculine enough, at least not enough to befit an all-American masculine norm. The scenario, a quest for legitimizing Jewish masculinity, has been

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<sup>143</sup> Stratton 7.

ritualized in American culture: the figure of the nebbish Jewish man-child who whimpers in self-defeat and wallows in his overanxious neuroses must authenticate his masculinity by chasing after women who are exquisitely feminine. *Friends* is a unique scenario in that Rachel is possibly of a Jewish background, albeit a background she has denied. More common, however, is the Jewish male who chases after an explicitly non-Jewish woman. Jewish men pursue non-Jewish women; Jewish women may not be romantic counterparts. When Jewish women do appear, they are the culprits for emasculating men. In effect, Jewish women are limited in their portrayal because Jewish men have been limited as well, only Jewish women have been limited more so: they must either be Jewish mothers (who, according to Alex Portnoy, any Woody Allen movie, or the pseudo-Jewish George Costanza, impair their son's ability to be masculine), the JAP (equally overbearing) or, if they are to become a legitimate object of affection, they must abandon any semblance of a Jewish identity. Can Jewish women ever be portrayed positively without abandoning their Jewish identity?

Jewish mothers have fared slightly better than Jewish daughters. Though the Jewish mother in particular has been unabashedly negative at times, just as common is the revered Jewish mother. In Abraham Cahan's classic Jewish immigrant coming of age tale, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), David's mother is the crucial presence in the early chapters and arguably the work as a whole. Mrs. Levinsky, who literally lives and dies for her son, is the standard that David invariably uses to judge all women. After her death, the result of defending her son from the taunting and physical abuse of gentile hooligans, her unmitigated devotion to her child can never

be matched by any of the women that he encounters. David's sexual trysts are only with women whose morality is questionable to him and, conversely, his love for God is described is similar to loving "as one does a woman."<sup>144</sup> "Sinful" women, those unlike his mother, are targets for sexual romps, and God is more similar to his mother than these women will ever be.

This same figure appears throughout American Jewish culture in a wide variety of media – as Gertrude Berg's title character in her radio and, later, television series *Mrs. Goldberg* (roughly 1929-1945 on radio and 1949-1954 on television), as Kate Jerome in Neil Simon's *Broadway Bound* (1986) and as Sophie Berger in CBS's *Brooklyn Bridge* (1991-1993). The *balabosteh* is an honored woman, and the success of this image in American Jewish culture helped popularize the stereotype. Amongst American Jews she became known as the *yiddishe mama*, popularized by Sophie Tucker's song, which depicted the mother figure that sacrificed all for her children, serving as the glue that held together a Jewish home in a country whose way of living greatly conflicted with the rituals of a Jewish household. She symbolized the Old World in the New World, the gentle balance between *shtetl* life tradition and the pulls of assimilation in America.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Cahan 38.

<sup>145</sup> Joyce Antler has written that the balance between the old and the new can account for the success of Gertrude Berg's *Mrs. Goldberg*. Unlike the *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*-style sitcoms of the era, Mrs. Goldberg was, according to Antler, a "modern" and "progressive" mother in that she suggested "models of mothering, child-rearing, and family relations that were new, even though they were dressed in the garb of traditionalism." Consequently, she resisted assimilatory values while recognizing that the family was "a minute-by minute affair, as is all of life" but can "fight back against cultural dictates" when necessary. See Antler, "Yesterday's Woman, Today's Moral Guide: Molly Goldberg as Jewish Mother" 143.

Even when reverential, Jewish mothers are still suggestively domineering. The backhanded compliment is illustrated in Leo Rosten's *Joys of Yiddish* where the *balabosteh* is defined as an "excellent and praiseworthy homemaker," but also as "a bossy woman."<sup>146</sup> Indeed, the schizophrenic portrayal is most famously at the root of Alex Portnoy's complaint: "It was my mother who could accomplish anything, who herself had to admit that it might even be that she was actually too good."<sup>147</sup>

Portnoy's rant continues to expose the double-edged sword:

The energy on her! The thoroughness! For mistakes she checked my sums; for holes, my socks; for dirt, my nails, my neck, every seam and crease of my body. She even dredges the furthest recesses of my ears by pouring cold peroxide into my head. It tingles and pops like an earful of ginger ale, and brings to the surface in bits and pieces, the hidden stores of yellow wax, which can apparently endanger a person's hearing. A medical procedure like this (crackpot though it may be) takes time, of course; it takes effort, to be sure—but where health and cleanliness are concerned, germs and bodily secretions, she will not spare herself and sacrifice others. . . . Devotion is just in her blood.<sup>148</sup>

That his mother is "too good" is the basis of Portnoy's complaint. Her "devotion," according to Alex Portnoy, suffocates him. Readers, serving in much the same role as his barely heard psychologist, hear his rambling monologue and see that Portnoy desperately flaunts his masculinity, imagining that his penis will bludgeon away his neuroses, all the while overcompensating for the embarrassing results of being raised by a too-domineering Jewish mother. Most tellingly, at the end of his diatribe castigating his mother, he says bitterly and desperately, "And why doesn't

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<sup>146</sup> Rosten 29.

<sup>147</sup> Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 11.

<sup>148</sup> Roth 12.

my father stop her?”<sup>149</sup> It is not only that his mother is too intrusive, but it is that his father isn't vocal enough. As the most demanding family member, his mother has usurped his father's role.

In Alex Portnoy's eyes, he suffers from the curse of being raised by a Jewish mother: Jewish mothers raise Jewish sons who are not masculine enough, who in turn marry overbearing Jewish wives and become husbands who “[i]n that ferocious and self-annihilating way in which so many Jewish men of his generation served their families” raise Jewish sons who are not masculine enough.<sup>150</sup> Thus, Alex Portnoy perceives the grievance against his family as hardly unique; it is the experience of being Jewish that ultimately is the root of his complaint and in effect drives him to pursue a sexual relation with “The Monkey,” an attractive non-Jewish woman who, as Jerry Seinfeld would explain nearly three decades later, had “*shiksappeal*.”

Jewishness here is portrayed as hindering masculinity. The perceived lapse in Portnoy's own masculinity – or, to state it differently, the inability to be as masculine as non-Jewish men – is the result of being raised by heavy-handed Jewish women. Portnoy fears effeminacy – that he will be unable to live up to an imagined masculine norm.

This masculine norm, the litmus test for manliness, is characteristically American. The emphasis on the healthy male body throughout American history has been equated with a forceful national body as well. Likewise, an all-American machismo have been the standard against which all American men were (and still are)

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<sup>149</sup> Roth 17.

<sup>150</sup> Roth 8.

judged. How “American” a man is, is defined in part by how masculine he is – that is to say, how “physically American” he looks. Mark Seltzer notes that in 1910 the first *Boy Scouts of America* handbook stressed that good American boys must develop their bodies because physical development is “so needful for continued national existence.” That same year, Teddy Roosevelt, whose frontiersman image arguably did more to connect the American body with a masculine aura, stated at a men’s club speech, “that vigorous manliness for the lack of which in a nation, as an individual, the possession of no other qualities can atone.”<sup>151</sup>

It is no surprise that the stereotype depicting Jewish men as weak and Jewish women as too much like their men stems from the very idea of what it means to be American. The debates over whether or not Jews could be integrated into America’s melting pot seemed to be subsequently based in the image that Jews could not fit an American physical norm. The physicality is important because it confirmed the idea that Jews were indeed a race, and therefore inassimilable. Generally speaking, in fact, groups that traditionally have been seen as non-mainstream in American have been burdened with these gender-related stereotypes in order to “mark” them from becoming normalized and keep them from blending in with mainstream America. Hence, any group that was to be kept out of the American mainstream, be it Jewish men, or Italian men, or African-American, or Hispanic, or Asian-American, or Polish, were not only seen as racially different, but were also imagined as unbecoming a masculine American norm. This worked on both sides of the equation: African American men and Italian men were stereotypically hyper-masculine, but African

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<sup>151</sup> Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* 149. Also see Iskovitz’s “Secret Temples” 187-188.

American men were said to be lazy, while their women worked hard and were oversexed; Italian men—like Jews—were dominated by overzealous Italian mothers. Jewish men, in particular, were incongruously both effeminate and lascivious, dangerous because they secretly lusted after non-Jewish white women, but controllable because they were not as masculine as tried-and-true “American” men. This stereotype is exhibited in Edith Wharton’s widely read novel *The House of Mirth* (1905, later adapted into a play of the same title by Clyde Fitch in 1906). Slimy Sim Rosedale, described as a “plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type,” hardly the image of masculinity prescribed by Teddy Roosevelt and Progressive era politics, lusts after Lily Bart. Lily reacts to him with “irrepressible annoyance,” but little fear.<sup>152</sup>

The stereotype, of course, is inherited from Europe as well. “Historically,” writes Daniel Boyarin, “the Jewish male is, from the point of view of dominant European culture, a sort of woman. . . . [He exhibits] a set of performances that are culturally read as non-male within a given historical culture.”<sup>153</sup> We only need to recall Dickens’ Fagin, the memorable villain of *Oliver Twist*, but an oddly loveable, effeminate villain (who has been discussed as procuring “Fagin’s boys” as prostitutes).<sup>154</sup> The truly frightening and dangerous villain of *Oliver Twist* is the manly thug, Bill Sikes. His menace stems from his brutal masculinity, while Fagin’s

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<sup>152</sup> Wharton 13.

<sup>153</sup> Boyarin, “Masada or Yavneh? Gender and the Arts of Jewish Resistance” 306.

<sup>154</sup> See Wolf, “‘The Boys are Pickpockets, and the Girl is a Prostitute’: Gender and Juvenile Criminality in Early Victorian England from *Oliver Twist* to *London Labour*.”

harmlessness is a result of not only being old, but surrounding himself with pre-pubescent boys, calling his sexuality into question. Fagin may be “bad,” but he is an ineffective villain.

The gendering of Jews was characteristic of anti-Semitic discourse. Otto Weininger’s infamous work *Sex and Character (Geschlecht und Charakter, 1903)* “was probably one of the most influential doctoral theses ever written.”<sup>155</sup> It captured the Aryan moral fiber and undermined a growing women’s movement in modern culture by articulating already-assumed claims that the Jewish body was essentially an effeminate one. Weininger disturbingly writes that “Judaism is saturated with femininity to such an extent that the most manly Jew is more feminine than the least manly Aryan.”<sup>156</sup> Professing the superiority of men over women, the anti-Semitic text also argues for the pre-eminence of Christianity because Christ, born a Jew, surpassed his Jewish (and therefore womanly) condition. He argues that the modern condition is too influenced by Jews and by women; like Christ, individuals must make a choice “between Judaism and Christianity, between trade and culture, between woman and man, between the species and the individual, between emptiness and value, between the earthly and the higher life, between nothingness and divinity.”<sup>157</sup> In this one sweeping passage, Weininger conflates Jews, women and the sins of transgression.

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<sup>155</sup> Robertson 24.

<sup>156</sup> Weininger 306.

<sup>157</sup> Weininger 330.

A surprising and jarring example illustrates the stereotype in European culture: Sander Gilman reminds us that Freud identified the clitoris with Jewish masculinity. In Vienna, the slang term for the clitoris was “*Jud*,” or “Jew” and female masturbation was mocked as “playing with the Jew.” Gilman explains that the derogatory term conflates Jewish masculinity with women’s bodies and that in Vienna, the “definition of the essential male [was] the antithesis of the female and the Jewish male.” Thus, the clitoris, as well as the circumcised penis, were “less masculine” than the gentile penis, which had not had part of its “masculinity” cut away.<sup>158</sup> Gilman explains, “Jewish males are ‘gender benders.’ They exist between the conventional categories of ‘normal’ (and normative) sexuality, just as they exist between the categories of European national identity and ethnopsychology.”<sup>159</sup>

Daniel Boyarin argues that while the impression of Jews as non-male was found throughout the governing European culture, the idea can be traced back to the Roman period when Jews proudly defined themselves as feminized in order to resist subjugation to the patriarchal and excessively masculine Roman kingdom.<sup>160</sup> While

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<sup>158</sup> Gilman, *Freud, Race and Gender* 38-39. For further discussion of Gilman’s findings see Pellegrini 119. Also see Gilman’s *The Jew’s Body*.

<sup>159</sup> Gilman, *Freud Race and Gender* 32. In *The Jew’s Body*, Gilman demonstrates that in the nineteenth century, hysteria, which was traditionally ascribed to women, was also attributed to Jewish men as well. Because hysteria, he explains, was assumed to be a product of femaleness, “it is evident that there is a clear ‘feminization’ of the male Jew in the context of the occurrence of hysteria” (63).

<sup>160</sup> Boyarin, “Masada or Yavneh? Gender and the Arts of Jewish Resistance.” *Jews and Other Differences*. Also see Boyarin’s larger study, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*. Boyarin reads Sigmund Freud’s psycho-sexual analysis as a response to stereotypes surrounding Jewish men. Most interestingly, he reads Theodore Herzl’s Zionist movement as an internalized result of the anti-Semitic, homophobic stereotypes surrounding Jewish men. The

Ritchie Robinson says that “the analogy between Jews and women, and their exclusion from standards of manhood” was always available in European society, “the ‘feminized Jew’ appears distinctly only in the nineteenth century” as the image of the flawless Aryan Christian male is popularized.<sup>161</sup>

But in America, many groups of immigrant men, not only Jewish men, were faced with the effeminacy stereotype. The influx of European immigrants compromised a distinct American national identity; the creation of not-quite-American men as effeminate helped imagine a biological difference between true American men and European immigrants. Gender, like race, was an important tool to distinguish “us” civilized Americans from “them.” Herbert Spencer, the most influential of the thinkers during the immigration era whose works helped shape the idea of an American standard of superiority, argued that a seminal characteristic of “primitive savages” (as opposed to “our” refined society) was that *too little* difference was found between savage women and savage men. He wrote that savages exhibit “at the one extreme a treatment of [women] cruel to the utmost degree bearable; and at the other extreme a treatment which, in some directions, gives them precedence over men.”<sup>162</sup> The uncivilized were, then, both amorally brute and essentially

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Zionist movement, for Boyarin, was a means of masculinizing, as well as nationalizing, Jews in order to “escape the stigma of Jewish difference” (303).

<sup>161</sup> Robertson 25. Also see Daniel Boyarin’s “*Goyim Nachas*, or, Modernity and the Manliness of the *Mentsh*” in the same anthology. Boyarin discusses the Romanic movement in Europe from a Jewish perspective and its effect upon their construction of manliness. Jewish images of manliness become a negotiation between the appreciation and the discomfort with Western (Christian) culture.

<sup>162</sup> Spencer 725.

effeminate at the same time. Karen Brodtkin notes that the application of this theory to Jews, as well as other immigrants, helped justify the large working class immigrant female presence in the labor force: “The ideal white woman of land-owning families did neither field nor domestic work, nor did she share with her menfolk plantation management and political rule. . . . [Immigrant] women differed sharply in the extent to which they worked for wages outside their homes, and in the degree to which their work segregated them from contact with men. . . . [W]hether as household domestic workers, as parts of family groups in agricultural labor, or in manufacturing, the jobs available . . . put them in close proximity to men.”<sup>163</sup> Effectively, European immigrant men were pegged as indistinct from women (either they were measured as effeminate, or their women were decidedly too masculine), confirmed by the fact that their women worked alongside them, and “their” women were determined to be equally gender-blurred. As European immigrants became more accepted in American society, the stereotypes gradually diminished. For Jews, however, the stereotype persisted and still remains today, perhaps because it also existed in Europe and was not solely an American product.

In fact, it was ritualized as the norm in the American theatrical tradition. Jewish comedians found profit in buying into the stereotype. As Andrea Most has demonstrated, Jewish vaudeville and musical theater comics, often cast in the comic second-male-lead role, were typically associated with not-quite masculine behaviors. Comic characters of the twenties and thirties were typically “assistants” to the female lead, without professing any sexual attraction to her. In addition, because hilarity

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<sup>163</sup> Brodtkin 86-87.

always ensues in these early musicals, the comic characters often found themselves in drag by happenstance. Most concentrates on two quintessential Wild West vaudeville musicals, Ziegfeld's spectacle, *Whoopie* (1929), which featured Jewish comedian Eddie Cantor and the Gershwins' *Girl Crazy* (1930), which highlighted Jewish vaudevillian William Howard. Cantor's character, Henry, assists in bringing the lovers together, stopping the action to perform in drag, only to wind paired with a butch nurse who has a fetish for vulnerable men. Howard's Jewish taxi cab driver, Gieber Goldfarb, dresses as a woman to avoid capture by gruff, beefy villains, who find him quite attractive as a woman. Andrea Most shows that comedy, the favored vehicle for most Jewish actors at the time, was gender-based. Jewish male comics were inherently feminized and the feminization became the focus of the humor. In this way, Jewish male comics, like Jewish men in general, were perceived to be less masculine than the all-American male.<sup>164</sup>

The tradition of (Jewish) comic characters continued throughout the golden age of the book musical. In Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* (1949), Luthur Billis (not designated Jewish, but Joshua Logan's dialogue for Billis is written in New York dialect, often a code for "Jewish") dances in a wig, hula skirt and

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<sup>164</sup> Most, "'Big Chief Izzy Horowitz': Theatricality and Jewish Identity in the Wild West," *American Jewish History* 313-41. Most demonstrates that though these Jewish comic characters function within the confines of the Jewish male stereotype, ultimately the stereotype is turned into moments of power and adoration. She writes, "In creating their characters, Cantor and Howard had to contend with the stereotype of the feminized Jewish man, which was often attached to them by the anti-Semitism of the era. Because they were actors in musicals, however, they did not have to allow the stereotype to disempower them; . . . Cantor and Howard reject the macho image of the cowboy (which would force them to disappear into the unenviable role of straight man) and instead adopt a feminized persona which allows them literally to dance circles around the 'real' cowboys with whom they share the stage" (330-331).

coconut bra in the famous “Honey Bun” number with Nellie Forbush (who herself is dressed as a male soldier).<sup>165</sup> This number puts Billis, dressed as a hula girl, on a par with Nellie, also in drag. Only through the blurring of gender can Billis can be paired with the leading lady.<sup>166</sup>

In *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), by Burt Shevelove, Larry Gelbart, and Stephen Sondheim, the slaves Pseudolus and Hysterium played by Jewish comic actors Zero Mostel and Jack Gilford, respectively, both wind up performing as women in the farce. Based on the comedies of Plautus, the plot is complicated and full of mistaken identities, mostly derived from Pseudolus’s antics, which significantly depend upon blurring contemporary notions of masculinity and femininity. Most famously, Mostel’s Pseudolus coaxes Gilford’s Hysterium to dress as a blonde virgin’s corpse in order to trick the brutish Miles Gloriosus into believing that his bartered bride, the living blonde virgin Philia, is dead. In a show-stopping moment, Pseudolus and Hysterium sing a reprise of the love duet “I’m Lovely,” previously sung by the ingénues, Hero and Philia. What was

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<sup>165</sup> For a discussion of Luther Billis as a Jewish/ethnic comic-type see Andrea Most’s “‘You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught’: The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*,” *Theatre Journal* 321-23.

<sup>166</sup> In this same article, Most also discussed Emile de Beque as a pseudo-Jewish intellectual. Though she by no means implies that Emile is Jewish, his character is similar to the Jewish intellectuals that Rodgers and Hammerstein would be quite comfortable associating themselves with. Most notes that neither Nellie nor Emile sing a duet together, with the exception of “Twin Soliloquies,” in which they sing to themselves, not to each other. Where Billis must dress in woman’s clothing to be paired with Nellie in song, Emile who *is* paired with Nellie, can only sing to her, not with her. Joe cable, the all-American lieutenant, on the other hand, was given the only duet with Nellie, albeit cut from the show before the Broadway opening (but reinserted in the film version of the musical). In fact, like Luther Billis, Emile is forced to play the womanly role at one point. He mimics Nellie in a reprise of her song “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair” without changing a lyric.

once a traditional love song between a boy and girl is reprised as an atraditional love song between a male comedian wooing another male comedian, who in turn is dressed as a woman (and eventually starts identifying himself as such).

This is not the only example in the musical of these two characters performing comic shticks that smudge the boundaries between gender roles or find themselves in situations that function as such: Hysterium is discovered to have hoarded “Rome’s most extensive and diversified collection of erotic pottery,” implying an interest in homosexual images.<sup>167</sup> When Senex’s wife, Domina (whose name implies her personality) reappears in the second act, she sings a sexually electric solo number, “That Dirty Old Man,” in which, in the heat of the moment, she forces her slave Hysterium onto his knees and, suggesting a erotically charged master/slave relationship, drags him around the stage. He remains silent throughout the song, subjected to Domina’s lusty restraints. Throughout the play, Hysterium is not only mistaken for Philia, but also for Eronius’s daughter and for Domina, and (when he is not in drag) he is mistaken for a eunuch and later a male courtesan. Likewise, Pseudolus finds advantage in blurring the lines between masculinity and femininity. Towards the end of the play, to keep Miles Gloriosus from kissing the corpse of his dead bride (Hysterium again), Pseudolus kisses Miles instead. While distracting Senex from entering his own home, Pseudolus wangles his way into a musical number, “Everybody Aught to Have a Maid,” in which Senex sings about hanky-panky with the serving girl, while Pseudolus pantomimes her role.

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<sup>167</sup> Shevelove, Gelbart and Sondheim, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* 48.

Especially when compared to the beefy Miles Gloriosus, Pseudolus and Hysterium seem far from masculine. Mostel and Gilford, well known for playing Jewish characters (Mostel had played Tevye in the original production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, Gilford would most famously go on to play the tragic elderly Jew, Herr Schultz, in *Cabaret*), engaging in verbal shenanigans and physical disguises reminiscent of Jewish/ethnic comedians, hardly conceal the fact that they are part of a tradition of Jewish funny men. The script can't conceal these characters' Jewishness either: Pseudolus is *schlemiel* to Hysterium's *shlemazl*

On the one hand, in all of these productions, Jewish men play roles that perpetuate male effeminacy. On the other hand, in all of these cases, as they buy into the effeminacy stereotype they become scene stealers, if not show stoppers. Who can deny that Luther's "Honey Bun" or an Eddie Cantor drag number weren't the highlight of the evening. Because drag rejects conventions, turning societal norms in upon themselves, drag empowers the performer. The Jew in drag, in essence, turns the idea that the Jew is effeminate, and thereby controllable, in upon itself. In drag, the Jewish performer is the spectacle that earns the audience's favor; effeminacy, when played for laughs, becomes empowering. Consequently, as theater stars and Borscht Belt comedians became television household names, the trend continued. Milton Berle – Uncle Miltie – became quite famous for his cross-dressing routines, so much so that his comedy-in-drag became a staple of his television show. Ironically, though he was plenty famous for his drag comedy, he also became famous for the naughty rumors about the impressive size of his genitalia: Milton Berle's drag routines were hardly emasculating; in fact, quite the reverse.

On Broadway and in the movies, Danny Kaye was revered as the popular song-and-dance man whose characters were often strikingly feminine. His onscreen romances were barely sensual. Of Kaye's boyish charm, Laurence Epstein writes that "Kaye was a transition figure for Jewish comedians. He felt much more fully American than the Marx Brothers, but his role was not yet clear. One aspect that some critics have noted is the sexual nature of some of his unmasculine characters, which enabled Kaye to present an alternative mask to the one the Marx Brothers wore. The Jew could enter the society but not fully as a man."<sup>168</sup> During the early part of his career, Kaye was asked to dye his hair blond (which he did) and, as it is rumored, get a nose job (which he did not) in order, perhaps, to appear more American. But the effeminacy of his characters highlighted him as "different." Even while singing "White Christmas" (1954) with Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney (which was, of course, written by Irving Berlin, also Jewish), he plays the second banana funny man to Crosby's all-American lead. Is he creating the feminization or was the feminization thrust upon him? In many ways the arrangement is similar to the circumstances faced by Dustin Hoffman's character in *Tootsie* (1982). Because no one wants to hire him, soap opera actor Michael Dorsey reinvents himself as Dorothy Michaels in order to get a role, albeit a female role. Similarly, Jewish actors, like Jewish characters, were not accepted as leading men and had to portray themselves as less-than-manly comic figures in order to gain stardom.

While some Jewish writers such as Norman Mailer and Irwin Shaw have created "bad boy" Jewish characters to counteract the stereotype, some among the

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<sup>168</sup> Epstein 97.

most macho and angry in all of American literature,<sup>169</sup> we continue to see traces of the stereotype in American popular culture today. There are no Jewish action figures in today's movies. And while most action heroes do not reveal their religious identity, it is significant that they are played by Schwarzenegger, Stallone and Van Damme (two of which have German accents) and never by Jewish actors, a choice of casting which, interestingly enough, can call the character's Jewishness into question. Instead, Jewish men are featured much more prominently in comedies. On his hit television show, Jerry Seinfeld was well known for his domesticity and cleanliness, typically qualities pegged as effeminate (in one famous episode, he was mistaken for a gay man; his cleanliness was given as an explanation for the assumption). *Murphy Brown's* Miles Silverberg, a young, neurotic Jewish producer – Murphy's boss – somehow never managed to “control” his tough, independent lead anchorwoman and typically cowered in her presence. Even Reality Television, a genre that has managed to both break and enforce stereotypes at the same time, has shown Jewish men to be not-quite-masculine enough. *Survivor: Africa's* eventual winner, Ethan Zohn, the young contestant with Biblical good looks, who refused to eat ham, even in the face

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<sup>169</sup> The image of the “tough Jew” seems to be a response to the stereotype of the effeminate Jewish male and the Jew-as-victim archetype. A modern example would be the HBO series *The Sopranos* in which a Jewish character is tied to the Mafia. I will go into greater detail on masculinity, aggression and American Jewish culture in the next chapter. For more on Jewish male characters as an opposition to the traditional effeminate stereotype, see Warren Rosenberg's *Legacy of Rage: Jewish Masculinity, Violence and Culture*, particularly the chapters devoted to Norman Mailer. In the next chapter, I will continue my discussion of tough Jews as a response to the effeminacy stereotype. As a side note, I find it interesting that no significant study has been conducted of the effect the representation of Israeli men in the American media has had upon the perception of American Jewish men. To what extent has the *sabra* image, today exemplified in Ariel Sharon's bulldog personality, altered the way Jewish men in America are characterized?

of starvation, and who is a professional athlete (though, significantly, a soccer player, as opposed to a more “American” sport, such as football, basketball or baseball), broke traditional stereotypes in the depiction of Jewish men. At the same time, he was portrayed as being “in touch with his feminine side,” hardly aggressive – especially when compared to several of the more token macho cast members – and routinely shy and quiet, characteristically comfortable in the company of the show’s mother figure, Kim Johnson. (One memorable scene showed “Mama Kim,” as she was nicknamed during the show, choosing Ethan to accompany her into the final round of competition. Realizing that he had been saved from elimination, he clung to her like a school boy, his head pressed against her shoulder as she held his hand. The camera focused on this image for several seconds before breaking.) In many respects, the editing of *Survivor: Africa* fashioned Ethan into perhaps the most positive portrayal of a Jewish male character on a modern television series – he was admirable, athletic, handsome, caring, comparatively the most down-to-earth of all the male cast members. At the same time, this portrayal has not been without relying upon standard stereotypes about Jewish men, albeit portraying them as positive qualities rather than negative ones.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> It is interesting to note that this cast of *Survivor* included Brandon Quinton, a gay man who was edited to be portrayed as an overly flamboyant homosexual. Though *Survivor* has typically been known for its positive portrayals of gay men that defied conventions (Richard Hatch, an aggressive gay father, won the first *Survivor* and John Carroll was equally as assertive in *Survivor: Marquesas*), Brandon’s presence is interesting to note because it detracted from Ethan’s own self-declared “feminine side.” In essence, if Ethan demonstrated slightly less machismo than other male cast members, such as the NRA-card-toting Frank or the jock-like Silas, it was hardly called into question because Brandon’s effeminacy was far removed from a masculine norm. In effect, because reality TV has a habit of fitting cast members into neatly packaged categories (“the Gay Guy,” “The Black Male,” “the Cute College

If the portrayal of Jewish men is problematic, it is even more so for Jewish women: if American culture feminizes Jewish men, where does this leave Jewish women? Though Jewish male characters, pursuing or married to non-Jewish women, appeared on television throughout the eighties and nineties, (*L.A. Law*, *Northern Exposure*, *thirtysomething*, *Murphy Brown*, *Seinfeld*, *Mad About You*, *Friends*, *The West Wing*), the list of Jewish women pursuing non-Jewish men is short, the most recent being *The Nanny* starring Jewish comedienne Fran Drescher. Jon Stratton writes that as Nanny Fine, she “is not attempting to make herself invisible. Indeed, she is celebrating her Yiddish identity, which is the basis for much of the show’s humour.”<sup>171</sup> As Stratton has pointed out, the central romantic relationship is between Fine and her not-Jewish employer, Mr. Sheffield. However, Sheffield is English and

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Girl,” “the Older Woman” “the All-American Jock,” etc.), masculinity, or the absence of it, suggested that gays are further removed than Jews from an all-American norm (embodied by the fair-haired, muscular young men who are cast as “the All-American Jock”). Though CBS may be praised for its casting and portrayal of Ethan Zohn as an admirable Jewish male lead, CBS’s reality TV series *Big Brother* presented viewers with one of the worst portrayals of a Jewish male. In its third installment, Josh Feinberg was the first Jewish contestant to enter the Big Brother household. Josh was utterly unlikable: whiny, nasal, prone to temper tantrums and crying fits. He was physically different from the other men in the household, too: he was skinny, hairy and frail among several tall, muscular, smooth-chested, athletic men, two of whom dated gorgeous female contestants while trapped in the *Big Brother* house. Josh’s Jewish identity throughout was always clear. (At one point he tried unsuccessfully to ally himself with the African-American contestants claiming that their experiences with racism and anti-Semitism fostered a natural partnership.) He was the nerd among jocks, a standard presentation of Jewish men. After the show ended, he became the only male Reality TV cast member to pose for *Playgirl*. Was this an attempt to verify his masculinity?

<sup>171</sup> Stratton 296.

“Because he is English, the disturbance of the American Anglo-assimilation pattern is lessened. So much so that, by the sixth season of the show, she can marry him.”<sup>172</sup>

Stratton’s book was written before the premiere of *Will and Grace*, which has introduced America to another single Jewish woman who frequently discusses her cultural upbringing and is equally frustrated by her boisterous Jewish mother. Portrayed by the actress Deborah Messing, herself Jewish, Grace Adler spent much of the run of the series overwhelmed with romantic difficulties. The running gag in the show is, however, that the perfect man for her is her roommate Will Truman. But Will is a gay man, and thus Grace can be paired with a gentile because he is not “all-American,” that is to say, he is not heterosexual. Though Grace spent the early seasons of the show as a single woman, midway through the run, Grace got married. *Will and Grace* was groundbreaking in that it featured the first wedding of a major character on television in which both bride and groom were Jewish. Grace finally met her Jewish doctor (played by Harry Connick, Jr.). However, for several episodes, Leo was shipped off to Africa and Grace was left with her surrogate husband, Will. (Harry Connick, Jr. does not even appear in the show’s opening credits. Even though Grace is married, she is still effectively paired with Will, hence the television show’s title.)

Nanny Fine and Grace Adler are permitted to be Jewish because they are paired with men who either fall outside the American majority (Mr. Sheffield), are in absentia (Leo), or are gay (Will). Even so, they are the exceptions to the rule; Jewish women are largely absent from American popular culture. The contemporary theatre,

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<sup>172</sup> Stratton 296.

however, has been more willing to grant a presence to Jewish women, as characters, as playwrights and most importantly as an important identity that manages to challenge assumptions about Jews. Theatre by and about Jewish women demonstrates that the answer to the question “What does it mean to be Jewish in America?” is not necessarily the same for women as it is for men.

As I have stressed throughout, the American Theater is significant to American Jewish history because the theater has been a forum for negotiating Jewish identity within a contained environment. The rise of issues particular to Jewish women on the stage mirrors the rise of the discussion of similar issues within the American Jewish community. The increase in single Jewish women and dual career families brings with it the necessity to change assumptions,<sup>173</sup> both from within the community (that nice Jewish girls ultimately get married to nice Jewish boys, preferably doctors) and from outside of the community (that Jews are gendered male, albeit an effeminate masculinity). In her study of how Jewish men perceive Jewish women, Sylvia Fishman writes that Jewish men, “often spoke about Jewish women in language consistent with negative stereotypes. Some pictured Jewish women as

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<sup>173</sup> The premier scholar tabulating sociological research on American Jews is Sylvia Barack Fishman. Her short article, “The Changing American Jewish Family Faces the 1990s” demonstrates that the past decade has produced a visible change in the lifestyle of American Jewish men and woman which has had a “powerful, and probably permanent, impact on the character of the American Jewish family.” Regardless, “Jews continue to value the creation of a happy home. . . . Jews are more likely than other ethnic groups to consider themselves successful human beings when they enjoy marital satisfaction and more likely to suffer a loss of self-esteem when they experience marital instability or divorce.” The importance of a strong familial life rubbing against an increase of divorce and intermarriage in Jewish families, and an increase in the number of never-married Jews means that Jews, more so than ever before, must “face the challenge of retaining their vitality and cohesion while responding to the opportunities of an individualistic and open society” (80).

aggressive, articulate and demanding; others pictured Jewish women as the chubby makers of ‘killer chicken soup.’ One male Jewish focus-group participant asserted that even when Jewish women were attractive, ‘they aren’t really gorgeous.’”<sup>174</sup> Jewish men, it seemed, attached already existing stereotypes to Jewish women. Most interestingly, Fishman found that when women were interviewed, they “had internalized [the] pejorative stereotypes of Jewish women, and projected these negative stereotypes onto other Jewish women.”<sup>175</sup> Regardless of where the stereotypes began, to some degree or another, Jews have allowed their perceptions to be crafted by existing assumptions regarding other Jews. If that assumption includes the idea that Jewishness is associated with a not-quite-masculine-enough American identity, what space are Jewish women allowed to inhabit? As Anne Pellegrini puts it, “All Jews are womanly, but no women are Jews,”<sup>176</sup> a statement that especially rings true in looking at Leah Napolin and Isaac Bashevis Singer’s *Yentl* (1973), the play based on Singer’s short story “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” (also made into a much acclaimed movie musical starring Barbara Streisand in 1983). *Yentl* is the story of a nineteenth century Polish Jewish girl whose access to Torah study is restricted because she is female. Her solution is to pass herself off as a boy, a plan so successful that she is even married off to a young innocent girl. (Sex is never an issue: Yentl’s wife is so uninformed that Yentl can easily avoid sex by inventing rules to evade it.) Yentl’s disguise is ultimately revealed, however, when she falls for

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<sup>174</sup> Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture* 8.

<sup>175</sup> Fishman 9.

<sup>176</sup> Pellegrini 109.

another Talmud student; unlike Singer's short story, the play takes on feminist overtones as Yentl educates herself. At the end of Singer's story Yentl disappears when the truth comes out. The play alters Singer's original ending so that Yentl is portrayed as an admirable figure with Yentl remaining onstage – she is not absent from the play's conclusion as she is in Singer's short story. Singer avoids presenting what happens to her, opting instead to focus upon the rumors that the villagers have invented to explain her absence. The play, however, does not condemn Yentl for her actions. We see the conclusion through her eyes, and not through the villagers. (Barbara Streisand's film version even goes further – the film's final shot is of Yentl proudly sailing to America. Yentl's feminist tradition becomes a part of the American dream.)

It is notable, however, that in order for Yentl to become a feminist hero, she must first essentially become a man. Independence can only be achieved if Yentl takes on a male persona. Yentl may be a feminist figure (in fact, a recent anthology of Jewish feminist writing called itself *Yentl's Revenge*)<sup>177</sup> but she can only become an independent woman by altering her physical appearance to be more masculine. When she finally does appear as a woman at the end, it seems strange to see her as such; the Yentl we have grown accustomed to and, indeed, admired is an androgynous one.

Yentl is symptomatic of a larger issue: must the representation of Jewish women be dependent upon Jewish men's representation? Can Jewish women's identities be constructed independent of Jewish men? Must Jewish femininity be

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<sup>177</sup> See Ruttenberg, *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*.

discussed through the lens of Jewish masculinity? These are questions that been at the center of Wendy Wasserstein's three most overtly Jewish plays: *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977), *Isn't It Romantic* (1983) and *The Sisters Rosensweig* (1992). Though these three plays span three decades, the essential question is the same: can a Jewish woman be a strong, independent and remain unmarried without having her identity negotiated through Jewish men? In all of the plays, the female protagonists are faced with the prospect of a Jewish husband (real or otherwise). In fact, in two of the three plays, the female protagonists consider marrying a Jewish doctor, a stereotypical evaluation of a Jewish woman's success. Wasserstein considers why a Jewish woman's Jewishness is dependent upon marriage. Merv Kant from Wendy Wasserstein's *The Sisters Rosensweig* touches upon how Jewish men are "sold" to Jewish women as perfect husbands by their parents. "You know," he says, "I don't think it's particularly true that Jews don't drink. I think it's a myth made up by our mothers to persuade innocent women that Jewish men make superior husbands."<sup>178</sup> As A. C. Hall says, growing up a Jewish girl meant that the routine established for her was that she "dated (and by extension, married) nice Jewish boys."<sup>179</sup> In other words, Jewish girls are nice Jewish girls if and only if they marry nice Jewish boys. This is not to say that Wasserstein's plays consider intermarriage as a viable alternative. (Only *The Sisters Rosensweig* touches upon the issue and there intermarriage is presented as a form of self-hatred.) Rather, Wasserstein's plays

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<sup>178</sup> Wasserstein, *The Sisters Rosensweig* 27.

<sup>179</sup> Hall 3.

consider whether a single Jewish woman is “just as Jewish” as a Jewish woman who has married a nice Jewish boy.<sup>180</sup>

Likewise, Wasserstein’s plays are filled with nice Jewish boys and girls because Wasserstein typically creates Jewish stereotypes before confronting them. In fact, Wasserstein’s plays are full of Jewish caricatures, from Tasha Blumberg, the outrageous Jewish mother of *Isn’t It Romantic?*, to the seemingly materialistic Gorgeous Teitelbaum, the “good daughter” of the Rosensweig sisters who consults her Rabbi at every turn, to the overweight school girl Holly Kaplan, in search of a nice Jewish doctor, to Marty Sterling, the nice Jewish doctor himself. But it would be a mistake to view these characters as simple stereotypes. On the topic of Jewish stereotypes in Wasserstein’s works, Stephanie Hammer discusses their importance; the passage is worth quoting in full:

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<sup>180</sup> Steven Whitfield sees the issue of intermarriage as more upfront than I do. He writes, “Though the special burden of expectations for women to marry is a recurrent theme in Wasserstein’s work, an even more special burden that is placed upon Jewish women privileges marriage within the faith” (230-231). He sees Wasserstein’s women grappling with the pressure of marrying within the faith because they must pass along a Jewish identity to the next generation, but this added pressure is in direct conflict with a feminist independence. Thus, for Whitfield, Wasserman’s plays show that “ideology of the women’s movement can collide with the dictates of patriarchal Judaism” (230). Whitfield amends his statement, however, saying that Wasserstein’s plays may not emphasize the collision as explicitly as they could be portrayed because “Wasserstein’s writing betrays no awareness” (230) of this tension between Jews and the women’s movement because the Jews in her drama are “observably Jewish but unobservant families” (231). See Whitfield, “Wendy Wasserstein and the Crisis of (Jewish) Identity. While I agree that Wasserstein’s characters are pressured to marry within the faith, I do not see Wasserstein presenting intermarriage as a viable alternative. Instead, the pressure placed upon Wasserstein’s protagonists is to follow a prescribed plan – to marry the nice Jewish boy. Except for Sara Rosensweig, they do not consider marrying outside the faith. Instead, they struggle between marrying within the faith, that is, following what is expected of them, and remaining single.

This momentary universe created by [Wasserstein] is however not only a Jewish comic utopia; it is also, emphatically a Jewish *girl's* world—a place where gendered divisions break down and get pulled over to an emphatically, at times gleefully, feminine side. This world is by no means Wasserstein's invention for it is known to us from generations of Jewish comedienne—first through the comedy of Fanny Brice and then down through generations of female comedienne to Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller, and on to contemporary practitioners Fran Drescher and Elaine Boosler. The Jewish girl's comic world is, thematically, utterly stereotypical: a place where Mother is domineering, never satisfied, terribly embarrassing, but often right, and where the pursuit of a perfect boyfriend becomes a frenzied, vain pursuit not unlike Parzival's pursuit of the Holy Grail. However, Wasserstein renders these stereotypes with such wild exaggeration . . . that the images flip over and explode. These virtuoso comic performances simultaneously foreground the artificiality of such stereotypes as well as the exuberant vitality of the women behind them. The strategy resembles the stylistic gambit of *camp*—the means by which a minority employs in exaggerated form the clichés with which the major culture describes it, as a means for subversive celebration.<sup>181</sup>

Here, Hammer is discussing Wasserstein's *Bachelor Girls*, her hilarious collection of essays about being a single (Jewish) woman, but her emphasis on Wasserstein's stereotypes can also be applied to her plays. Echoing Hammer's sentiment, Christopher Bigsby writes that Wasserstein "seems to relate to a history of comedy that invites audiences to see her as a vaudevillian, a Jewish comic, anxious to please, according to her critics, by disavowing the very principles that generate her subject matter."<sup>182</sup> That "subject matter" of her plays is often a response to the stereotypes placed upon Jewish men and women and it is significant that Wasserstein writes in the vein of the Jewish comedian. Comedy has presented the most egregious examples of stereotyped Jewish women (and men, for that matter). Wasserstein's

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<sup>181</sup> Hammer 18-19.

<sup>182</sup> Bigsby 330.

comedy based upon Jewish stereotypes is often so outrageous that they inevitably become undone, as in the case of *The Sisters Rosensweig*'s Gorgeous Teitelbaum, who proves to be more complicated than we are first led to believe. Gorgeous, the over-the-top talk show host, seems to be an amalgamation of the overbearing Jewish mother and the brand name-obsessed Jewish American princess. Even when it is noted that she fits the stereotype, she doesn't exactly resist it:

MERV: So you're the sister who did everything right. You married the attorney, you had the children, you moved to the suburbs.  
GORGEIOUS: Now, don't make me into a cliché. I am much more than that. Merlin, I am one of the first real jugglers. I love nuts and they're just terrible for you. Ucch! I'm so fat!<sup>183</sup>

However, we learn that she is faced with financial troubles; at the end of the play she returns a Chanel suit, a gift from the synagogue sisterhood, so that she can fund her children's college expenses. The stereotype turns in upon itself: her flamboyance was a charade, but an admirable one; she *chose* to adopt the stereotype in order to keep a positive outlook even through tough times. In essence, the stereotype that Wasserstein creates is reinvented as a positive portrayal because Gorgeous has selected to embrace it.

*The Sisters Rosensweig*, as the title suggests, focuses upon not one, but three sisters. In addition to Gorgeous, there is her older sister Sara, an ex-patriot who has abandoned her Jewish identity to become a powerful banker and her younger sister Pfeni, a travel writer and a self-proclaimed "wandering Jew."<sup>184</sup> Like Gorgeous, Pfeni embraces a stereotype. Pfeni has not had a strong Jewish education, but her

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<sup>183</sup> Wasserstein, *The Sisters Rosensweig* 30.

<sup>184</sup> Wasserstein, *The Sisters Rosensweig* 103.

identification of herself as a wandering Jew is what most empowers her Jewish identity. Most interestingly, however, is that Pfeni has taken on a stereotypical classification that has traditionally been assigned to Jewish men: the classic figure of the wandering Jew is typically male. In part, Pfeni embraces it because it helps explain her lack of success with romance. Pfeni doesn't "settle down" because she has embraced her nomadic nature as an identity; it is her way of connecting with her Jewish roots. Likewise, it also is the root of her feminism. Pfeni's recreation of the image of the wandering Jew as one that women can assume shows that women need not be kept from assuming the (positive) Jewish stereotypes that gendered male. So long as adopting the stereotype is a choice, the stereotype can foster a positive self-image. Pfeni challenges an image that has traditionally been gendered male. She is not a Yentl, that is to say a woman who finds Jewish feminism through the guise of men. Rather she deconstructs the gendered-specific image of the wandering Jew and thereby recasts it as non-gender specific.

Like her younger sisters, Sara also is faced with the choice to accept or reject a stereotype. Sara Goode, the wealthy banker, formerly Sadie Rosensweig, resists Merv Kant's advances throughout much of the play because he represents the nice Jewish boy that her mother always wanted her to marry.

SARA: I know you, Merv. You're just like all the other men I went to high school with. You're smart, you're a good provider, you read *The Times* every day, you started running at fifty to recapture your youth, you worry a little too much about your health, you thought about having affairs, but you never actually did it, and now that she's departed, your late wife Roslyn is a saint.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Wasserstein, *The Sisters Rosensweig* 53.

Merv recognizes that Sara resists him for what he signifies. He is the nice Jewish boy that, were she to marry him in her youth, would mean that she would be following the life that was dictated for her. She was *expected* to marry a Merv Kant, and because she was expected to do so, she never did. “You weren’t a nice Jewish girl,” Merv says to Sara, a statement that makes her recoil. “Why do you always come back to that?”<sup>186</sup> By the end of the play she learns that in resisting the nice Jewish boys that have come and gone throughout her life, she has actually been limiting her own autonomy. In essence, she has restricted her choices: she thought that she would *have* to marry a Jewish husband but never considered that she would *want* to marry a Jew. Because she ruled out the possibility of a Jewish mate, she limited her choices. The final scene of *The Sisters Rosensweig* shows Sara proclaiming her Jewish surname as her own; she has realized that she loves Merv because she has chosen to love him, and more importantly, allowed herself to choose to love him.

*The Sisters Rosensweig* is the latest of Wasserstein’s overtly Jewish plays but her earlier plays also portray Jewish women resisting stereotypes but learning to accept them when they are able to *choose* to accept them. *Isn’t It Romantic*’s plot (1983), foreshadowing *The Sisters Rosensweig*, is centered upon the un-doing of the Jewish stereotype that nice Jewish girls can and should marry nice Jewish doctors. However, it also confronts the stereotype of the Jewish mother. It is treated with admiration when Janie Blumberg, who throughout the play has cringed at her mother’s overly animated dancing, not to mention her intrusive behavior, finally tap

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<sup>186</sup> Wasserstein, *The Sisters Rosensweig* 54.

dances “with some assurance” just like her mother.<sup>187</sup> At the play’s end, Jamie has come to respect her mother’s eccentricities because her mother’s quirks are her way of saying that she is different. Tasha Blumberg may seem to be an exaggeration of the Jewish mother who is obsessed with marrying off her children but Wasserstein tells us that the play is her most autobiographical, and that Tasha Blumberg is based upon her own outlandish mother, Lola Wasserstein, who conned her way into Radio City Music Hall several times, walked around New York City dressed like Patty Hearst, and habitually told waiters that it was her daughter’s birthday in order to get free desserts.<sup>188</sup> Oddly, *Isn’t It Romantic* is the only major work of Wasserstein’s that features mothers on stage, strikingly unique for a Jewish writer, considering the number of mothers that appear throughout the corpus of literature by Jewish American authors. Her most recent play, *Old Money* (2002), features Jewish fathers, but no mothers, and the clash between the American-Jewish idea of marital bliss and the American-feminist idea of female independence—typical of Wasserstein’s works as a whole—is absent. *Old Money* contains a token ingénue love interest between a Jewish boy and a Jewish girl, but their Jewishness is merely a footnote to the play, and (consequentially?) their fathers show little interest in their childrens’ budding romance. On the other hand, the budding romance between Janie Blumberg and Marty Sterling is central to *Isn’t It Romantic*, the prospect of Janie having a romance with a nice Jewish doctor is tantalizing to Tasha. Aside from the overwhelmingly American idea that women would be much better off married than single, Jewish

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<sup>187</sup> Wasserstein, *Isn’t It Romantic* 152.

<sup>188</sup> Wasserstein, *Bachelor Girls* 15-22.

women have the added pressure to get married because they are the carriers of the Jewish tradition. Technically speaking, a child born to a Jewish man and a non-Jewish woman is not considered Jewish, whereas a child born to a Jewish mother is traditionally considered by Jews to be Jewish. For Janie to remain single not only means that there will be no grandchildren for Tasha and Simon Blumberg, but also if Janie does not marry it means that she is *aharon ha-aharonim*, the last of the last.

For Janie's mother, the possibility of a marriage between Janie and Marty is a fulfillment of the proverbial Jewish mother's dream. Because of the pressures from both ends – a five thousand year old Jewish tradition, and an American culture that pushes its women into marriage – for Janie, the idea of Marty as a mate seems more interesting than Marty himself. After first meeting the Jewish doctor in Central Park, Janie's immediate comment to her friend Harriet is "Marty Sterling could make a girl a nice husband." Janie imagines Marty to be "a nice husband" for "a girl," ignoring the very credo that she herself believes: all "girls" are inevitably different and no Marty Sterling, however "nice" he is, could be the perfect husband for each "girl's" individual tastes. With the prospect of a mate in sight, Janie falls into the very scheme that her mother has bought into as well: that every girl, especially a Jewish girl, should seek out a "nice husband." Her friend Harriet calls this to Janie's attention by responding, "Now you really sound like your mother."<sup>189</sup> True enough, Marty would provide security for Janie, of utmost concern to her mother ("Janie, . . . I want to know who's going to take care of you when we're not around anymore."<sup>190</sup>),

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<sup>189</sup> Wasserstein, *Isn't It Romantic* 84.

<sup>190</sup> Wasserstein, *Isn't It Romantic* 151.

which seems to be of concern to Janie as well; after Harriet tells Janie that she sounds just like her mother, Janie once again echoes her mother: “Harriet, do you know who that man’s father is?”<sup>191</sup> Janie is intrigued by the possibilities of a potential mate whose family’s success could provide a stable means of living.

Both Tasha and Janie see marriage as a means to move Janie from her parents’ care and direction to the care and direction of a husband. With a flair for the dramatic, Benedict Nightingale stresses that Marty is “a parent camouflaged as a lover, a symptom of [Janie’s] real problem, which is an umbilical cord as thick and strongly shackled as a ship’s cable.”<sup>192</sup> In the narrative that has been planned for Janie in which she moves seamlessly from Tasha Blumberg’s daughter to Marty Sterling’s wife, no room has been granted for her to be independent of another individual. In fact, to ensure that she does get married, the Blumbergs also have a back-up plan for Janie in case her relationship with Marty Sterling collapses. They bring Vladimir to Janie’s apartment, a Russian cab driver who speaks little English. In fact, they have only known him for ten minutes. “He’s a nice boy,” says Janie’s father. “Don’t you think he’s a nice boy, Janie? Seems intelligent too. I thought maybe if things didn’t work out with you and Marty, I’d take him into the business.”<sup>193</sup> Janie’s individuality is muffled as she is defined first by her parents and, as is the plan, next by her husband-to-be.

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<sup>191</sup> Wasserstein, *Isn’t It Romantic* 84.

<sup>192</sup> Nightingale H2.

<sup>193</sup> Wasserstein, *Isn’t It Romantic* 106.

The Blumbergs are well meaning; Tasha tells us that she wants nothing more than for her daughter to be happy. “Sure, I’d like Janie to be married, and if she were a lawyer that’d be nice too, and, believe me, if I could take her by the hand and do it for her I would,” she tells Lillian Cornwall. “[W]hat do I want from her? I just want to know that she’s well. And to give her a push, too. But just a little one.”<sup>194</sup> But Jamie’s objection, and the sore spot in the all-out confrontation between mother and daughter in the play’s final scene, is that Tasha gets to define what happiness is for Jamie, a definition of happiness that Tasha herself has found limiting. After admitting to her parents that she has ended her relationship with Marty Sterling, Janie explodes:

Mother, think about it. Did you teach me to marry a nice Jewish doctor and make chicken for him? You order up breakfast from a Greek coffee shop every morning. Did you teach me to go to law school and wear gray suits at a job that I sort of like every day from nine to eight? You run out of here in leg warmers and tank tops to dancing school. Did you teach me to compromise and lie to the man I live with and say I love you when I wasn’t sure? You live with your partner; you walk Dad to work every morning.<sup>195</sup>

Janie stresses that her mother is simply happy being a go-go dancing Jewish wife who rarely cooks partly because she has managed to find sincere companionship with her husband. Her happiness stems from her originality and her wonderful ability to find independence within marriage. Tasha, however, doesn’t quite hear what Janie is saying and seems to repeat the same argument that Janie makes:

Now I understand. Everything is my fault. I should have been like the other mothers: forty chickens in the freezer and mah-jongg all

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<sup>194</sup> Wasserstein, *Isn’t It Romantic* 120.

<sup>195</sup> Wasserstein, *Isn’t It Romantic* 150.

afternoon. Janie, I couldn't live like that. God forbid. . . . I believe a person should have a little originality—a little “you know.” Otherwise you just grow old like everybody else.<sup>196</sup>

But Janie doesn't want to be the type of wife who has forty chickens in the freezer either. What she wants is the same chance to make choices, to find her own originality, just as her mother did. Choosing not to marry a nice Jewish doctor, when she is expected to choose otherwise, is the same as choosing to go-go dance, when it's expected to do otherwise. What Tasha and Janie have both fought against are the same expectations. It is expected that women are supposed to fade into the background. Marty expects this very scenario. “I need attention. A great deal of attention,” he says to her.<sup>197</sup> His childish nickname for Janie, “Monkey,” implies the role that she will play in their marriage. Certainly, Marty is not the villain of *Romantic*. In fact, Wasserstein has said that it is important that he not be portrayed as such so that Janie's choice to reject him is for no other reason than to choose to pursue a life of independence over married life, at least for the time being.<sup>198</sup> As Christopher Bigsby writes, “The point is not whether Janie does or does not get married but that she makes a choice, good or bad.”<sup>199</sup> This is true; Janie comes to realize that she can choose to marry (or not marry) the Jewish doctor, cook chickens for him, or order out, and thus follow or not follow a paradigm that has existed for

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<sup>196</sup> Wasserstein, *Isn't It Romantic* 50.

<sup>197</sup> Wasserstein, *Isn't It Romantic* 59. Gail Ciociola has said that Marty “wants more than he has the right to expect” (46).

<sup>198</sup> Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights* 424.

<sup>199</sup> Bigsby 343.

her, and for other American Jewish women before she was born. In short, Janie's rejection of Marty is a rejection of the predictable and the stereotypical. In her rejection of Marty is an affirmation of herself as an individual, and a declaration that Jewish women can and (as she shows by pointing to her mother's eccentricity) always have been individuals.

In fact, in the final moments of the play, Janie demonstrates that individuality has been passed down from generation to generation through women. Convincing her mother to trust her judgment after she's dumped Marty Sterling, she uses her mother's own words, "I believe a person should have a little originality, a little 'you know'; otherwise you just grow old like everybody else. And you know, Janie, I like life, life, life."<sup>200</sup> Finally, she says, "Mother, don't worry. I'm Tasha's daughter. I know; 'I am.'"<sup>201</sup> By identifying herself as Tasha's daughter and speaking the very words that her mother used, she creates a narrative quite contrary to the one that she has resisted: Jewish women, at least for Janie, have followed a tradition of individuality. Before the curtain comes down, the final image we are left with is Janie "dancing beautifully, alone," which has always been her mother's signature characteristic.<sup>202</sup> It is a complex ending: on the one hand, Janie has dumped Marty to find independence. On the other hand, Janie is shown behaving just like her mother. But just as she chose to leave Marty, she also chooses to adopt her Mother's

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<sup>200</sup> Wasserstein, *Isn't It Romantic* 151.

<sup>201</sup> Wasserstein, *Isn't It Romantic* 151.

<sup>202</sup> Wasserstein, *Isn't It Romantic* 153.

eccentricity. Janie may have been her mother's daughter before, but now she has *chosen* to be her mother's daughter.

In time, perhaps, Janie Blumberg will do what Sara Rosensweig is able to do and choose to marry a Jewish mate rather than remain single, as Janie has chosen. In fact, Sara could easily be the Janie in a few decades, just as Holly in *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977), Wasserstein's first major Jewish protagonist, may grow up to become a Janie or a Sara. (As Wasserstein's writing career has matured, so have her Jewish central characters.) Marriage is the expectation of Holly, the only Jewish character in the play. At a college reunion, the all-women dorm-mates make up for lost time. Holly Kaplan summarizes where the last six years of her life have taken her:

You know, for the past six years I have been afraid to see any of you. Mostly because I haven't made any specific choices. My parents used to call me three times a week at seven A.M. to ask me, "Are you thin, are you married to a root-canal man, are *you* a root-canal man?" And I'd hang up and wonder how much longer I was going to be in "transition."<sup>203</sup>

Significantly, Holly's non-Jewish friends do not feel the same pressure to marry speedily. Muffet is quite happy supporting herself and Kate was "sort of living with" her beau before heading into therapy (but she's "better after four sessions").<sup>204</sup> Even Samantha, who decided to get married, has found married life to be a form of feminism. "Robert respects me," she tells the others proudly. Moreover, Samantha has found that her original thoughts about marriage, as a limitation upon female

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<sup>203</sup> Wasserstein, *Uncommon Women and Others* 71.

<sup>204</sup> Wasserstein, *Uncommon Women* 69.

independence, were in error. After marriage, she says, “there are more options.”<sup>205</sup> Only still-unmarried Holly, because she views her life in transition, sees herself as making no “specific choices.” She doesn’t see herself as making any specific choices, because she doesn’t think that as a single Jewish girl there are any specific choices to make. This is not to say that Holly’s friends wound up where they planned to be either. But the opportunities offered to Holly or, as she sees it, the lack of opportunities, are in some way affected by the fact that she is Jewish; Holly has bought into the narrative that Jewish daughters must become Jewish wives. Patiently or impatiently, Holly waits for the opportunity to present itself so she can move from the position of Jewish daughter into the role of Jewish wife. It is a pressure that the non-Jewish women in *Uncommon Women and Others* do not seem to face, or at least not in the same way because they are not confronted by the stereotypes surrounding Jewish men and Jewish women.

Wasserstein’s plays rely heavily upon stereotypes because Wasserstein recognizes the role that stereotypes play in one’s self-perception. Rather than presenting Jewish characters who overtly negate the stereotypes (these plays are not the dramas of Jewish athletes nor Jews in Utah), Wasserstein embraces the stereotypes in order to complicate them. As Janie, Holly, Sara, Merv, Gorgeous and Pfeni understand their identities as Jews, their conceptions of their relationships to the world is shaped by these stereotypes. This is not to say that Wasserstein’s dramas validate stereotype, but they do validate the function that perception plays upon the human psyche. In Wasserstein’s plays, Jewish difference is not found in stereotype,

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<sup>205</sup> Wasserstein, *Uncommon Women* 70.

but the role that stereotype plays in one's Jewish identity. For Wasserstein, Jewish difference exists because Jews must respond to the perception of Jewish difference. Most importantly, by emphasizing that Jewish stereotypes are gender-based, Wasserstein carves out a role for Jewish women that has been unprecedented. Her characters are not women who outwardly reject stereotype; instead, the stereotype is transformed into one of many possible ways for self identification. By doing so, Wasserstein's characters open up a range of possibilities for characterizing Jewish women, not the least of which include adopting the very stereotypes that were designed to limit them. Tasha and Gorgeous may be outrageous Jewish mothers, but they are admirable characters because they choose to be unique. Likewise, Janie Blumberg and Sara Rosensweig are presented with nice Jewish boys and neither offers an outright rejection the narrative that Jewish girls should marry a good Jewish man when she sees one. For Janie, rejecting Marty does not change her Jewish identity. For Sara, accepting Merv's advances *does* change her Jewish identity. Where previously she had limited herself by rejecting anything that too closely resembles a prescribed narrative for Jewish women, she has come to understand that the *choosing* to follow a path that many Jewish women have been perceived to follow is hardly limiting so long that it is indeed a choice. If stereotypes have been limiting, Wasserstein strips them of their power by having her characters reinvent the stereotype as a choice.

## **Sick Jews: Jewish Masculinity and AIDS Drama**

In August of 2002, the newest member of the Jewish community was a giant orange rock monster with super powers. At that time, Marvel Comics outed The Thing as a Jewish superhero, its first in any comic book series. The Thing is a member of the Fantastic Four, a legion of superheroes which includes an elastic man, an invisible woman and a human torch. Because of his brute strength, The Thing is the strongest of the foursome. Apart from his proclivity for smashing brick walls, The Thing is most famous for his Schwarzenegger-like one-liner, "It's clobberin' time!" Jews may not have an action hero in the movies to lay claim to, but in the two-dimensional world of Marvel Comics, humankind is now protected by the first Jew whose skin has been replaced by orange rocks. The comic book does not address the difficulties of circumcision.

The Thing was the creation of Jack Kirby (born Jacob Kurtzberg) in 1961. In this particular issue of *Fantastic Four*, Ben saves the life of an old friend, Mr. Sheckerberg, from the iniquitous Powderkeg. During a heated battle, Mr. Sheckerberg is injured and The Thing, overcome with emotion, starts to say the Jewish prayer, the *Shema*. In the final panels, Sheckerberg lives and Powderkeg is caught; the villain is shocked that The Thing is Jewish. "There a Problem with that?"

the orange rock monster barks. Powderkeg says, predictably, “No! No, it’s just ... you don’t look Jewish.”<sup>206</sup> True enough.

However, of the foursome that makes up the Fantastic Four, it is telling that The Thing, the physically strongest of the team, is the Jewish character. In the preceding chapter, I discussed that Jews in America have been perceived as not quite masculine enough. The Thing stems from a long line of Jewish male characters who, in order to be seen as a manly, must overexert their masculinity; they must be *hyper-masculine*. In fact, a more famous example exists in the comic book world as well: the Thing may be the first Jewish superhero, but he is not the first pseudo-Jewish superhero. As Harry Brod has convincingly shown, such resistance to the label of effeminacy gave birth to the star of *Action Comics*, the most famous of all superheroes, Superman (first appearance, June, 1938), who was the brainchild of two young Jewish men, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. For Brod, the Superman story is an inherently Jewish one because it is the clash between two identities: the hardly masculine Clark Kent, the “quintessential characterization of the Jewish *nebbish*,” and the hyper-masculinity of the Man of Steel.<sup>207</sup> Brod writes, “It is precisely the extremism of the polarization between Superman and Clark that makes him such a paradigmatically Jewish American male character. . . . Herein lies the dilemma: to create a heroic Jewish male image one must abandon the Jewish component and rely on the dominant culture’s version of the heroic male. Jewish male heroes must be

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<sup>206</sup> Kesel, Immonen and Koblisch “Remembrance of Things Past,” *Fantastic Four*.

<sup>207</sup> Brod 282.

non-Jewish Jews[.]” In short, to be heroically masculine, “Jews have to out-Gentile the Gentiles[.]”<sup>208</sup>

In order to be a masculine Jewish male, Jewish men must overcompensate. They must seem as far removed from effeminacy stereotypes as possible if they wish to exhibit American masculine normative behavior. The irony is, however, that in the case of *The Thing* and *Superman*, they are far from anything normative; their names alone suggest they are hardly representations of common American men. As Jewish men reinvent their masculinity in so that it coincides with American norms, they ultimately produce a version of masculinity that seems overly masculine. Popular culture has rendered Jewish men to be either Clark Kents, that is to say *nebbishes* and neurotics, or Supermen, that is to say men who distance themselves from effeminacy, be they the Jewish boxers of the twenties and thirties, Norman Mailer’s bad boy Jews, the Jewish gangsters of such films as *The Long Goodbye*(1973), *The Godfather, Part II* (1975) and HBO’s *The Sopranos*, The WWF’s (World Wrestling Federation) Goldberg, or even Jewish adult film stars Ron Jeremy and Herschel Savage.

Because of the effeminacy stereotype surrounding Jewish masculinity, Jewish men are limited in how their masculinity is portrayed. What does that say for gay Jews who are also faced with the effeminacy stereotype? Gay Jews are twice stereotyped – if they are to be considered masculine, they must surpass the effeminacy stereotyped associated with both Jewishness and homosexuality. Because the theater has become a significant part of Jewish and gay culture, the theater has allowed gay Jews to make headway in challenging the dual stereotype; this is in large

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<sup>208</sup> Brod 283.

part because of the prominence of gay Jewish playwrights. With the exception of Terrence McNally, the most prominent gay playwrights of the last few decades—Tony Kushner, Paul Rudnick, Larry Kramer, William Finn, James Lapine, Harvey Fierstein, Martin Sherman, and William Hoffman—are all Jewish. Likewise, they not only write about the gay experience, but their subjects cover the Jewish experience as well. Add to the list musical theater gurus Stephen Sondheim and Jerry Herman, whose works suggestively touch upon gay and Jewish motifs, and a canon of gay Jewish drama becomes apparent. In essence, it seems as if the gay experience on the American stage has been very much mediated by the Jewish experience; the reverse is true as well.

Because Jewish and gay men have been burdened with the effeminacy stereotype, representations of Jews and gays have often been conflated throughout Western history. Particularly during the *fin de siècle*, which marked the rise of both modern anti-Semitism and homophobia, “the Jew” and “the homosexual” were shaped as near-mirror images. As Jonathan Freedman writes, the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century found Jews, like “the homosexual,” “fully crystallized in . . . psychiatric and sexological discourses.” Jews were “redefined not as members of a religion (however debased or privileged) or a culture (ditto), or even as inhabitants of a region or a nation, but in terms that managed the proliferation of ambiguities from which the very concept of ‘the Jew’ emerged by pathologizing them.”<sup>209</sup> In this way, Jews, who were slippery to define to begin with (were they a race? A religion? A nationality? A culture?), were classified by their supposed

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<sup>209</sup> Freedman, “Coming Out of the Jewish Closet with Marcel Proust,” *GLQ* 523.

deviance. Jewishness, linked with homosexuality, pinpointed them in such a way so that they fit into a “tidy box to contain their proliferating indecipherability.”<sup>210</sup> Because Jews were associated with sexual deviance, as Daniel Boyarin has argued, Freud’s psycho-sexual theories stemmed from his fear that the intertwining of Jewishness and homosexuality was becoming too prominent in Western, particularly German and Austrian, culture. Boyarin writes that, “The Oedipus complex, the fantasy of a masculinity rendered virile through both of its moments, the desire for the mother (not the father) and violent hostility toward the father, provided Freud with the cultural/psychological cover for his dread.”<sup>211</sup> This “dread” was coupled with the fear that psychoanalysis would be mocked because it would be seen as being conceived by a Jew, and thereby an effeminate Jew at that: what could a Jew, a sexual deviant, know about the psychosexual desires of all human kind?

Freud’s fear of being discredited because of his “Jewish” sexual abnormalities is indicative of a larger picture. By the end of the nineteenth century Jewishness and deviant sexuality were effectively bound together. As anti-Semitic discourse became

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<sup>210</sup> Freedman 523. This is not to say that Jews and homosexuals were first linked at the turn of the century. Instead, it is to show that they became categorically similar as they were defined sexually and psychologically. As John Boswell has demonstrated, social pressures that condemned Jews during the early Christian era and the Middle Ages resembled the societal views about same-sex relationships. See his book *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. As he writes, “[T]he fate of Jews and gay people has been almost identical throughout European history, . . . even the same methods of propaganda were used against Jews and Gay people—picturing them as animals bent on the destruction of the children of the majority” (14).

<sup>211</sup> Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* 216. See also Gilman’s *The Case of Sigmund Freud: Medicine and Identity at the Fin de Siècle*.

deeply rooted in gender-construction it coincided with the rise of modern homophobia. It comes as no surprise that gay men were thrown into concentration camps alongside Jews in Nazi-controlled Germany.<sup>212</sup> Interestingly enough, as Faith Rogow has discussed, during the Nazi era, Jewish communities and Germany's gay men tried to divorce themselves from any apparent connection between the two groups. Rogow discusses the case of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, the father of sexology and a prominent gay Jew, whose work (along with the Institute for Sexual Research) was destroyed by the Nazis. The German Jewish community attributed its destruction to Hitler's anti-gay outlooks, while Germany's gay voices saw the Institute's demolition as an anti-Semitic act. By discussing the Institute's demise as a hateful action against the other group, both groups tried to classify the other as the victims of Nazism, rather than casting themselves as the victims.<sup>213</sup> In doing so, both groups attempted to distinguish themselves from the negative perceptions that linked them.

European dialogues regarding Jewish effeminacy and sexuality crossed the Atlantic during the last decades of the nineteenth century, the heyday of Jewish

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<sup>212</sup> This is not to say that the stereotype of Jews was limited to that of an effeminate homosexual. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Jewish male sexuality was deemed abnormal and Jewish men could be portrayed as hyper-sexual predators of non-Jewish women. Andrea Dworkin has written that during the Holocaust, Jewish men were often portrayed as rapists, similar to the fabrications surrounding African-American men throughout American history. See her essay, "The Sexual Mythology of Anti-Semitism" in *A Mensch Among Men: Explorations in Jewish Masculinity* 118-123. For a fascinating memoir of one gay man's experience in the concentration camps, see Heinz Heger's *The Men with the Pink Triangle (Männer mit dem rosa Winkel): The True, Life and Death Story of Homosexuals in the Nazi Death Camps*. Richard Plant's *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War against Homosexuals* offers a more comprehensive overview of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals in the Holocaust. Plant is a gay and Jewish survivor from Nazi Germany.

<sup>213</sup> Rogow 77.

immigration to America. In some respects, newly acquired liberties in the new country allowed for Jewish men to challenge the stigma of Jewish effeminacy much more so than was possible in Europe. Jewish neighborhoods allowed Jewish boys the sense of freedom within the crowded vicinities to get into physical altercations with gentile boys of neighboring districts. The Lower East Side allowed for this shaping of Jewish identity to coincide with brute masculinity, sometimes gang mentality, and raw, violent anger.<sup>214</sup> Such rage is exhibited in Michael Gold's angry autobiographical work, *Jews Without Money* (1930). Through terse language that avoids metaphor or sentimentality, Gold's memoir paints a shocking landscape, a Lower East Side not viewed with warm nostalgia, but with the acrimonious distaste of slum life. The coming-of-age story is full of street brawls, encounters with prostitutes, alcoholism, pimps, and beggars. If there is a "thesis" to this autobiography, it is that America has changed the character of the Jews, forcing them to relinquish quasi-intellectualism and become violent and, in the process, masculine:

Ku Klux moralizers say the gangster system is not American. They say it was brought here by "low-class" European immigrants. What nonsense! There never were any Jewish gangsters in Europe. The Jews there were a timid bookish lot. The Jews have done no killing since Jerusalem fell. That's why the murder-loving Christians have called us the "peculiar people." But it is America that has taught the sons of tubercular Jewish tailors how to kill.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> See Warren Rosenberg's *Legacy of Rage: Jewish Masculinity, Violence and Culture*, particularly pages 19-25. Here, Rosenberg discusses violence amongst Jewish men as a response to the stereotype of Jewish effeminacy and its link to homosexuality.

<sup>215</sup> Gold 37.

In its final words, Gold's work does not reminisce upon the coming of age process, but calls for its readers to begin a fierce revolution against the pangs of American cruelty:

O workers' Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely,  
suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East  
Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit.  
O Revolution, that forced me to think, to struggle and to live.  
O great Beginning!<sup>216</sup>

Gold no longer envisions Jewishness as a cerebral movement, but as the blistering voice of the heated proletariat. In its most extreme form, such crude, masculine overcompensation led to the rise of a few notorious Jewish gangsters, most famously Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel. It also accounts for a growing Jewish interest in boxing during the decades of and surrounding the Great Depression and, as mentioned earlier, the invention of Superman.

History, it can be said, is the fashioning of heroes. As Michael Meyer has noted, "For modern Jews, a conception of their past is no mere academic matter. It is vital to their self-definition. Contemporary forms of Jewish identity are all rooted in some view of Jewish history which sustains them and serves as their legitimation."<sup>217</sup> Consequently, it comes as no surprise that gay Jewish history has largely been abandoned in Jewish narratives of history. Of course, gay history is nearly absent in a hetero-normative Western historical tradition, but its absence from Jewish history is not only due to a traditionally interpreted scriptural aversion to homosexuality but also to a desire to "masculinize" Jewish history. In essence, Jewish history has

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<sup>216</sup> Gold 09.

<sup>217</sup> Michael Meyer, introduction, *Ideas of Jewish History* xi.

resisted gay Jewish historical narratives because Jews themselves have been burdened with stereotypes of effeminacy. By severing the connection that Western anti-Semitism and hetero-normative ideologies have put in place, Jewish history becomes hetero-normative as well. True, Reformed Judaism is the first major American religious organization to accept same-sex marriage (encouraging both partners to be Jewish) and Conservative Jewish organizations are debating the same issue. However, as a whole, Jewish gay heroes are absent from Jewish history. When Biblical stories are evoked to demonstrate that same-sex relationships are very much a part of Jewish tradition, such suggestions are quickly challenged. In 1993, Israeli Labor Party Knesset member discussed the Biblical story of David's love for Jonathan while speaking on behalf of gay and lesbian rights in the military. He was met with enormous hostility for speaking about Biblical tales within a homoerotic context.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Along these lines, Jody Hirsh has argued that Jewish history is founded upon “positive images of homosexuality in Jewish sources and Jewish tradition” in “all periods of Jewish history” but religious and academic scholars “in their refusal to acknowledge the gay experience in Jewish history” have failed to note the “potentially positive attitudes” toward homosexuality (83). Hirsch traces examples of homosexual motifs in the Bible from David and Jonathan's relationship, to Ruth and Naomi's friendship to Joseph's femininity and his rejection of Potiphar's wife. Hirsh notes that these Biblical figures “aren't gay in the modern sense of being exclusively homosexual or developing an exclusively 'gay' life-style. It is clear that however we interpret the 'gayness' of biblical role models, the norm was to be married and have children regardless of whom one was really able to love, or even prefer. The first of the 613 biblical commandments is, after all, be fruitful and multiply. David, Jonathan, Ruth, Naomi, and Joseph all had children. In all five cases, however, their relationships with loved ones of the same sex were pivotal relationships in their lives as well as in the significance for the Jewish people” (88). Hirsh goes on to demonstrate the overt homoerotic imagery in the poetry of the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry, particularly the poetry of Juda Ha-Levi, Moses Ibn Ezra and Solomon Ibn Gabriol. She concludes that “The number of homosexual poems written by well-known poets is astounding. The proliferation of homosexual verse is proof positive

In post-Biblical Jewish history, it is difficult to find Jewish men and women who could be identified as gay or lesbian partly because the definitions of “gay” and “lesbian” and “homosexual” have developed over time. The term “homosexual” was first used in 1869 by medical communities; “Gay” is a more modern term. It is somewhat anachronistic to identify gay Jews if those who we wish to be labeled as “gay” or “lesbian” did not label themselves as such. Part of the difficulty is that today “gay,” “lesbian,” and “homosexual” are all terms used to describe personal identities when the very idea of “having an identity” is a relatively modern one and the notion that homosexual behavior can establish one’s identity is a contemporary concept.<sup>219</sup> Furthermore, the construction of a gay or Jewish identity yields similar issues. Just as debate exists over what makes a Jew a Jew, (Is a non-practicing Jew a Jew? Is someone who is born of a Jewish mother the only definition for “Jew”? Can one be culturally, but not religiously, Jewish?), a similar debate exists over labels of sexual orientation. Is a man who engages in homosexual relations, but identifies himself as a heterosexual man, a gay man? Is a man who has only had sexual

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that homosexuality, even to medieval Jewry, was not considered a significant problem” (90). Also worthy of notice is Rebecca T. Alpert’s essay, “In God’s Image: Coming to Terms with Leviticus,” 61-70. Alpert discusses the passages from the Bible (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13), which seem to condemn homosexual relationships as a *to’evha* (abomination). While Alpert does not deny a straight forward approach to the passage, that sexual relations between two men is meant to be disgusted, she notes that other interpretations, depending upon one’s interpretive methodology, are viable and do not necessarily limit the text’s authority. For more on biblical scholarship and studies of Jewish masculinity and sexuality, see Lori Hope Lefkowitz’s work, particularly “Coats and Tales: Joseph Stories and Myths of Jewish Masculinity,” *A Mensch Among Men* and “Passing As a Man: Narratives of Jewish Gender Performance,” in *Narrative*.

<sup>219</sup> See Boswell 92.

relations with a woman, but has had emotional feelings for men a gay man? Must one live his or her public life as a gay or a lesbian to be gay or lesbian? Both identities are slippery in their appliance.

In fact, modern gay organizations have noticed the similarities between the shifty definitions surrounding homosexuality and Jewishness as well. She mentions the 1951 mission statement of the Mattachine Society, which sought to construct “an ethical homosexual culture . . . paralleling the emerging cultures of our fellow minorities—the Negro, Mexican, and Jewish peoples[.]”<sup>220</sup> The year is significant because only four years later Will Herberg would move Judaism into the American mainstream by placing it alongside Protestantism and Catholicism as one of America’s three great religions.<sup>221</sup> Even when more conservative Jewish groups, usually Orthodox Jews, have condemned homosexuality, gays have habitually ignored the religiously inspired interpretations that arouse such condemnation from Jewish groups. Instead, they have aligned themselves with Jewish groups because of their status as a liberal ethnic minority within the United States. In other words, when gays define Jews as an ethnic group, they find an ally, a friendship that would not be possible were they to define Jews as a religious institution.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Rogow 80.

<sup>221</sup> See Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*.

<sup>222</sup> In a wonderful example of how gay characters are commonly linked with Jews, Showtime’s *Queer Duck*, the very first gay cartoon, features the adventures of Adam Duckstein, who ridicules Dr. Laura and Jerry Fallwell and goes ga-ga over Streisand. He’s gay. He’s a duck. And he’s Jewish. (In fact, the voice of his Jewish mother is played by Estelle Harris, who also played George Constanz’s pseudo-Jewish mother on *Seinfeld*.) The “joke” of the cartoon is that it is full of stereotypes and by perpetuating the stereotypes, it challenges them as well. The fact that *Queer Duck* is

In some respects, gay men's association with Jews as a sibling minority group is similar to Leo Bersani's argument that gay men relate easily to women because of their symbolic status as "Others." There is a difference, however: Bersani argues that while gay men have found an ally in feminists because both groups challenge traditional misogynist machismo, gays also risk jeopardizing those political affiliations with feminists because gays must contest the ill-conceived perception that they are "a woman's soul in a man's body." In order to reject the stereotype that they are male in body only, they must to some degree or another imitate what has been traditionally conceived of as masculine behavior, a gender construction which challenges the goals of feminism and gay activism.<sup>223</sup> Identification with Jewish difference, on the other hand, is perhaps less problematic than an identification with women. Because Jews as a whole have traditionally been gendered male, alignment with Jews does not pose the same stigma that identifying with women does. In theory, when gays unite with Jews, they contest the perception that gays are women in a man's body because, while Jews may not be represented as typically masculine, they are envisioned as male.

Within the theater these issues become more complex. Why has there been a proclivity for gay Jewish plays? Perhaps, one reason is because of the ample presence of Jews in the theatrical community. Though I do not wish to argue that gay Jewish playwrights have had an easier time getting their work accepted by theatrical

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Jewish recognizes the very stereotype in which the lines between Jewish male and gay male often overlap.

<sup>223</sup> Bersani 60.

audiences because of the theater community's disproportionately large Jewish population, I do suggest that the forum for such plays, in which there is a large Jewish audience, seems natural for discussing gay issues through Jewish motifs. In combination with the fact that Jews are demographically more liberal than the rest of the American population, and because the "Jewishness" in several of these gay plays is central – *Torch Song Trilogy* (1982), *The Destiny of Me* (1992), *Angels in America: Millenium Approaches* (1991), *Angels in America: Perestroika* (1992), *Falsettos* (1992) – gay issues, which may otherwise seem foreign, may be more palatable. In fact, the gay Jewish play seems to have developed a recognizable storyline: *Angels in America*, *Falsettos*, William Hoffman's *As Is* (1985) and Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1988) all portray a Jewish gay male attending to his non-Jewish, handsome, heroic lover who is stricken with AIDS. As Alisa Solomon has written:

His [the healthy lover's] Jewishness serves several functions: it marks the sick lover's identity as "purely" gay; that is, it highlights the gayness of the goy as his primary characteristic, uninflected by ethnicity. Thus, the empathy is driven by an implied analogy: reviling gays is like reviling Jews. Further, the boyfriend, doubly feminized by his homosexuality and especially by his Jewishness, ministers like a Jewish wife, enabling a straight audience to see the lovers as any ordinary couple facing a disease, just like them.<sup>224</sup>

As Solomon notes, an audience's sympathy for gays is mediated through their sympathy for Jews. However, there is another reason behind the prevalence of gay Jewish characters in gay dramas: gay Jews are less threatening to an American norm than gay gentiles. Gay Jews have had an easier time gaining acceptance in the theater

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<sup>224</sup> Solomon, "Wrestling with *Angels*: A Jewish Fantasia," *Approaching the Millenium: Essays on Angels in America* 123. Solomon rightly argues, however, that *Angels in America* subverts this standard AIDS drama paradigm. Her article is discussed in more detail below.

because gay Jews do not violate an imagined all-American norm. At the same time, gay Jewish playwrights have found a political advantage in associating the gay experience with the Jewish experience. As I discussed in Chapter One, Jews have an established presence as “everymen” figures in American culture because of their status as both an insider and an outsider. By associating themselves with Jews, gay men are able to feed off of that universal status, an “everyman” status that is obviously always gendered “male”. Even in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* plays (*Part One*, 1991; *Part Two*, 1992), where Prior, a Protestant gay male living with AIDS, serves as the everyman figure and not his Jewish (ex)-lover Louis, he is still associated with Jewishness. Prior, who the Angels have dubbed a Prophet, has been delivered the word of God, portrayed as a larger-than-life Bible, marked with the glowing Hebrew letter Aleph. Interestingly, Prior is able to “read” this book, not by translating the Hebrew, but by literally having sex with it, in a scene that can only be depicted by quoting it in full:

ANGEL:

Open me Prophet. I I I I am  
The Book.  
Read.

PRIOR: Wait. Wait. (*He takes off the glasses*)

How come. . . . How come I have this . . . um, erection? It’s  
very hard to concentrate.

ANGEL: The stiffening of your penis is of no consequence.

PRIOR: Well maybe not to *you* but . . .

ANGEL:

READ!

You are Mere Flesh. I I I I am Utter Flesh,  
Destiny of Desire, the Gravity of Skin:  
What makes the Engine of Creation Run?  
Not Physics But Ecstasies Makes The Engine Run:

(*The Angel’s lines are continuous through this section. Prior’s lines overlap. They both get very turned-on.*)

PRIOR: (*Hit by a wave of intense sexual feeling*): Hmmm . . .

ANGEL: The Pulse, the Pull, the Throb, the Ooze . . .  
PRIOR: Wait, please, I . . . Excuse me for just a minute, just a minute  
OK I . . .  
ANGEL:  
    Priapsis, Dilation, Engorgement, Flow:  
    The Universe Aflame with Angelic Ejaculate . . .  
PRIOR: (*Losing control, he starts thump the book*) : Oh shit . . .<sup>225</sup>

Out of context, there is hardly anything exclusively Jewish about this scene.

However, in watching this scene, we are always aware that Prior is essentially “humping” a Hebrew letter. The book is signified Jewish by the flaming Aleph and by having sex with the book Prior is able to connect with the Jewishly specific word of God through “universal” means. As Hana Wirth-Nesher has written about the sexual encounter, “[T]he tone of the scene [shifts] from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the content to the special letter that gives the play a Jewish ethnic marker while simultaneously recognizing that marker as being at the very core of some fundamental American discourse that subsumes all ethnic difference. The aleph is a theatrical special effect that can be claimed by all.”<sup>226</sup> It can be “claimed by all” because the Bible that Prior is presented with is coated with ethnicity. Just as Jews have been granted an everyman status in contemporary American literature, for Prior to have access to such ethnicity makes him more of a universal figure than if he would have been given a Protestant Bible. Prior is not only accessing the word of God here, he is accessing a contemporary tradition that has cast Jews as metaphors

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<sup>225</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part 2: Perestroika* 47-48.

<sup>226</sup> Wirth-Nesher 227.

for all mankind.<sup>227</sup> Prior, a self-avowed WASP who is the thirty-second descendent named Prior Walter after the Bayeux tapestry Prior Walter (thirty-fourth if you count the “two bastards”), has no ethnicity.<sup>228</sup> Even his name, Prior Walter, calls attention to bloated lineage. As Emily, Prior’s nurse, spells it out, “Weird name. Prior Walter. Like, ‘The Walter before this one.’” Louis then tells her that “The Walters go back to the Mayflower and beyond. Back to the Norman Conquest.”<sup>229</sup> If Prior weren’t gay, he would be stereotypically all-American. However, Kushner’s America is an ethnic one, where Prior exists as the token WASP in a menagerie of Jews, blacks, gays and Mormons. Prior is the oddity for Kushner: “[H]e can trace his lineage back for centuries, something most Americans can’t reliably do. . . . [A] certain sense of

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<sup>227</sup> I purposely use the gender-specific “mankind” here instead of the less chauvinistic “humankind” because the everyman tradition is a masculine tradition. Every-*men* are assumed to represent all humans, but every-*women* figures are assumed to be only representing the female experience, an experience which typically challenges the idea that everyman plots are universal for women as well. For a critical discussion of Jews as everymen figures on the stage, see Ellen Schiff’s *From Stereotype to Metaphor: The Jew in Contemporary Drama*, especially 211-242.

<sup>228</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* 86. Allen J. Frantzen has argued that Kushner takes great steps to construct Anglo-Saxonism as culturally monolithic so that the play can reject cultural domination based upon bloodlines and instead envision an America where progress is driven by a politics not based upon nation or race. In the process, however, Frantzen says that “there is a quite traditional sense in which the play uses its WASP hero to conform to rather than to contradict the ideology of Manifest Destiny” even though the play “seems to carry revolutionary ambitions” (148). Frantzen, however, misses the Jewish overtones of Prior’s conversion to Prophet and consequentially is left to conclude that “One leaves the play with the distinct impression that the new angels of America, however unruly and unconventional, follow the lead of the Anglo-Saxon whose proximity to the angelic, even if radically redefined, has opened up to them the promise of a new age” (148).

<sup>229</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* 51.

rootlessness is part of the American character.”<sup>230</sup> As Prior accesses a Jewish tradition, he becomes more American because, for Kushner, to be different is to be American. Before Prior can become a Prophet, he must first become American by becoming ethnic. Jewishness is reconstructed as Americanism. Because, for Kushner, true Americans are essentially rootless (echoing Horace Kallen’s idea that all Americans possess a degree of anonymity), Jewishness becomes the metaphor for Americanism.<sup>231</sup>

Indeed, as Prior taps into Jewish heritage, his own heritage is transformed. When he is greeted by two of his ancestors, they foretell his status as a (Jewish) Prophet by singing, at first, in Hebrew:

Adonai, Adonai,  
Olam ha-yichud,  
Zefirot, Zazahot,  
Ha-adam, ha-gadol<sup>232</sup>

Through Prior, Kushner debunks the Judeo-Christian myth, which has seen Jews as simply Christians-in-waiting. Instead, the myth is inverted, and traditional Christians become Jewish, and by “becoming Jewish,” they become American: Because of its everyman status, Jewish ethnicity grants Prior universality as he morphs into a Prophet. By associating Prior with Jewishness, Prior – a gay male with AIDS – is

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<sup>230</sup> Kushner, “The Secrets of ‘Angels,’” H5.

<sup>231</sup> In *Culture and Democracy in the United States*, Kallen writes that an American identity is based upon a “peculiar anonymity” 51. Elsewhere, Kallen writes that “democracy is anti-assimilationist. It stands for the acknowledgement, the harmony, the organization of group diversities in cooperative expansion of common life, not for assimilation of diversities into sameness.” See “Zionism and Liberalism” in *The Zionist Idea* 529. Kushner would agree wholeheartedly.

<sup>232</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* 88.

able to enter into the role of an everyman, a literal All-American Prophet, who will serve as, in the words of the Angel:

American Eye that pierceth Dark,  
American Heart all Hot for Truth,  
The True Great Vocalist, the Knowing Mind,  
Tounge-of-the-Land, Seer-Head!<sup>233</sup>

The Judeo-Christian myth is not the only inversion that we see in *Angels*. As Prior has sexual intercourse with the flaming Alef and the Angel of America, gay and Jewish sexuality – traditionally stereotyped as effeminate and deviant – become holy. In effect, in order to become a Prophet, Prior must not only become less Protestant and more Jewish. But he also must perform abnormal sexual acts with the book and, through the book, he both penetrates and is penetrated by the hermaphroditic Angel who has eight vaginas and is also “Equipped as well with a Bouquet of Phalli.” (Prior tells us, “The sexual politics of this are *very* confusing.”)<sup>234</sup> If Jews and gays are effeminate and sexually transgressive, both traits are *practiced* in Prior’s initiation into Prophethood as he is penetrated by the hermaphroditic Angel (but appears as a woman). To become holy, Prior takes on a sexually effeminate role even as he tops the flaming Aleph. As Prior explains, in making humans, “God split the World in Two,” separating the masculine from the feminine.<sup>235</sup> In order to reach God’s word, both the feminine and the masculine are needed. Thus, to reach the (Jewish) word of God, it is necessary to be slightly effeminate, as well as masculine, an appropriate

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<sup>233</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika* 44.

<sup>234</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika* 48-49.

<sup>235</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika* 49.

position for Jewish and gay men who may be male but are imagined to be not masculine enough.

The Jewishness of *Angels in America* is only heightened by the location of the play: New York City, the location—not without reason—for most plays about American Jews. As Sander Gilman has written, “Being a New Yorker in the 1990s means sounding Jewish – being a Jew in spite of oneself.” Gilman argues that this conflation of Jewish and New Yorker identities took place after World War Two, but the roots of such conflation are found earlier, most famously in Henry James’s writings who shuddered at the cataclysmic destructions that this city of Jews has done to the English language. “New York,” continues Gilman, “the city which is itself a disease, becomes the locus of one’s sense of alienation from the self. It is not merely that more Jews live in New York than in Jerusalem, but that there is a traditional association between the idea of the American city and that of the Jew.”<sup>236</sup> As Kushner dramatizes an American epic, locating the AIDS crisis in the heart of New York City, he Americanizes the AIDS crisis by Judaizing it. This is not to say that

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<sup>236</sup> Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* 31. The link, of course, is not without reason. A comparison between the 1990 National Population Survey and the 1991 New York Jewish Population Study demonstrates that New York Jews are more likely to describe themselves as Jewish by religion (83%) compared to the rest of the Jewish population in America (53%). New York Jews are more likely to practice Jewish rituals, are less likely to view themselves as atheists or agnostics or of no religion, exhibit a lower intermarriage rate (which may be a simple result of a high Jewish population), and are more likely to visit Israel and donate to Jewish charities. The two studies in discussion are found in Kosmin, et. al., *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey* and Bethanie Horowitz’s study, *The 1991 New York Jewish Population Study*. Comparisons of the two studies can be found in Bethanie Horowitz and J. Solomon’s “Why is this City Different from All Other Cities? New York and the National Jewish Population Survey,” *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* and Bethanie Horowitz’s “Jewishness in New York: Exception or the Rule?” *National Variations in Jewish Identity: Implications for Jewish Education*.

AIDS is a Jewish disease, but that because AIDS is the plague of New York and because Jews are America's everymen, AIDS is an American problem.<sup>237</sup> Kushner is inadvertently playing off the late nineteenth century stereotype of Jews as carriers of disease; because Jews were found in large numbers in cities, also the locality for disease—especially sexually transmitted diseases, Jews were inevitably linked to epidemics. In his "Gay Fantasia on National Themes," Kushner cannot discard the historical representations of disease, which has been conflated with the representation of Jews. However, Kushner inverts the stereotype. As Prior is Judaized, he becomes the metaphor for hope because he is becoming a universal figure. If Jews were diseased Others, *Angels in America* reconfigures Jewishness to be universal purity. As Prior becomes a Prophet through his copulation with the flaming Hebrew letter, he can deliver his message of hope.

Though Prior may be the closest thing to a hero in *Angels*, lest we forget, the two characters who explicitly identify themselves as Jews in *Angels in America* are not honorable individuals. Just as Kushner inverts stereotypes about gay and Jewish masculinity, Kushner also reconsiders the mythic ideal of the Jewish everyman figure. Just as the "goy" Prior becomes the "Jewish" everyman figure of the play, his

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<sup>237</sup> This phenomenon is not lost on Gilman as well, although in a different context. In comparing the AIDS epidemic with how German society in 1939 constructed the syphilis epidemic through representations of the Jewish body, Gilman writes, "[T]here is an older association with the image of the pathological representation of the American and its equation with the image of the Jew which should be cited. Nineteenth-century cities were regarded as places of disease and the Jews as the quintessential city dwellers, the Americans of Europe. Just like gays in the 1980s. Thus hidden within the image of the [imagined] American origins of AIDS is a further association with the Jew, an association made through the image of the city" (232).

Jewish boyfriend Louis Ironson does not live up to the same status. Louis sheepishly hides from any sense of responsibility to care for Prior and instead seduces Joe Pitt, a closeted gay Mormon. A careless director would see Louis as the standard Jewish *nebbish*, and Louis's faults would be a result of his disorganized and wimpy persona. But Kushner is unraveling this stereotype – Louis is no Woody Allen, Eugene Jerome, nor even an Arnold Beckoff. As Alisa Solomon has articulated, “Louis is the Jewish victim made victimizer, the limp wimp made lusty, the self-righteous do-gooder doing bad: Kushner calls forth self-conscious Jewish types precisely to undo them. . . . Kushner lays these familiar Jewish images before us and invites us to see their contradictions and limitations.”<sup>238</sup>

The result is that Louis becomes a rather unlikable character, though one who seems real. Combined with the fact that Roy Cohn masquerades as the play's villain (though he, too, is a complicated creation – *Angels* offers no characters that can be summed up in neatly wrapped packages with labels), *Angels'* two most prominent Jewish male characters are reviled and detested in the play, so much so that Kramer has been accused of abandoning Jews in his unflattering portrayal of Louis and of Roy Cohn.<sup>239</sup> As Tony Kushner has said of *Angels in America*, “I'm very critical of

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<sup>238</sup> Solomon 126.

<sup>239</sup> Edward Nordon argues that because American Jewish families are not present in Kushner's *Angels*, or for that matter in most gay Jewish plays, he has abandoned an essential ingredient in Judaism for the sake of dramatizing gay issues. Jonathan Freedman has also criticized the play, contending that the play's ending falls short of answering the difficult questions it poses about Jewish identity. He writes, “The play collapses into a traditional assimilationist answer to the questions of Jewish identity it has bravely raised. The price of achieving political efficacy in a Christian-centered culture turns out to be the abandonment of Jewish difference to affirm other forms of difference” (91-92).

Jews because I am one and, for instance, Jewish homophobia makes me angrier than Goyishe homophobia. I think, good God, after what we've gone through for the last six hundred years and before . . . surely suffering should teach you compassion. So I've been kind of hard about it."<sup>240</sup> Perhaps because Kramer, like many, has seen Jews as closer to gays than to Christians, the burden of tolerance is heavier for Jews because it is expected that they should understand what it means to be disenfranchised and oppressed better than the Christian majority. As Kushner has stated elsewhere, when he came out of the closet, the easiest way of explaining his sexuality to his father was by comparing it to the Jewish experience. As he explains, "[T]he one thing that we both agreed [on] was that Jews do badly when they try to pretend not to be Jews. And so it was a way of making inroads into something that was emotionally very, very difficult for him."<sup>241</sup>

Though gay identities are Judaized through Prior, Louis and Roy's disgraceful behavior disrupts the "nice gay Jewish boy who dotes upon the needs of others" stereotype that runs through much gay drama and literature. However, all is not lost for Louis, as *Perestroika*, the second part of *Angels in America*, sees Louis gradually, though not necessarily successfully, working through his guilty feelings and reentering Prior's life, although no longer as his boyfriend. The hateful, closeted, aggressive, conservative Roy Cohn is also given a moment of sympathy, arguably the play's most tender scene, in which the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg recites Kaddish for him through Louis, almost as a *dybbuk* possessing him. (Although she cannot resist

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<sup>240</sup> Kushner, interview with Adam Mars Jones 27.

<sup>241</sup> Kushner, interview with Rabbi Norman J. Cohen 218.

adding two more “Aramaic” words to the Jewish prayer for the dead: “You sonofabitch.”<sup>242</sup>)

Reading any of Kushner’s works, one gets the sense that groups – gays, straights, Jews, Protestants, blacks, Mormons, or otherwise – are envisioned as political mechanisms struggling for power and approval. Though *Angels in America* is assembled with religious motifs and symbols, the play saps religion out of any ideologies presented, substituting politics for religion. Kushner’s upbringing may be the root of such a dogma. He writes in *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness*:

One of the paths down which my political instruction came was our family Seder. . . . Our family read from Haggadahs written by a New Deal Reform rabbinate which was unafraid to draw connections between Pharanoic and modern capitalist exploitations; between the exodus of Jews from Goshen and the journey towards civil rights for African-Americans; unafraid to make of the yearning which Jews have repeated for thousands of years a democratic dream of freedom for all peoples. It was impressed upon us, as we sang “America the Beautiful” at the Seder’s conclusion, that the dream of millennia was due to find its ultimate realization not in Jerusalem but in this country.<sup>243</sup>

The Jewish Diaspora is only of concern to Kramer in that Jews, as early immigrants to modern America, have felt the pangs of disenchantment and consequently aligned themselves with American liberalism and socialism. In America, Jews have solidified their progressive politics – why, then, should Jews look to Jerusalem, when America has transformed Jews into a churning liberal

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<sup>242</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika* 126.

<sup>243</sup> Kushner, “American Things,” *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* 5.

apparatus? For Kushner, there is something celebratory about American Jews, who have consistently opposed reactionary politics and have become sharp advocates for civil rights.

At the same time, Louis and especially Roy Cohn are the shameful beneficiaries of American Jewish prosperity. Louis identifies himself as a victim of Christian oppression throughout the play. He is easily able to identify himself as different, and it is difference – recognizing himself as Other – that enables him to subscribe to liberal politics. His construction of the world is simplistic: liberal Others versus conservative monoliths. However, we know his philosophies are too simplistic, as Kushner has created an assortment of characters whose identities are too intricate to be reduced to such a simple bi-polar equation. As Framji Minwalla has written of Louis, “[H]e falls into the same trap most liberals do: he paints the forest but loses the trees.”<sup>244</sup> Louis may claim, as he says, that the “worst kind of liberalism” is “bourgeois tolerance,” which demonstrates, as AIDS has, that “when the shit hits the fan you find out how much tolerance is worth. Nothing,” but Louis is a practitioner of the very liberalism that he despises. In a discussion with Belize, a black drag queen hospital worker, Louis begins a lengthy discussion about power in America with the untutored declaration, “the thing about America, I think, is that . . . [u]ltimately what defines us isn’t race, but politics.”<sup>245</sup> Belize takes him to task and dogmatically chides him for his apparent racism. Ultimately, what Louis does is consider the problems of all minorities as if they were equivocal to Jewish struggles

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<sup>244</sup> Minwalla 110.

<sup>245</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* 90.

in America. He wants all Others to be identically oppressed so that liberalism itself is not divided, but more importantly, as Minwalla writes, “because the alternative means speaking from, and being part of, the dominant culture, the one that oppresses.”<sup>246</sup>

Through Louis, Kushner has criticized an American Jewish population that has failed to understand that identity politics and liberal reform are multifaceted. Just as Louis later identifies Louis Farrakhan as a black man who pushes for racial equality but hates Jews, Kushner identifies Louis Ironson as a hypocritical American Jew: Louis classifies himself as an Other, but forces all minorities to conform to his version of Other. By doing so, he can claim equal status as a victim.

At times Roy Cohn also capitalizes upon his position as an oppressed Jew, even though he has easily assimilated into the powerful and elite, hobnobbing with Republican dignitaries in the Reagan/Bush administration. Facing disbarment, Roy conjectures that his adversaries on the committee consider him to be “some sort of filthy little Jewish troll.”<sup>247</sup> Generally, however, Roy has avoided an identity as a victim, generally ignoring his Jewish heritage and his homosexuality because he resists being pigeonholed into a minority label. At a physical examination, Roy’s doctor diagnoses him with AIDS and concludes that he is gay. In response, Roy delivers a tirade on the nature of trying to give someone’s identity a brand name:

Like all labels they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors. This is what a label refers to. Now to

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<sup>246</sup> Minwalla 112.

<sup>247</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* 127.

someone who does not understand this, homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men. But really this is wrong. Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a puissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry?<sup>248</sup>

He ignores his homosexuality because homosexuality means a lack of aggression and an absence of power and manliness. Like “Jewishness,” which Roy claims forces others to see him as a troll, homosexuality denotes an inability to perform up to a human potential. As Stephen J. Bottoms writes, “Roy effectively passes for ‘American’ (as opposed to un-American) by adopting the attitudes of a WASP-ish Republican hawk so as to cover the ‘stain’ not only of his homosexuality, but of his Jewish family background.”<sup>249</sup> His detestation of Ethel Rosenberg validates his notion that to be too ethnic, or too much of an Other, is to be un-American. It is emblematic of his credo that he tells his doctor, “Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys.”<sup>250</sup> His persecution of Ethel Rosenberg as an un-American Jew, thereby casting himself as an all-American (Jew), similarly expresses the semantics he uses to discuss his sexuality: Power allows him to be American, and thereby “a heterosexual man . . . who fucks around with guys” rather than an irrelevant homosexual.

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<sup>248</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* 45. See Michael Cadden’s “Strange Angel: The Pinklisting of Roy Cohn.” Cadden argues that Prior’s rejection of the Angel, so that he can advocate change and community, shows that he can do what Roy Cohn never could: rectify “homosexuality” with “clout.”

<sup>249</sup> Bottoms 165.

<sup>250</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millenium Approaches* 46.

The irony is, however, that the now-Reaganite crony Roy Cohn and the liberal Louis Ironson are not all that dissimilar in their ideologies. As Louis says to Belize, sounding eerily like Roy, “Power is the object, not being tolerated.”<sup>251</sup> In both their views, there is an essence of Machiavellianism. (As Roy says near the end of *Millennium Approaches*, “Am I a nice man? Fuck nice . . . You want to be Nice, or you want to be effective?”<sup>252</sup>) Neither Louis nor Roy simply wants to be tolerated. Indeed, tolerance is a dirty word for Kushner. He writes in *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness*, “If you are oppressed, if those characteristics which make you identifiable to yourself make you loathsome to a powerful majority which does not share those characteristics, then you are at great risk if your existence is predicated on being tolerated. Toleration is necessary when power is unequal; if you have power, you will not need to be tolerated.”<sup>253</sup> The difference between Louis’s solution and Roy Cohn’s is that Cohn, quite unabashedly, assimilates into conservative power. Louis, however, exclaims, “Fuck assimilation.”<sup>254</sup>

Though Louis initially fails to understand the difficulties and complexities that various disenfranchised groups face in America, he does exhibit a secure Jewish identity, something that cannot be said of Roy Cohn. Roy, of course, dies in the play,

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<sup>251</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* 90.

<sup>252</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* 108.

<sup>253</sup> Kushner, “Some Questions About Tolerance,” *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* 43.

<sup>254</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* 90.

while Prior lives and though Prior does not take Louis back as his boyfriend, Louis is by his side on the Bethesda fountain among a newly formed family consisting of Louis and Prior, a more New Yorkish (read: liberal) Hannah and the ex-ex-drag queen, Belize. Roy's death signals that closeted identities, those resistant to change, are counterproductive as the millennium approaches. As the play closes, Louis remains true to his liberal Jewish identity, arguing for Israel's right to exist, but also for Palestinian's right to land. What Kushner has shown is that progress is based upon a constant battle for civil rights; and even among oppressed groups, such as Jews, there must be a readiness to take charge and call for political action, while at the same time, a willingness to grant others that same command on their own terms. As Warren Rosenberg has put it, Kushner shows that "if we are to survive, we must all be willing to shut up from time to time and listen to Prior, the transformed gay WASP prophet, so that we, too, may be healed in the angel's fountain."<sup>255</sup> The same could be said for allowing time to listen to Belize, or Hannah, or Louis, as well. As Kushner has written elsewhere, "There is a false notion that Culture unites people and Politics divides them."<sup>256</sup> When groups fight for each other's civil rights as well as their own, so that each may identify as a distinct unique culture, politics unites groups, rather than segregates them.

The final scene around the Bethesda fountain is one that redefines the American family, where politics, not lineage, binds individuals. That Louis, who has exhibited a strong Jewish identity, is a part of this new American family is

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<sup>255</sup> Rosenberg 283.

<sup>256</sup> Kushner, "Some Questions About Tolerance" 43.

significant: Jews, when they recognize their political responsibilities not only to American Jews, but to identity politics, can and should be included in a portrait of American multicultural America. Thus, the final scene complements the opening scene well: At the play's opening, Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz eulogizes not only Louis's grandmother, but also the loss of an identifiable Jewish culture, one that has been fooled into believing that assimilating into "goyishe" American society is a sign of success:

She was . . . not a person but a whole kind of person, the ones who crossed the ocean, who brought with us to America the villages of Russia and Lituania—and how we struggled, and fought, for the family, for the Jewish home, so that you would not grow up *here*, in this strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted. Descendants of this immigrant woman, you do not grow up in America, you and your children and their children with the goyische names. You do not live in America. No such place exists. Your clay is the clay of some Litvak shtetl, your air the air of the steppes—because she carried the old world on her back across the ocean, in a boat, and she put it down on Grand Concourse Avenue, or in Flatbush, and she worked that earth into your bones, and you pass it to your children, this ancient, ancient culture and home.<sup>257</sup>

Our flesh is the sum of history; our identity has been established before we were ever born. What the Rabbi laments, and what sounds the dirge that begins *Angels*, is that we have forgotten our responsibility to the past, a responsibility that is only retained by continuing to fight for the right to keep a unique identity, one respectful of history, one equally interested in survival. This fight is a fight about family, for the Rabbi, and Jewish cultural identity. However, as we see in the play's final scene, the definition of family has been extended. Jews, like all groups seeking

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<sup>257</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* 10.

to break from the bonds of disenfranchisement, must not only argue for their own Civil Rights, but the Civil Rights of others as well.

Thus, *Angels in America* not only reconstructs American liberal politics but also the motif of the Jewish family as the epicenter of Jewish life. The new core to Jewish life is political, not familial. Jewish patriarchy is deemphasized and the question of Jewish masculinity is circumvented because Jewish life, now based in political struggle, is created through horizontal relations between other disenfranchised groups, significantly gay groups, whose Otherness is not created by vertical, generational identification. Kushner takes the Jewish/gay stereotypical linkage to task: what if the construction of Jewishness mirrored the paradigm of gay identity and Jewishness was identified not through birth but through political ideology? Politics, not effeminacy, seems to be where these two groups intersect.

The same year that *Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika* was performed, Larry Kramer's *The Destiny of Me* also made its theatrical debut. (That both plays appeared in 1992, the very year that "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" became one of the more popular sound bites of the Bill Clinton versus George Bush presidential campaign, is significant. Both plays, like the campaign cliché, considered mainstreamed masculinity, homosexuality, military-like machismo, liberalism, and identity politics all in the same beat. "Passing as a man" seemed to be the theme of both politics and theater that year.) Where Kushner removes the family as the focal point of Jewish identity, in Larry Kramer's *Destiny of Me*, we are shown that a Jewish identity simply cannot be stripped of its generational make-up. Can a Jewish identity, which is generational, and a gay identity, which is not, co-exist?

*The Destiny of Me* is Larry Kramer's sequel to his politically controversial AIDS drama, *The Normal Heart* (1985), and, like the earlier play, features Ned Weeks, the autobiographical representation of the play's author. Taking place several years after the incidents of *The Normal Heart*, Ned is now bedridden in a Washington, DC, hospital. There, his life literally passes before his eyes as the traumatic past becomes one with the equally traumatic present. In the process, his childhood is recreated and, proving that hindsight is fifty/fifty, Ned reconsiders his upbringing now knowing that his fate is to die of AIDS.

Ned is privy to communication with his teen-age self, Alexander, his name before he changed it to Ned. The name change is not the only difference between the teen-age Alexander and adult Ned; the tough-skinned, driven Ned hardly bears a resemblance to the softhearted and gentle Alexander. Though the AIDS crisis is fundamental to this play, *The Destiny of Me* is first and foremost about family and (consequently?) demonstrates more interest in Jewish themes than *The Normal Heart*. *The Destiny of Me* considers the question "What does it mean to be masculine in America?" Ned's critique of American masculinity is scathing, and quite influenced by his understanding of Jewish history: "While they teach you to love yourself they will also teach you to hate your heart. It's their one great trick. All these old Jewish doctors—the sons of Sigmund—exiled from their homelands, running from Hitler's death camps, for some queer reason celebrated their freedom on our shores by deciding to eliminate homosexuals." Ned believes that doctors' propensity for professing that homosexuality is "sick" and making gay men's hearts "lie alone"

stems from having Jewish roots.<sup>258</sup> On the one hand, Ned finds it ironic that Jews, who have been continuous victims of groups seeking their extermination, wish to “eliminate homosexuals.” However, Ned shows no hatred of Jews for their religious beliefs, as he does not make a connection between homophobia and religious doctrine. In other words, Ned is not angry at any *halachic* laws behind a Jewish aversion to homosexuality.

Instead, at least to this point in the play, Ned sees the aversion as an effect of the Jewish ethnic experience within anti-Semitic communities: The fact that he mentions that these doctors are the “sons” of Freud demonstrates that Ned feels the need to emphasize a Jewish male tradition. Starting with Freud as the Jewish patriarch, his sons establish their identity after their exile “from their homelands” forced them to run “from Hitler’s death camps” by establishing male homosexuality as an abnormality. But, as Ned states, this is “queer” reasoning; odd, yes, but the pun is important, too. Because anti-Semitic stereotyping has emasculated Jews, Jewish masculinity takes a step closer to the norm when Jews emasculate homosexuals. Jews, whose masculinity is already seen as queer, are trying to become less queer. But is Kramer angry at Jewish men or is he angry at Western culture which first saw Jewish male sexuality as queer?

Something needs to be said here about the play’s author, Larry Kramer, in order to understand how and why his take on “Jewishness” is so difficult to specify. Since Kramer has written a play which is a thinly-disguised autobiography, it is important to look at how the author has represented himself not only through his

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<sup>258</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 85.

drama but also through his political activism. In reality, *The Normal Heart* and *The Destiny of Me* are both venues for his politics. Kramer's use of the arts in carrying his ideology only reinforce his mantra – when there is injustice, when people are dying, one has a duty to see that his every moment revolves around challenging those who misuse power. The arts, too, must be incorporated into a political existence.

Kramer, characteristically known for his rage against homophobia and his insistence that the lack of attention given to the AIDS crisis by recent politicians is no less than a calculated genocide against gay men,<sup>259</sup> was called “the most belligerent man in America” by the gay magazine, *The Advocate*.<sup>260</sup> However charming his crustiness may seem, his irascibility should not be taken lightly. His naked anger, an obvious motif throughout all of his AIDS writings, including *The Normal Heart* and *The Destiny of Me*, is a deliberate insistence that the fight against AIDS is a fight against all heterosexuals who have failed humanity in their inability to understand and tackle the “gay” AIDS crisis, making them (as he famously and controversially wrote in a letter to the editors of the New York Times) “equal to murderers.”<sup>261</sup>

Nevertheless, heterosexuals are not the only ones who bear the brunt of Kramer's anger. Deeply influenced by Hannah Arendt and her strident work describing Jews as partially responsible for modern anti-Semitism because of a lack of organized, political confrontation of such hatreds, Kramer links the AIDS crisis

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<sup>259</sup> Kramer makes this point several times throughout the titular essay in *Reports from the holocaust: the making of an AIDS activist* 217-281.

<sup>260</sup> Qtd. in Sarah Trillin's “Christmas Dinner with Uncle Larry,” 312.

<sup>261</sup> Kramer, “Equal to Murderers,” 11 June 1984, reprinted in *Report from the holocaust: the making of an AIDS activist*, 73-75.

with the Holocaust. In connecting the horrors of AIDS with the tragedy of the Holocaust, Kramer's writings show an insistence that gay men must not repeat the mistakes illustrated by American Jews during World War Two, arguing that gays must become an aggressive, political machine or die. He not only criticizes gays who have managed to pass among the heterosexual elite and have failed to use their influence, but also closeted gay men whose incapability to proclaim their identity ultimately leads to a heterosexual perception that a gay population is insignificant in number. Most shockingly, he condemns the "good little boys" who volunteer at AIDS crisis centers and gay health clinics, not for the deeds that they do, but because their presence means that they are doing the work that the government should be doing, while alleviating the government's need to intervene.<sup>262</sup> Most significantly, in the comparison between AIDS and the Holocaust, Kramer suggests that just as the Holocaust was a deliberate attempt to murder the Jews, AIDS is a deliberate method of killing off gay men. In other words, AIDS can be blamed upon those in power.

By comparing gay men to the Jews in Europe and America before and during World War Two, all gay men become Jews, and all Jews are fashioned not as a religion but as impotent victims. With little difficulty, Kramer refashions the historical connection between Jews and gays, no longer in terms of a lack of a perceived lack of manliness, but as a shameful lack of rage.<sup>263</sup> On the one hand,

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<sup>262</sup> David Bergman has argued that Kramer's incessant writing about who to blame for AIDS served as a vehicle to express Kramer's already existing animosity between gays and heterosexuals, and also between Kramer and the gay community at large (122-38).

<sup>263</sup> Interestingly enough, while Kramer saw a lack-of-rage as a connection between the two groups, he fails to consider that Jews, like gays, were imagined as being not

Kramer desperately wants to show the similarities between Jews and gays for many reasons. Western society sees the Holocaust as the most significant event that has happened to Jews in modern history; to show that gays are like Jews is to show that gays must learn their lessons from the Jewish experience or they will become (and, as he sees it, currently are) victims of genocide. To die in a tragedy akin to the Holocaust is to emphasize the significance of the gay community. The title of his collection of AIDS essays, *Reports from the holocaust* (1987), is meant to jar readers into recognizing that the tragedy of the Jewish Holocaust and the tragedy of AIDS can and should be compared. Still, that “holocaust” remains uncapitalized in the title demonstrating nervousness over the comparison – AIDS *isa* holocaust, but not *the* Holocaust. Regardless, Kramer feels strongly that “Jews don’t have any right to own this word.”<sup>264</sup> That Kramer himself is Jewish grants him the leeway to make such a statement that could otherwise be declared insensitive. He wants to show that gays are victims who can be talked about in the same sentence as the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. This is not to dismiss Holocaust victim’s anguish; rather the reverse: he must first accept the idea that Jews have suffered a more serious, tragic event than any other group in human history. By doing so he can rationalize that the AIDS pandemic is just as grave.

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manly enough. In listing traditional Jewish stereotypes, Kramer suggests in *Reports from the holocaust* that all Jewish stereotypes “involve money, greed and power” whereas “gay stereotypes don’t seem to blend so well.” The stereotypes gays are faced with are more eclectic: “amusing, decorative, effeminate, and creative . . . [and] sexually threatening . . . . It doesn’t occur to many that foppishness and sexual prowess are an unlikely combination” (237). As I have shown previously, Jews were indeed faced with these very stereotypes, but perhaps because Jews are stereotypically seen as *more* manly than gays, Kramer does not emphasize this point.

<sup>264</sup> Kramer, interview with Lawrence D. Mass 359.

However, Kramer sees a danger in creating too strong a link between gays and Jews. He writes in *Reports from the holocaust*:

I wonder why so many gays demand that our lives and experiences be viewed 'positively,' when in fact we have lived through such horrors to get here. Jews demand, of themselves and the world, constant remembrance of their tortured history. Homosexuals have been hated by religion, state, country world, and history, by parents and families and peers. (This is a horrible singularity of the gay situation: Can Jews imagine being hated *by their parents* for their Jewishness?)<sup>265</sup>

The Holocaust seems to be a tricky issue for Kramer because he does not want to lose the uniqueness of the gay experience as he connects AIDS with the Holocaust.

Likewise, Kramer's autobiographical protagonist in his AIDS plays walks a fine line between embracing Jewish history and rejecting Jewish identity. In *The Normal Heart*, Ned Weeks seems to do the former, while *The Destiny of Mås* a sequel that articulates the difference between the Jewish experience and the gay experience. It is as if *The Destiny of Mås* evers the connection between gays and Jews that *The Normal Heart* has established. *The Normal Heart*, originally directed by Joseph Papp, received much attention for its political edginess. The play dramatized what would later serve as the central theme of Kramer's *Report from the holocaust*. On a first date (!) with Felix, a *New York Times* journalist, Ned tries to

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<sup>265</sup> Kramer, *Reports from the holocaust* 232. Kramer is, arguably, too simplistic, as he does not consider the effects that intermarriage has had on the Jewish family, with many parents feeling rejected by a child who has married outside the Jewish religion (traditional Orthodox families will sit *shiva* for such a child) and children feeling rejected by parents who do not support their interfaith marriage. I do not mean to suggest that the effect that intermarriage has had upon some Jewish families is equivalent to the effect that a child's homosexuality has had upon familial relationships, as painful as both situations can be for some families. Instead, I wish to point out that Kramer is too slippery in his suggestion that Jewishness does not disrupt parent-child relationships.

convince him of his obligation to use his influence in the *Times* to get coverage of the mounting AIDS epidemic:

NED: Do you know that when Hitler's Final Solution to eliminate the Polish Jews was first mentioned in the *Times* was on page twenty-eight. And on page six of the *Washington Post*. And the *Times* and the *Post* were owned by Jews. What causes silence like that? Why didn't the American Jews help the German Jews get out? Their very own people. Scholars are finally writing honestly about this—I've been doing some research—and it's damning to everyone who was here then: Jewish leadership for being totally ineffective; Jewish organizations for constantly fighting among themselves, unable to cooperate even in the face of death: Zionists versus non-Zionists, Rabbi Wise against Rabbi Silver . . . <sup>266</sup>

Without prompting, Felix easily grasps the connection between the Holocaust and the AIDS emergency, but rejects such a comparison:

FELIX: Boy, you really have a bug up your ass. Look, I'm not going to tell them I'm gay and could I write about the few cases of a mysterious disease that seems to be standing in the way of your kissing me even though there must be half a million gay men in this city who are fine and healthy. . . . And this is not World War Two. The numbers are no where remotely comparable. And all analogies to the Holocaust are tired, overworked, boring, probably insulting, possibly true, and a major turnoff.<sup>267</sup>

For a moment, Felix is able to steer Ned away from such a politically charged conversation, but during a kiss that is "quite intense," Ned somehow feels guilty, "breaks away, jumps up, and begins to walk around nervously," ignoring the budding romance and immediately reverting to what he sees as a more important agenda:

NED: The American Jews knew exactly what was happening, but everything was downplayed and stifled. Can you imagine how

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<sup>266</sup> Kramer, *The Normal Heart* 50.

<sup>267</sup> Kramer, *The Normal Heart* 51.

effective it would have been if every Jew in America had marched on Washington?<sup>268</sup>

That Ned would chastise himself for giving into a politically unproductive act such as kissing is indicative of the author's character. (He asks himself in his essay, "Reports from the holocaust," "Do I feel guilty because I'm not fighting this fight twenty-four hours a day? Do I feel guilty I'm alive?" He never explicitly answers these questions.<sup>269</sup>) Kramer was well known to stop contact with his heterosexual friends without warning because having heterosexual friends essentially violated his political dogma; he was, in his mind, in cahoots with the enemy. Simply put: "AIDS was not being, and has not been, attended to because it occurs in populations the majority isn't interested in and finds expendable."<sup>270</sup> His rapport with gay colleagues was equally as apprehensive. Kramer was the founder of the GMHC, an organization that sought to confront Mayor Ed Koch, whose response to the AIDS crisis was unimpressive at best. (Kramer blatantly suggests in *The Normal Heart* and in various non-dramatic writings that Koch avoided taking on AIDS issues because any sensitivity to gay issues would cause suspicions about his own sexuality.)<sup>271</sup> When the organization finally did get a meeting with the mayor, members of the GMHC

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<sup>268</sup> Kramer, *The Normal Heart* 52.

<sup>269</sup> Kramer, "Reports from the holocaust" 225.

<sup>270</sup> Kramer, introduction, "The Farce in Just Saying No" *Just Say No* by Larry Kramer xvii.

<sup>271</sup> Koch, along with Ronald and Nancy Reagan, as well as other politicians who Kramer viewed as corrupt become the targets in Kramer's satirical *Just Say No*. Aside from disguising (or not disguising) Nancy Reagan as Fobby Schwartz, the callous, vindictive and hypocritical First Lady, the farce depicts the "Mayor" and "Junior" (i.e., Ron Reagan, Jr.) as closeted homosexuals.

excluded Kramer from the conference, fearing that his abrasiveness would do more harm than good. In a huff, Kramer resigned (and ultimately wrote *The Normal Heart*, which dramatizes his ordeal).

Throughout his writing, it is not surprising that Kramer shows bitterness towards Jews. The fact of the matter is he shows bitterness towards everyone. Straights and gays alike are not committed enough to the AIDS cause, at least in the way that he has envisioned it. John M. Clum has written that, for Kramer, homosexuality is “an oppositional stance to the majority that makes one a victim of hatred, loneliness, unhappiness, misunderstanding, slaughter by homophobic critics, disease, [and] medical incompetence.” In this way, Kramer “cannot offer liberation from heterosexist conceptions of gayness or the restrictive narratives of canonical straight realistic, domestic, American drama.”<sup>272</sup> Clum is critical of Kramer because he finds that through Kramer’s rant against a heterosexual norm, homosexuality invariably remains abnormal, as he cannot define it independent of heterosexuality. For Kramer, homosexuality does not seem to be comprised of love or sexual relations (in fact, his pre-AIDS 1978 novel, *Faggots*, offers the opinion that gay life is based too much upon sex), but instead is fashioned as anti-heterosexuality. Nowhere is this more evident than when he vents his anger against prominent and wealthy gays, who he sees as having worked within, not against, a structure that has privileged heterosexuality. But the only alternative that Kramer offers is himself: fuming, lonely, and without joy; Kramer, too, defines himself around a heterosexual norm.

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<sup>272</sup> Clum, “Kramer vs. Kramer, Ben and Alexander,” *We Must Love One Another or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer* 210.

(Even the very narrative of *The Destiny of Me*, as Clum has noted, resembles the two most classic works of American drama: O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.) What Clum suggests is that by obsessively opposing heterosexual norms, Kramer ultimately winds up being an unwilling accomplice to them. His identity becomes an opposition to community. Loneliness is central to Kramer's fight against heterosexual power and incompetence.

It thus becomes difficult to talk about Kramer and Jewishness, since Kramer resists the very idea of community, a concept both at the root of Judaism and still very much a part of Jewish culture. Kramer rejects a Jewish identity because he rejects the notion that he is part of any community; loneliness defines him politically. In an interview with Larry Mass in which he discusses anti-Semitism, which for many Jews is a defining characteristic that unites them, Kramer diverts the issue, claiming that he has never experienced anti-Semitism:

MASS: Larry, you once told me that you have never, personally, experienced anti-Semitism. . . .

KRAMER: . . . I had a blessed childhood and upbringing. Of course, anti-Semitism was present at Yale, to an extent that really affected the lives of my brother and father; but by the time I got there, it wasn't. There were a lot of Jews in my class, and plenty of Jews got into the fraternities and societies. There were no Jews in the Whiffenpoofs. I was in a singing group, and the leader of our group was a Jew, and he was not elected to the Whiffenpoofs when he should have been, and that destroyed his life. But personally, I have to say that I've been very lucky in this regard. And when I went to work in the movie business, it was actually an advantage to be Jewish.<sup>273</sup>

To experience anti-Semitism would mean experiencing a victimization that too many Jews have experienced. In the same interview, however, Kramer ultimately

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<sup>273</sup> Kramer, interview with Lawrence D. Mass 359.

contradicts himself. When Larry Mass mentions that he heard Kramer tell an anecdote in which an uppity woman turned and said point blank to Kramer, “We don’t much care for Jews,” Kramer responds that “Certainly, this was anti-Semitism, but when I’ve told you I’ve never really experienced anti-Semitism, I’ve had in mind the much more virulent forms, like when you’re a kid and they call you a kike and beat you up.”<sup>274</sup> Elsewhere, the interviewer has written that although Kramer reveals quite often a “very extroverted Jewishness[,] . . . he was . . . in fact to some extent still in denial about the depth and pervasiveness of *ongoing* anti-Semitism, in his own communities as well as in the world at large. As with the rest of us, unless it slapped him in the face, which apparently it hadn’t (or if it had, he still hadn’t noticed it), he was able to evade it.”<sup>275</sup> To be fair, Mass notes that Kramer’s avoidance of his Jewish identity is indicative of a larger problem facing most Jews, whose ill-informed notion of self in which they think that they can somehow escape or surpass a Jewish identity only means that they “are still in the closet.”<sup>276</sup>

I want to stress that while Kramer resists establishing a Jewish identity for himself, he ultimately *does* establish a Jewish voice throughout his writing. In order to reject being a part of a Jewish community, he must first create it. Obviously, in

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<sup>274</sup> Kramer, interview with Lawrence D. Mass 380.

<sup>275</sup> Lawrence D. Mass, “Larry versus Larry,” *We Must Love One Another or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer* 16.

<sup>276</sup> Mass, “Larry versus Larry” 17. Demonstrating that Kramer cannot flee from his Jewishness, Michael Denny goes so far as to write that Kramer’s satirical novel *Faggots* places Kramer “in the mainstream of postwar Jewish American humor, in the tradition of Philip Roth and Woody Allen as well as the great television comedy writers of the 1950s. *Faggots* is written in classic New York yiddisher, faegele voice that is utterly hysterical . . .” (184).

*The Destiny of Me*, it is embodied in his family: His brother Ben is, for the most part, the good son, the son who holds the best chance of accomplishing the Jewish-American dream of marrying a nice Jewish girl, becoming a doctor or a lawyer and giving his parents plenty of Jewish grandchildren. His mother Rena, the most complicated member of his family, is the *yiddishe mama* who, as Alexander sees it, questions whether she truly wants to fulfill the role that her marriage prescribed for her, a role created by his father's warped sense of Jewish masculinity. Richard, Alexander's father, exhibits the aggravatingly perverse behavior that Jews must emasculate homosexuals in order to be masculine themselves. Richard Weeks is a cruel man whose verbal humiliation of Alexander is matched only by his physical abuse of him. As Richard constantly and consistently reminds Alexander, the reason behind his hatred of the boy is that Alexander's effeminacy humiliates him. In frustration after Rena threatens to leave, unable to "take it anymore," Richard shouts to his horrified wife, fully aware that Alexander is witness, "What does anyone know about not taking it anymore? . . . Not seeing my sons turn into anything I want as my sons—the one I love never at home, the other one always at home, to remind me of what a sissy's come out of my loving you."<sup>277</sup> The phrasing of Richard's outburst betrays his protests; he is less appalled by Alexander's sissy-like behavior, than he is by how his son's effeminacy reflects upon his own masculinity and his ability to reproduce, since Alexander is the result of his "loving" his wife. Because Richard has produced a son who is hardly masculine, he, too, is not masculine enough. Paradoxically, like the "sons of Freud" who Ned sees as justifying their own

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<sup>277</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 76.

masculinity by discounting homosexuals, when Richard castigates Alexander for his effeminacy he becomes more masculine. As much as Richard may cry that he wishes Rena “had that abortion,” Alexander’s presence validates Richard’s own masculinity too.

At the same time, Ben’s presence affirms Richard’s masculinity. In Richard’s eyes, Alexander cannot measure up to his older brother Benjamin, who his father sent to study at West Point. It is Benjamin who is his father’s favorite because, through Benjamin, Richard sees the possibility that the stereotype surrounding Jewish masculinity will be broken. When Benjamin becomes the victim of anti-Semitic harassment by his West Point superiors, which ultimately results in “black marks on his permanent record,”<sup>278</sup> his father is furious to hear that Benjamin wishes to leave West Point and fight the decision. “That’s right,” he says. “They don’t like Jew boys. Why do you want to make so much trouble? . . . Can’t you see how impossible it is to be the only one on your side?”<sup>279</sup> Richard’s objection is that Benjamin will be singled out as different, even with justice behind him. In his eyes, it is more beneficial to bow to anti-Semitism and graduate with a degree from West Point, than to “deliberately choos[e] to fight the system!”<sup>280</sup> That this is an argument over his son’s service in the military is significant. As has been the story of so many Jews who entered the military, and as has been dramatized in many Jewish American plays (e.g., Moss Hart’s *Winged Victory*, [1943], Arthur Laurent’s *Home of the Brave*,

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<sup>278</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 43.

<sup>279</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 42.

<sup>280</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 41.

[1945], Edward Chodorov's *Common Ground*, [1945], Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*, [1955], Neil Simon's *Biloxi Blues*, [1985]), the military is heavily non-Jewish and dangerously anti-Semitic, especially at West Point in the 1940s when few Jews were admitted. What Richard is essentially asking his son to do is to join the ranks of the military and not be Jewish. Richard sees a clear-cut Jewish identity as being less masculine than a career in the military. Most importantly, just as he sees Alexander's effeminacy as reflecting badly upon his own masculinity, Benjamin's success at West Point is vital to the confirmation of his own masculinity.

Richard carries with him the stigma of being a Jewish male in a world that views Jewish men as less than masculine. As is revealed towards the end of the play, Richard's father was a *mohel*. "I helped my father," he tells a now-adult Ned. "I was his assistant. All the time, the blood. Bawling babies terrified out of their wits. Tiny little cocks with pieces peeled off them. I had to dispose of the pieces. I buried them. He made me memorize all the Orthodox laws. If I made a mistake, he beat me."<sup>281</sup> In this disturbing image of circumcision, Richard associates Judaism with the missing foreskin. For Richard, to be Jewish means to be physically reminded of an imagined inferiority, literally scarred for life with the idea that Jewish men do not measure up to a masculine norm. The anxiety that Richard struggles with is pitifully amplified by a horrible secret that he carries with him: that his father once "cut away too much foreskin and this rich baby was mutilated for life. . . . He ran away when the kid he mutilated grew up and tracked him down. He couldn't have an erection without great

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<sup>281</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 108.

pain and he was out for Pop's blood."<sup>282</sup> In effect, Richard's father, who was "supposed" to take part in "a holy honor" in which "God was supposed to bless him and his issue forever," practiced a ritual which eventually stripped a Jewish male of his ability to perform sexually. For Richard, the effect of Jewishness is that a Jewish male's masculinity ranges from not-quite masculine to that of a eunuch.

In truth, Richard tries to exceed the limitations that he imagines Jewishness to place upon his masculinity. In Benjamin, Richard sees a chance to surpass these professed limits vicariously. His anger at Benjamin for leaving West Point, and thereby destroying his father's dreams that his son could blend in with an apparent masculine norm, is further agitated when Benjamin reveals his true desire: to study literature. Echoing the sentiment of too many parents of English majors, Richard is flabbergasted. "Studying all that literature stuff is crap!"<sup>283</sup> Benjamin's thesis topic, Twentieth Century Negro Poets, the literature of an oppressed people who have not been able to become all-American, only increases Richard's anger.

While Ned blames his father for poorly coping with his anxieties over Jewish masculinity, he isn't always sure how much blame to place upon the Jews as a whole for his personal suffering. At times it seems that he cannot separate his father from all Jewish men. Undeniably, Alexander/Ned reveals fascination with his mother's childhood love for Drew Keenlymore, a wealthy non-Jew who became quite smitten with Rena. Even though his mother "had lots of beaux," Alexander only focuses

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<sup>282</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 108.

<sup>283</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 74.

upon her sole non-Jewish suitor.<sup>284</sup> Ignoring his mother's many Jewish boyfriends, his fascination with Drew suggests that if she had married a non-Jew, somehow things would have turned out differently. Alexander doesn't seem to consider that any of the many Jewish suitors who wooed Rena would have been a better mate for his mother and a better father for himself. He imagines that non-Jews are more accepting of difference than Jews are because they are not handicapped by their anxiety over Jewish masculinity. "Alexander Keenlymore, farewell! . . . Benjamin could have had two full-time maids! Momma, don't you want to be different?"<sup>285</sup> At this point in the play for Alexander, Jewishness suppresses difference, which he perceives as blossoming among the company of gentiles.

In some ways, Alexander/Ned perceives his gay identity, the source of his difference, as being created by neuroses over Jewish difference, a neuroses that seems to be passed down from generation to generation, from father to son. As the play hints, Ben's son Timmy is reminiscent of the young Alexander. Ben, now married with kids, informs us that Timmy, like Alexander, "disappoints the shit out of" him and easily cries.<sup>286</sup> Subconsciously, Ben, like Richard, is concerned that he has somehow been the cause of his son's effeminacy and his inability to stand up for himself. When Ben first tells Ned of the problems he has with his son, Ned is acutely aware of the parallels. He coolly quotes, "And the sins of the fathers shall visit unto

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<sup>284</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 52.

<sup>285</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 55.

<sup>286</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 95.

the third and the fourth generations.’”<sup>287</sup> Years later, in the hospital room in which Ned is housed, an odd conversation occurs between Ned and his brother; in what seems to be a muddled rehash of the nature versus nurture debate, they consider the cause of an individual’s behavior:

BEN: We can’t die. We’re indestructible. We have her [mother’s] genes inside us. Sara called. Timmy has to have an operation. But then it should be fine. His bleeding will stop. Finally. All these years we blamed ourselves. It wasn’t bad parenting. It wasn’t psychosomatic. It was genetic. Ulcerated nerve ends not dissimilar to what Richard must have had.

NED: I’m glad. Genetic. That’s what they say now about homosexuality. In a few more minutes the Religious Right is going to turn violently Pro-Choice.<sup>288</sup>

But Timmy’s ulcer isn’t as genetic as it seems. The seeds may have been planted by genetics, but as we have learned previously, Timmy’s youth is not a peaceful one, and we can surmise that the stress that Timmy has lived with is partially to blame. As Ben has told Alexander previously, his wife was too forceful with the boy. In fact, the difficulty that Ben had with Timmy was that his wife Sara treated Timmy exactly how Richard treated Alexander: “You know how Richard always yelled at you, no matter what you did, you couldn’t do anything right? That’s how Sara treats Timmy. She says I . . . I withhold. . . . My son . . . he . . . she . . . she’s so hard on him, she takes everything out on him that’s meant for me. I called her . . . a controlling bitch. She says she can’t stop herself from doing it.”<sup>289</sup> Though Ben says that Sara treats Timmy the same way Richard treated Alexander, Sara is more dangerous than

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<sup>287</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 95.

<sup>288</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 113.

<sup>289</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 94.

Richard ever was, in Ben's mind at least, because she is a mother, and not a father. Judging by comments Ben has made about his own mother, Ben fears that Sara behaves too much like Rena. Ben's nervousness about Sara's "controlling" nature is that she will stunt his son's masculinity, much like how he perceived Rena to be dwarfing Alexander's masculinity. Rena, according to Ben, "Took his [Richard's] balls away" and also "almost smothered you [Alexander] to death."<sup>290</sup> What Ben sees in his wife Sara, and in his mother Rena, is a too-dominant mother, which is significantly both a stereotype surrounding Jewish mothers, who turn their sons into neurotic effeminates, and a stereotype encompassing gay men, whose sexuality is caused by a too-loving, or too-strong maternal figure. Essentially, what Ben is concerned with is that Timmy's manliness is being compromised by a too-controlling woman, and thereby a not-dominant-enough man.

It may be calming to Ben to reason that Timmy's ulcer is genetic, "not dissimilar to what Richard must have had," because the blame for whatever may happen to Timmy in manhood – an ulcer, effeminacy, neuroses, homosexual leanings – is out of Ben and Sara's control. In this way, Ben circumvents any idea that Jewish mothers cause their son's effeminacy, and too-dominant-mothers cause homosexuality. Where previously, Ben had put his family through therapy to "teach" them to behave normally – "We're working on it! Sara's in therapy, too. She's learning. I'm learning." – in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of his parents – "Richard and Rena couldn't learn. We can learn. We mustn't stop trying to learn."<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 93.

<sup>291</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 95.

– he ultimately has concluded that Timmy’s problems are genetic, and not the result of “bad parenting.” In this way, Ben relieves himself of the guilt of whatever imagined abnormalities exist in Timmy’s masculinity. Whatever happens to Timmy, Ben’s inability to control his wife had nothing to do with it.

However, a double standard exists. For his *daughter* he still continues to fight tendencies to repeat the mistakes that Rena and Richard made with raising him:

BEN: Now if Betsy wouldn’t keep falling for all these wretched young men who treat her so terribly.

NED: Yes, that’s a rough one.

BEN: But I’ve found her the best therapist I could find.

NED: Her very own first therapist.

BEN: We learned to attack problems and not be defeated by them. We found the tools to do this, probably by luck and the accident of history. Rena and Richard didn’t. For them it was more about missed opportunities. It was the wrong time for them and it hasn’t been for us.<sup>292</sup>

While Ben has decided that he can guide the destiny of his daughter, he has concluded that he cannot fight the forces that will make his son what he will become. Ben may have chalked it up to genetics, but this is simply an easy catch-all to avoid the preconceived notion that he can’t alter Timmy’s behavior. Ben has fallen into the trap of believing in the stereotype that links Jews and gays – domineering Jewish mothers inhibit their sons’ masculinity; sons whose masculinity has been inhibited by domineering mothers turn gay. It is a stereotype that surrounds sons, but not daughters. After convincing himself that his own mother emasculated his father and his younger brother, Ben fears that the same thing is happening to his son. However, he relieves the fear that he is repeating the patters of behavior learned from his

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<sup>292</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 113.

parents by concluding that Timmy inherited genes that made him what he is. In this way, he avoids guilt. Ben may have been too dough-faced (and unmanly himself) to control his wife, but his shortcomings had no effect on his son's effeminacy.

In a perverted way, gay identities and Jewish identities are linked in Ben's mind, quite similarly to how Richard sees the connection between Jewish masculinity and homosexuality. They are linked for Alexander as well, though he does not consciously recognize it. Alexander's quest for difference is inspired not by gentiles, but by Jewish or gay theater icons. Throughout the play, Alexander turns to the songs of Jewish-American musical visionaries – Irving Berlin, Sigmund Romberg, Jerome Kern, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Jule Styne, Sammy Cahn, Al Stillman – and the plays of the world's two most famous openly gay playwrights – Oscar Wilde and Tennessee Williams – as safe havens against the pangs of his childhood torture. “Nobody I know is interested in what I'm interested in,” he says, after taking a bow in an imaginary performance of *South Pacific*. He adds, even more proudly, “And I'm not interested in what they're interested in.”<sup>293</sup> The jaunty showstopper from *South Pacific*, “I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair,” is sung comically as a cathartic release of anger over his father's tyranny and *Show Boat*'s “Make Believe” serves as a motif for escapism throughout the play; he imagines himself as Wilde's Cornelia Otis Skinner, treasures the theater posters of *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and parades through the house singing the music of Jule Styne. Though Alexander does not recognize it as such, in his love of theater he finds an intersection of gay and Jewish culture. In effect, theater serves as his outlet that

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<sup>293</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 22.

classifies him as “different,” a label in which he takes great pride. Though Alexander initially associates “difference” with the non-Jewish Drew Keenlymore, in actuality it is the theatrical works of gay and Jewish dramatists which provide him with the dignity of otherness. Ironically, through performance, Alexander feels most comfortable showing his true self. Through theater, gay culture and Jewish culture have overlapped to provide an outlet for Alexander’s delicate temperament.

However, *The Destiny of Me* is ultimately not interested in showing the similarities between gay and Jewish identities. Unlike *The Normal Heart*, which connected the two politically, *The Destiny of Me* severs the connection between the two identities. Through its use of the Holocaust motif, *The Normal Heart* showed that gays must learn from the mistakes of American Jews, and that a continuum exists between how Jews and gays react to prejudice. *The Destiny of Me* however, shows the danger in conflating groups that have been traditionally identified as Others. In the struggle for equality and acceptance, *The Desitny of M* contemptuously shows that groups inevitably will exploit each other’s “faults” in order to climb the social ladder towards favorable reception. The paradigm of a political battle between the mainstream elite and the disenfranchised Others is too simplistic as the boundary between mainstream and Other often and usually overlaps.

Where Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* sets up a paradigm for a horizontal political alliance, Kramer distrusts such a model, as political enemies are often enemies of each other. (This is why Kramer can so easily make sweeping criticisms of Republicans and Democrats—Reagan, Bush, Jesse Helms, Ed Koch and Bill Clinton—in the same breath.) Thus, though Alexander cherishes his gay identity, he

does not seem to embrace a Jewish identity, finding conflict between the two. The fight for gay rights, where AIDS serves as catalyst, is not a fight between powerful groups and oppressed groups – progressive politics do not unite as they do for Kushner – but between gays and heterosexuals. Kushner’s utopian vision which concludes *Angels in America*, is unreachable in Larry Kramer’s world, mostly because Kramer offers little solution to the problems that plague identity construction. However, Kramer’s drama should not be chalked up as a failure, as it articulates the problems with an all-too-simplistic construction of difference, an exemplar that is typically American. Where in Kushner’s *Angels* the powerful are not permitted to join the disenfranchised around the Bethesda fountain, the disenfranchised become the oppressors in Kramer’s disenchanted drama. Neurotic Jewish men, marked by a perceived effeminacy, become the enemy.

As in any coming-of-age story, *The Destiny of Mtra* ces a life’s development from inexperience to sophistication. It is unarticulated difference, not a gay identity, that fascinates young Alexander. (Alexander never proclaims “I’m gay,” but repeatedly relishes in his difference.) Alexander comes to believe that treasuring difference opens the door to a world of possibilities, but Ned shows him his youthful naiveté. As Ned tells the representation of his youth, “You’re going to go to go to eleven shrinks. You won’t fall in love for forty years. And when a nice man finally comes along and tries to teach you to love him and love yourself, he dies from a plague. Which is waiting to kill you, too.” Alexander asks his future self, “Do I learn anything?” an inquiry to which Ned, ironically using a Yiddish inversion of sentence structure and characteristically Jewish rhetoric, answers the question with a question,

“Does it make any sense, a life?”<sup>294</sup> Ned teaches Alexander that difference brings no glory. Alexander may be different, but in his attraction to Drew Keenlymore, Blanche Du Bois, *South Pacific*, gay playwrights, and Jewish American culture, Alexander hoped to create a new community of people who were different, a community not unlike what we see at the end of *Angels in America* around the Bethesda fountain. Though difference unites in Kushner’s *Angels*, the opposite proves to be true for Kramer. The lesson that Alexander learns from Ned is that difference creates no solidarity.

Though both *Angels in America* and *The Destiny of Me* are charged with progressive politics, they show that the paradigm of the “powerful versus the oppressed” is too simplistic. As the uncontrollable AIDS pandemic—which both plays view as a political problem—has shown, such simplistic formulae result in dire consequences. In this conservative versus liberal scenario, all oppressed groups become conflated into one voice, quite problematically because oppressed groups do not always speak with the same voice. In both plays, the American Jewish identity is a metaphor that shows the complexity of identity. Because Jewishness has been established as a mutable identity – part minority, part everyman, part victim, emblematically American – it is a suitable archetype for revealing identity’s multifaceted nature. Its inability to be contained within an easy-to-label envelope is a metaphor for all identities. The fight against AIDS rests upon the idea that gay issues are not always best represented by a monolithic liberal voice. Liberal politics cannot be unilateral. For Kushner, disenfranchised groups all seek civil rights, but exactly

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<sup>294</sup> Kramer, *The Destiny of Me* 122.

what those rights are change from group to group. Groups must work together to fight for each other's civil rights, without assuming that their fights will be the same. For Kramer, precisely because the struggles for civil rights are not the same, oppressed groups can easily erect a roadblock another group's scuffle for acceptance. That both playwrights apply Jewishness as the means for dramatizing the complexities of identity politics is not surprising. Jewishness, in its ability to be American and un-American at the same time, is and always has been the quintessential metaphor for manifesting the intricacies of social relations in America.

## **Bodies of Faith**

In the year 2000, the pejorative question, “Too Jewish?” was brought to the political forefront. Joseph I. Lieberman, the soft-spoken, grandfatherly U. S. Senator from Connecticut became the first American Jew on a major party national ticket. As the Democratic Vice-Presidential candidate under Al Gore, Lieberman’s selection was groundbreaking and arguably energized Gore’s uninspired campaign as a result. While Gore’s selection of Lieberman was followed by a media frenzy over Orthodox Judaism, ultimately Lieberman’s Jewishness did not seem to be a significant factor in the 2000 election. In fact, the 2000 election showed no significant increase in Jewish support for the Democratic ticket in comparison to the previous two presidential elections.<sup>295</sup> More impressive, however, is that the Gore-Lieberman ticket acquired more votes in presidential election history than any other candidate, save Ronald Reagan’s 1984 landslide victory over Walter Mondale. Regardless of the embarrassing difficulties over deciding to whom Florida’s twenty-five Electoral College votes belonged, few blamed Lieberman’s Jewishness for the Democrats’ defeat.

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<sup>295</sup> The National Jewish Democratic Committee reports that Jewish support for the Democratic ticket was at an all-time high during the Clinton, Gore and Lieberman campaigns: 80% in 1992, 79% in 1996 and 80% in 2000. “The 2000 Jewish Vote in Historical Perspective,” *NJDC*.

Part of the reason for such diffidence towards Lieberman's Jewishness was due to the way Lieberman presented himself as a Jew. Lieberman was not a "bagel and lox" Jew; as a candidate he did not fashion himself as a Jew who embraced Jewish culture, cuisine, humor and vocabulary while remaining soft on religion – the very type of Jew portrayed in popular culture. Instead, Lieberman played against the type of American Jew commodified by the stage and screen. Neither was he a commonplace Jew among politicians. As Gregg Easterbrook has written, "Lieberman shunned the standard image of the northeast Jewish politician" by walking with hard liners on several key economic and defense issues. But the most obvious way that Lieberman shirked the stereotype was by "being very open about [his] religion."<sup>296</sup> His frankness about his religion is a rarity amongst American Jewish politicians. Though Lieberman was one of ten, a *minyán* of Jewish Senators in 2000, he was certainly the most outspoken about the effects of Judaism upon his identity. This is not to say that Lieberman's colleagues denied their Jewish identity, but that Lieberman was less afraid to emphasize his commitment to Judaism. He refused to campaign on the Sabbath, walked to Congress on Saturdays when the legislative agenda demanded his key vote, and kept a prayer book in his Senate office so that he could pray three times a day.

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<sup>296</sup> Easterbrook compares Lieberman's success with Daniel Glickman's successful run to be a Congressman from Kansas, representing Wichita, "which is about as white-bread as cities get." Easterbrook argues that Lieberman and Glickman's rise (Glickman later became Clinton's Secretary of Agriculture) was due to their ability to stress their hawkish views over their more progressive opinions and, most importantly, to their insistence of the importance of religion in American life.

While state or local politicians may emphasize their ethnic, racial or religious heritage as they run for office in order to appeal to large or dominant groups within their constituency, the lack of diversity among presidential and vice-presidential candidates denotes a fear of running candidates who are not mainstream enough to be accepted by the country-wide voting public. However, Lieberman's characterization of his Jewishness as faith-based – positioning him as similar to practicing Christians – brought him into the mainstream. In his pre-2000 election memoir, *In Praise of Public Life*, Lieberman recounts an anecdote from the time when he was running for the Senate in 1988:

On the Thursday before that 1988 election, I received a call from my friend Cornelius O'Leary, the Democratic leader of the Connecticut state senate, who told me that he *now* thought I was going to win the election. I said I was naturally glad to hear that, but why did he *now* think I would win? I'll never forget his answer.

"I went to visit my mother's house yesterday afternoon," he said, "and she had four of her friends over for tea. I asked them who they were going to support for president next Tuesday. They all said Bush. I made the case for [Michael] Dukakis but couldn't convince any of them.

"Then I asked about the Senate, and my mother said, 'That's easy. I'm voting for Joe Lieberman.'

"I asked, 'Why is that so easy?'

"'Because,' my mother responded, 'I like the fact that Joe Lieberman is a religious man.'

"At that," O'Leary said, "the other women at the table nodded. So, Joe, I now think your religious observance, which I thought might hurt you because it requires you to miss so many days of campaigning, will actually help elect you. It tells people that something matters to you more than political success. My mother and her friends are Christian, and you're Jewish, but the fact that you so clearly share their belief in God gives them a personal bond with you."<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Lieberman, *In Praise of Public Life: The Honor and Purpose of Political Service* 90-91.

By emphasizing religion, Christian America could relate to him. If Lieberman's Jewishness made him unlike Christians, surely the practice of a faith and his reverence towards God united them. The rhetoric of a Jewish identity as faith-based allowed religious Christians to comprehend Lieberman's religious convictions by relating them to their own. During the 2000 campaign, Lieberman was unyielding in displaying his passion for his religion. "I wanted to be who I am," he writes in his campaign autobiography, *An Amazing Adventure*, "and prayer and faith are at the center of my life and of my family's life. The same is true of many Americans, and I have never understood why some people feel that when you go into public life you lose the freedom to talk about your faith. My religious beliefs shape who I am and explain why I have dedicated myself to a life of public service."<sup>298</sup> As Lieberman puts it, his faith unites him with most Americans, rather than separates him from them, arguably more so than if he were to accentuate the ethnic and cultural components of Jewish life, which might have alienated a Christian majority. True enough, Lieberman was occasionally prone to make light of the idiosyncrasies in having a Jew run for Vice President by offering standard Jewish *schtick*; as a guest on Jon Stewart's *Daily Show* he "offered a series of special ethnically-oriented bumper stickers" including "GORE-LIEBERMAN—NO BULL, NO PORK," "WITH MALICE TOWARD NONE AND A LITTLE GUILT FOR EVERYONE" and the bumper sticker that elicited the most groans, "LOX AND LOAD."<sup>299</sup> However,

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<sup>298</sup> Joe and Hadassah Lieberman, *An Amazing Adventure: Joe and Hadassah's Personal Notes on the 2000 Campaign* 37.

<sup>299</sup> Joe and Hadassah Lieberman 124.

Lieberman insists that even his humor is derived from “spiritual roots,” quoting from the Psalms: “This is the day which the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad thereon.”<sup>300</sup> In fact, his invocation of God as he made the rounds on the campaign trail was so frequent that it prompted an unlikely critic, the Anti-Defamation League, to issue a letter of complaint to the senator from Connecticut.<sup>301</sup>

Conversely, Lieberman’s religious overtones in his characterization of himself as a Jew seemed to cause little offense to the public as a whole. In fact, his religious devotion was one of Lieberman’s most charming qualities, so much so that some Republicans tried subtly to shift the image of Lieberman’s Jewishness towards an ethnic-based rhetoric. Bill Bennett, once allied with Lieberman in their challenge to Hollywood’s waning morals, attacked Lieberman for not continuing the fight for their cause. The conservative cultural crusader said, “There were times when he was standing next to me that I thought he was Amos or Jeremiah. Instead, we have ‘Seinfeld.’ – you know, this modern ironic, ‘noodgy,’ shrugging your shoulders, ‘ha,

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<sup>300</sup> Joe and Hadassah Lieberman 124.

<sup>301</sup> Howard P. Berkowitz, ADL National Chairman and Abraham H. Foxman, its National Director, wrote in a co-signed statement, “Candidates should feel comfortable explaining their religious convictions to voters. At the same time, however, the Anti-Defamation League believes there is a point at which an emphasis on religion in a political campaign becomes inappropriate and even unsettling in a religiously diverse society such as ours.” They conclude the letter: “As this campaign unfolds, we urge you to keep in mind that public profession of religious beliefs should not be an elemental part of this or any other political campaign.” Lieberman’s emphasis on his faith also upset Orthodox groups who feared that he was becoming the spokesman for Orthodox Judaism. When asked if he was for or against interfaith marriage, Lieberman blundered by mentioning incorrectly that the Torah approves of such marriage; American Jewish groups cringed at Lieberman’s response, and Lieberman later regretted it, stating that he should have declined an answer since he was running to be vice president, not chief rabbi. See Tapper, “Slick with Sincerity.”

ha,' 'whatever,' sophisticate approach."<sup>302</sup> His comment is loaded, suggesting that only two versions of Jewishness exist for Lieberman: he can be the "Amos or Jeremiah" Jew (read: Biblical, Hebrew, moral, religious), which is positive, or he can be the "Seinfeld" Jew (read: ethnic, Yiddish, abandoner of religious values), who seems hardly headstrong, and best described by the ethnic-specific Yiddish word "noodgy."<sup>303</sup> The first falls within the mainstream, since Christians view Amos and Jeremiah as part of their culture, too, while "Seinfeld," regardless of his popularity, pinpoints Lieberman's Jewishness as a mode of cultural behavior rather than religious devotion. Though the notion that a Jew has only two options in his characterization of his Jewishness is dubious, it does denote a push to define Jews by using existing (and limiting) categorizations. In this paradigm, Jews can only be a religious group, in the vein of Lieberman, or an ethnic Jew, in the spirit of Seinfeld. That Lieberman chose to be the "Amos or Jeremiah" Jew, and not the "Seinfeld" Jew, regardless how Bennett tried to portray him, is significant. Though *Seinfeld* was a groundbreaking sitcom in its own right, and was the top rated show on television for several seasons, *Seinfeld's* popularity was due to its kookiness and the downfalls of identifiable Yiddish types: a *schlemiel* (Jerry), a *shlimazl* (George), a *nukhshleper* (Elaine) and a

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<sup>302</sup> Qtd. in Tapper. Tapper's *Salon* article was a follow-up to Bennett's chastisement of Lieberman in the *Wall Street Journal*.

<sup>303</sup> In all fairness, Bennett, in fact, is responding to Lieberman's use of the word "nudzh" first. At a Beverly Hills fund-raiser, Lieberman said that he would never support censorship, but would continue to "nudzh" them. Bennett found the Yiddish term "too gentle." Lieberman later explained that, based upon being "nudhzed" by his family, he would "define the verb as 'persistent criticism until one changes one's behavior.'" As he admits, however, "I did not benefit from the exchange [with Bennett]" (Joe and Hadassah Lieberman 145).

*meshugene* (Kramer). Vice presidential candidates, of course, cannot be kooky *schlemiels* or *meshugenes*, Yiddish “types” do not coexist with an American ideal of strong leadership; by adopting faith as the center of his Jewishness, however, Lieberman fashioned himself as an American rather than as a not-quite American. As he portrayed himself as a devoutly religious American, he mirrored the campaigns of Carter and Clinton, both of whom stressed their faith as a key characteristic that made them fit to be President.

Ironically, *Seinfeld* was undoubtedly American enough as it was, if the show’s popularity is any basis for judgment. In fact, Bennett’s discussion of Lieberman compares the two most talked about Jews at the turn of this century. When Lieberman’s visage became recognizable across the country in 2000, *Seinfeld* had only ended its nine year run less than two years earlier; due to syndication, however, it never really left the airwaves. In comparing *Seinfeld* and Senator Lieberman, it is easy to recognize two vastly different models of Jewishness, yet both became household names all across America. Both negotiated their Jewish identity in order to be accepted by mass audiences. *Seinfeld*, following in the tradition of the Jew as everyman, commodified Jewish identity to the point where Jerry Seinfeld’s Jewishness was just another way of identifying Jerry, no more offensive than his domestic tendencies or his love for cereal, but hardly as offensive when compared to any of the unwanted character-traits cum-labels used to identify the *meshugines* in Jerry’s world: The Man Hands, The Low Talker, The High Talker, The Close Talker, The Sideler, The Re-Gifter, The Mimbo (male bimbo), The Bad Breadker-Upper, The Bald Woman. Jewishness, in *Seinfeld*, is mainstreamed because, comparatively, Jerry

is as quirky as anyone else in the show if not less so. His Jewishness, as David Marc has written, is an “elegantly constructed balance of American, Jew, and Jewish-American.” Jerry’s humor is the humor of exclusion because everyone who appears in *Seinfeld* is, to some degree or another, marginalized. *Seinfeld*’s Jewishness is what makes him different, and in the world of *Seinfeld*, difference means normal. By being different, but not to the degree of those that the show mocks, “he can do more than pass for a successful American since he is one.” Paradoxically, exclusion becomes inclusive and Jerry is, in reality, “unexcludable without his Jewishness.”<sup>304</sup>

I begin this chapter by comparing Lieberman and *Seinfeld* because both are identifiably Jewish in remarkably different ways. Certainly they are an unlikely pair, but the comparison is not inappropriate as they both have managed seamlessly to integrate Jewishness into the mainstream in front of a mass audience. Their paths, however, are quite different. Lieberman’s piousness equates him with an (imagined) American principle whose core values are centered upon religious faith. *Seinfeld*’s quirkiness equates him with an (imagined) American ideal that privileges diversity and uniqueness. While both successfully integrated themselves into the mainstream, the distinction is, however, that the latter resisted the religious implications of a Jewish identity while the former embraced it. In both instances, difference became sameness: *Seinfeld*’s Jewishness was more idiosyncratic than Jewish-specific; Lieberman’s Jewishness was understood to be easily comparable to a Christian norm. Ironically, though both Lieberman and *Seinfeld* were able to maneuver themselves into the center of American culture, they were equally praised and criticized for their

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<sup>304</sup> Marc 200-202.

apparent successes.<sup>305</sup> Were they “good for the Jews?” David Zurawick concludes, regarding *Seinfeld*, “If nothing else, that massive popularity exposed the lie told by all the network executives over the years who argued that Jewish identity had to be masked for economic reasons.”<sup>306</sup> Similarly, if nothing else, Lieberman’s success showed that Jewish identity need not be masked in order to thrive in the political arena. Given the success of *Seinfeld* and of Lieberman, and their near-opposite characterizations of Jewishness, the question is *how* does Jewishness become mainstreamed?

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<sup>305</sup> *Seinfeld* was particularly criticized for its portrayal of Jewish clergy and Jewish rituals including a gossipy rabbi, a *mohel* with the jitters, and an episode in which George gets revenge by slipping lobster into the diner of Jerry’s girlfriend’s, who keeps kosher. Of the episode, “The *Bris*,” Jonathan and Judith Pearl are especially critical. They describe the *mohel* as “a coarse, cold and uncaring, buffoonlike boor.” The *brit milah* itself “was presented in this light, with no nods to its meaning, importance, or spirituality.” They describe it as a melding of “the notorious wedding scene of *Goodbye, Columbus* combined with a scene from Woody Allen at his self-disparaging worst” (31). Tom Shales, television critic from the *Washington Post* writes that the show was “self-hatingly Jewish” (B1). See David Zurawick’s chapter on *Seinfeld* in *The Jews of Primetime* 201-217. In the *New York Times*, Maureen Dowd noted the irony in Gore’s selection of Lieberman, an interesting contrast to his opponent, George W. Bush, who noted several times that he makes decisions by asking “What Would Jesus Do?” Dowd notes with Lieberman’s selection, “Both sides seem weirdly obsessed with snagging a divine endorsement.” In his first speech after Gore’s announcement of his running mate, Lieberman managed to mention God’s name thirteen times in ninety seconds. After Lieberman’s speech at the Democratic national convention, Gary Kamiya of the progressive web magazine, *Salon*, said that Lieberman’s “attempts to drag religion into the public sphere” only “cheapen[ed] religion by using it as a political tool and raising the specter of theocracy.” Kamiya was the first to nickname the Senator, “Holy Joe,” a name that leftist critics would adopt to criticize the Senator in years to come. One of the first critiques of Lieberman’s Jewishness in a Jewish publication was offered by Michael Lerner in *Tikkun Magazine*. Lerner questions the validity of the assumption that Lieberman is not an assimilated Jew. Lerner, “Vice President Lieberman?”

<sup>306</sup> Zurawick 202.

Generally speaking, the television and movie industry, with few exceptions, have avoided the religious connotations of a Jewish identity. As Joyce Antler has written, “Television tends to depict Jewishness in secular, cultural terms rather than focus on any religious dimensions of Jewish identity. Although this in itself is neither surprising nor necessarily problematic, what has troubled members of the Jewish community is the frequent ridicule with which religious themes and characters are portrayed when they do become subjects of TV shows.”<sup>307</sup> Likewise, *Seinfeld* generally simplified the religious components of Jewishness. It was still, however, identified as a distinctly Jewish situation comedy because its humor was identifiably Jewish. Its setting in New York, its use of Jewish actors, George and Jerry’s overbearing parents and Jerry’s profession as a stand-up comic all helped emphasize that *Seinfeld* was a Jewish comedy. *Seinfeld*, I believe, follows a model that I have discussed throughout – emphasizing the ethnic qualities of a Jewish identity in order to distinguish Jewish difference. As I have shown, in this model, the negotiation of a Jewish identity adopts multicultural rhetoric in order to establish Jewish difference. Through its comedy of difference, *Seinfeld* shows that Jews are a vital part of a multicultural America as ethnic New York, *Seinfeld’s* setting, became the microcosmic replica of the country as a whole.

Even as it perpetuated the essentiality of difference, *Seinfeld* touched upon the problematic nature of multicultural rhetoric throughout its run. In one episode, Elaine dates a man who she thinks is African American partly because the idea of an

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<sup>307</sup> Antler, from *Television’s Changing Image of American Jews* by Neal Gabler, Frank Rich and Joyce Antler 71.

interracial romance is attractively cutting-edge to her. At the end of the episode, she is slightly disappointed to discover that her boyfriend is white, and, as it turns out, he is equally disappointed to learn that she is not, as he had assumed, Hispanic, previously concluding that her last name, Benes, was of Hispanic origin, and her fondness for Salsa clubs was a cultural trait. When Elaine and her beau discover that they aren't dating someone "different" enough, they are let down because – like the show's philosophy – difference is normal. By being white (and not ethnic), they are outside the mainstream, because sameness stems from the generalized sense of difference ("Everybody's different!"). Of course, the irony is that the actress playing Elaine, Julia Louise Dreyfus, is Jewish, though her role is a self-designated *shiksa* from New York, who viewers "read" as Jewish nonetheless. Likewise, the actor playing her boyfriend, was indeed African American, although he was playing a white man who was assumed to be African American. The episode provocatively demonstrates that Jewishness, African Americanness, Hispanicness and whiteness are more malleable than terms such as "race" and "ethnicity" suggest. Even as Elaine becomes paradoxically abnormal by revealing her whiteness, Elaine is still a pseudo-Jew, "different" enough to be like everyone else. As is the narrative of the sitcom, Jewishness is made to fit already existing definitions of difference. When it is assumed that everyone is different, Jewishness is normalized because it, too, is different – different enough to be like everyone else.

On the other hand, Lieberman follows a radically different model. Without being too reductive, by stressing faith, he wedged Judaism into a Christian definition of religion. Just as Jewishness does not quite fit the definitions established by

multiculturalism, Judaism does not exactly fit American notions of religion. As

Stephen Whitfield writes:

Although the Judeo-Christian tradition is often invoked, historic Judaism cannot be fully accommodated to Christendom, even if intolerance were removed from the equation. The closest Hebrew equivalent to “religion” is *dat*, a term borrowed from the Persian and found primarily in the biblical book of Esther (which nevertheless does not mention God). That *dat* also means “law” hints at how the function and meaning of Judaism were transformed after its adherents were emancipated. Even as freedom of worship was formally guaranteed, modern civil society inevitably defined religion in a way that altered a Judaism that had previously been transmitted as practices more than a theology, as codes more than doctrines. Jews were promised freedom of religion, but what most were not quite entitled to enjoy was the freedom to define religion in a way that owed nothing to the prevailing conception in Christendom.<sup>308</sup>

In short: the very definition of religion as American society has come to understand it is Christian-specific. As Jews try to define themselves as strictly a religious group, they inevitably adopt a Christian-centric model. Arguably, as Lieberman maneuvered his way into the mainstream by stressing his faith, he did just that. This is not to fault Lieberman, as today’s sound-bite media tends to ignore complexities in favor of simplified personifications of the subjects it covers, but it is to stress that as Jewishness becomes constructed in American culture – either as a religion or as an ethnicity – both are ultimately reductive.

On the one hand, as Lieberman pursued the 2004 election, I found myself fascinated by how he has managed to negotiate his Jewishness before a public audience without following the assimilated, “bagels and lox” model, a frustrating characterization set by the entertainment industry. For that alone, he took on a heroic

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<sup>308</sup> Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* 197.

stature for many Jews who continue to take great pride in what Lieberman represented: a Jew could run for *President of the United States* without selling out to assimilatory values. However, this assumes that Lieberman has not assimilated in his own way: as Lieberman adopted a rhetoric in which Jews are primarily a faith-based group, he suggested an umbrella-like labeling of Jewish life that forced it to fit into neat boxes constructed with Christian dimensions. In fact, his politics parallel the Christianization of his Jewishness: though he remains, like most Jews, a staunch supporter of liberal ideals such as Civil Rights, domestic partner benefits, abortion rights, and the environment, at times he has adopted positions popular with the religious right, aligning himself with senators from across the aisle to co-sponsor bills that favor school vouchers for private religious schools and government funding for faith-based charitable organizations. For Jews, his positions are outside the mainstream, though his standpoints on his pet issues tend to be more representative of Orthodox Jews who are typically more conservative than other Jewish denominations. I do not doubt Lieberman's devotion to his religious practice. Nor do I wish to misrepresent his positions as proselytizing. (In fact, proselytizing is not a Jewish value.) Lieberman has said time and time again, as he asserted before the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in March 2003, "[O]ne need not be religious to be moral. Morality springs from a powerful sense of right and wrong, not from any requirement of faith."<sup>309</sup> Instead, I do mean to stress that as Lieberman's Jewishness is presented as faith-based, Lieberman walks a fine line between evoking a Jewish

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<sup>309</sup> Joe Lieberman, "Remarks to Consultation on Conscience Biennial Conference of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism," Washington, DC, 31 Mar. 2003.

identity and Christianizing a Jewish identity. Though he remains unabashedly devoted, is his construction of his identity as faith-based a form of assimilation as well?

As I have stressed throughout the preceding chapters, contemporary definitions of religion, race and ethnicity are all problematic for Jews. Lieberman is merely the product of an ongoing debate over the representation of Jewishness. How does one represent Jewishness so that it remains distinctly Jewish (and what does “distinctly Jewish” mean anyway)? Only the purists would disagree that politics is just another performance, a sister art to theatrical histrionics. It is, therefore, unsurprising that Lieberman entered the mainstream by presenting his Jewishness as strictly faith-based. Lieberman is the result of an American trend that has positioned faith as part of the establishment and ethnicity as separate from it. This is reflected in contemporary multicultural ideology as well: if Jews have not been privileged within multicultural ideology, it is because Judaism has been less so. While the preceding chapters have asked how Jews are presented in accordance with a multicultural rhetoric that has largely ignored Jews, I end with a discussion of how Judaism has been presented on the stage in light of a multicultural rhetoric that has cast Judaism as part of the mainstream. By and by large, multicultural movements have erroneously assumed that Judaism fits neatly within the notion of a Judeo-Christian rubric, itself an erroneous construct. The mythical Judeo-Christian ethic is the governing force that challenges diversity of culture. With a nod to Lenny Bruce, is ethnicity Jewish while religion—*goyish*? Are belief, reverence, faith, *religion*, as they have been

constructed in American culture, conceptually more applicable to Christians than they are to Jews?

To be a Jewish-American is to negotiate one's Jewishness using a vocabulary foreign to Jewish tradition and history. "As a religion," writes Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Judaism becomes a private matter, and the Enlightenment paradigm of the Jew at home and the citizen in the street finds its pristine expression in America just as these Enlightenment principles are bankrupted in Europe, after the genocide of the Jews on racial and not religious grounds."<sup>310</sup> In America, in accordance with the principles of Separation of Church and State, one practices religion in private and leaves his religion at the door in his role as a public citizen. This public/private dichotomy, of course, is based upon the assumption that American society is indeed religiously neutral. In fact, however, the very terms that are used to create this semblance of secularism are Christian in construct. Even the very idea of *time* in America requires the acceptance of a Christian measurement scale. (When Americans celebrated the recent millennium, according to the Jewish calendar, it was the year 5760.) Consequently, many questions remain: is it possible for a Jewish-American to define himself as religious? Is that rhetoric a part of the Jewish tradition? And, when most Jews do not view the religious components of their Jewishness as the essential ingredients of being Jewish,<sup>311</sup> does it mean that an American Jew must essentially adopt a Christian rhetoric if he chooses to see himself as a religious?

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<sup>310</sup> Wirth-Nesher, "Language as Homeland in Jewish-American Literature," *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* 218.

<sup>311</sup> Drawing upon various studies of Jewish self-identification, Stephen Whitfield notes that in a 1998 national survey, "the pursuit of equality and of social justice

As I have shown throughout, the idea of Jewishness is a perception more than a reality. Likewise, the idea of a religious Jew is equally problematic. Such a sweeping label implies that a normative Judaism exists. In America alone, the existence of practicing Orthodox, Conservative, Reformed, Reconstructionist, Agnostic and Secular Jews implies otherwise. Since I am more interested in how perceptions of Jewishness in America have been performed, rather than the realities (if, indeed, realities can be defined), I wish to consider how the theater has allowed Jews to shape Judaism so that it falls within the spectrum of a multicultural identity. Can American Judaism be integrated into multicultural philosophies? How have American Jews presented the Jewish religion on the stage so that it does not perpetuate a non-Jewish rhetoric that defines religion? Is there a route, a language, for performing Judaism in America so that it is independent of a perceived Christian concept of religion? As Judaism is performed before an American audience, how does it appear from seeming too *goyish*? In other words, can Judaism be presented in such a way that it challenges, rather than perpetuates, the idea that Judaism can be easily incorporated into the American Christian mainstream? Can the performance of Judaism resist the American idea of a Judeo-Christian culture, a paradigm in which Judaism can be easily absorbed into a Christian narrative?

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ranked much higher than religion itself as the Jewish value that mattered most.” Given the choice of “equality,” “Israel,” and “religion,” more than half of all Jews surveyed felt that “equality” was the most defining philosophy that shaped their Jewish identity. Only a fifth of those who responded felt that “religion” played the primary role in shaping their sense of Jewishness (Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* 239).

One route in plays about the Jewish faith has been to discuss faith through the representation of the Jew's body. The body becomes the means of distinguishing Jew from Christian. In other words, representing Judaism as physical resists the idea that Judaism can easily be categorized as strictly a faith. The notion that a Jew can be distinguished from his fellow countrymen is nothing new and was central to Nazi discourse and to anti-Semitic characterizations as a whole. It is hardly a revelation that anti-Semitic movements have portrayed Jews as physically different from Christians. However, Judaism is a religion of the body: Judaism emphasizes a unique relationship between the body and God. Indeed, Judaism as a whole blurs the line between spirituality and the body: laws of kashrut and blessings before and after meals exist in part because the food becomes a part of the body. Likewise, circumcision is the ritual which permanently marks an eight-day old male as Jewish. In Hasidic circles, the locks around the ears are holy and are never cut. Judaism does not create clear cut distinctions between the body and faith. Traditionally, Judaism goes much deeper than a belief that can be adopted and discarded.

In the presentation of Jews on the stage, the nature of theater can only heighten the relationship between the Jew's body and his religion. Perhaps because the body is the theater's primary tool for expression, playwrights have worked with the body as the vocabulary for defining Judaism in Jewish American drama. However, even in performances that are not anti-Semitic, performances that focus not only on Jewishness, but Judaism, it is remarkable how often religious belief is depicted as inseparable from an unquestionably Jewish body, usually that of the stage Hasid or the *shtetl* Jew. The *shtetl* Jew or the Hasid embody religious difference

because their dress makes them appear physically different; they are unable to pass among an American norm. They are, in effect, marked as Jews because of the costumes they wear. Because their dress makes them look different than an imagined American mainstream, they signify difference, a model which Woody Allen uses in *Annie Hall*, for example. When Alvy visits Annie's parents, they seem so "normal", so much a part of the American mainstream, that he imagines himself sitting at their dinner table dressed as a Hasidic Jew. Because he seems so out of place among her family, he physicalizes his Jewish difference to the extreme as he conceives of himself wearing a dark coat, a wide-brimmed hat, bear and *payis* (long, curly sideburns).

The stage Hasid in particular plays a significant role in the history of Jewish theater. While the Yiddish theater is generally a tributary of the *haskole* movement, the Jewish Enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Hasidism, too, reinvigorated the arts as a part of Jewish life; in Nahma Sandrow's words, "*Hasidism* encouraged the popular arts" because it "glorified spontaneous song and dance as expressions of joy in the divine. It encouraged the creation of simple lyrics in the vocabulary of the masses." However, as far as the *maskilim* (Enlightened Jews) were concerned, the Hasidim also represented a decidedly "rigid anti-intellectualism." The Hasidim may have infused the arts with religion, but the arts were, as the *maskilim* interpreted Hasidism, a Hasid's representation of the heart, not the mind.<sup>312</sup> Thus, the Yiddish theater characteristically mocked the Hasidim for their rigid devotion to Jewish tradition by often portraying them as simple minded fools. The

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<sup>312</sup> Sandrow 33.

early dramas of Jacob Gordin, one of the founding figures of Modern Yiddish Theater in America, typically presented the Hasidim as villains or dolts.

As the pangs of assimilation took their toll on the Jewish community in America, however, Jews quickly discovered that being both Jewish and American meant navigating difficult and often conflicting identities. As Jews grew accustomed to their Christian neighbors, and vice versa, religious devotion was more and more so abandoned in favor of more American mores. As Jews assimilated, religion became envisioned as the central ingredient that kept Jews from losing their Jewishness. What exactly was a Jew if religion was the enemy? As the Yiddish theater developed, religious devotion became less the characteristic of the antagonist and more the essential component in fostering a Jewish identity that did not abandon itself for an American mindset. In fact, the generation of Yiddish playwrights after Jacob Gordin mocked the Hasidim called Gordin anti-Semitic for his abandonment of religious tradition in favor of more European values.<sup>313</sup>

Where the Yiddish theater's origins may have resembled the *haskole* movement in its drive to westernize its Jewish audience, Yiddish theater gradually became a venue for perpetuating *hey mish* (familiar) Jewish values, often in spite of westernization. In the process, the figure of the old country Jew, the folksy European *shtetl* Jew, and most specifically, the stage Hasid, whose physicality alone came to represent unyielding tradition, became revered on the stage rather than mocked. Resistance to conceptual assimilation became embodied in the physically unassimilated figures of Jews who essentially looked different. Certainly, anti-

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<sup>313</sup> Sandrow 199-200, 408.

Semitic stage characterizations of Jews exploited physical difference as well. It is obvious, but important, to point out that when a group is meant to be dramatized as different, physical difference is the primary means of showcasing such a division from the norm. In that way, the *shtetl* Jew and the Hasid may have been the models for anti-Semitic characterizations, but they were also the models developed from within the Jewish community that represented resistance to assimilation.

As the Yiddish stage in America became a ritualized fight against assimilation, the appearance of the *shtetl* Jew and the Hasid on the Yiddish stage began to show that tradition could indeed be carried from the Old Country into America. If this wasn't the case in the real world, at least it could be true on the stage. As its audience gradually dropped their *hey mish* customs for American norms, and began to look less like their Old Country counterparts, the American stage's dramatization of the Old Country, either through the nostalgic figure of the *shtetl* Jew or the relic-like Hasid, showed that the traditions of the past had not been lost. If the audience themselves had moved further away from traditional old country ideals, the stage perpetuated the idea that there were Jews who hadn't. If there were Jews who still looked like the Jews of yesteryear, then tradition was still alive as well.

As Jews populated the audiences of the English-speaking American stages, the counterparts to the Yiddish theater, it was even more crucial that the ritual was propagated. Even as Jewish actors played pseudo-Jewish comic characters who lusted (and eventually married) non-Jewish women (a staple of not only stand-up and musical comedy but also characteristic of the lives of Jewish comedians as well), the appearance of the Jew of yesteryear engendered a "feel good" effect upon its

audience that was moving away from religious tradition. The most well-known example is, without hesitation, *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), now a cliché dramatization of Jewish struggles. Tevye the dairyman is not only the keystone fictional character of American Jewish culture, but he has become the most recognizable Jewish character on the American stage. Though Tevye is a *Pintele Yid*, espousing traditions deeply rooted in Jewish religious practice, all the while questioning God's workings, his Jewishness is a nostalgic one. *Fiddler on the Roof* is an Americanized version of Sholem Aleichem's original tales. It presents the Old Country in mythic proportions even as it attempts to preserve it.<sup>314</sup> Furthermore, *Fiddler on the Roof* transforms Tevye's Jewishness into something tangible, that is to say, a Jewishness that can be embodied and performed.

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<sup>314</sup> See Stephen J. Whitfield's "Fiddling with Sholem Aleichem: A History of *Fiddler on the Roof*," *Key Texts in American Jewish Culture*. In addition to tracing the source history behind the musical, Whitfield takes to task critics who have disapproved of *Fiddler*'s departures from the original tales by Sholem Aleichem. He writes that "*Fiddler on the Roof* is part of the saga of supersession, as the Old World gave way to the New, as the prestige of high culture would yield to the raucous immediacy of popular entertainment, as a sensibility that was tragic and ironic lost traction, defeated by a faith in betterment" (122). In effect, *Fiddler on the Roof* is best studied not as a historical replication of European Jewry, but as a reflection of (then) contemporary American Jewish life; such is how I approach the musical as well. Also see Seth L. Wolitz, "The Americanization of Tevye or Boarding the Jewish *Mayflower*" in *American Quarterly*. Preceding Whitfield's argument, Wolitz outlines the development of Tevye's character, as seen through Sholem Aleichem's stories, his play (in Yiddish), Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish film, Arnold Perl's off-Broadway play, *Fiddler on the Roof* and Norman Jewison's film of the musical. He is most critical of the musical because it is the least sensitive to, oddly enough, the "tradition" of the Tevye stories. Tevye has become the voice of the imagined past: "Coarsened, toughened, burly, jovial and positive, he embodies the ancestor of whom Jewish America wants to be proud. His portrayal expresses the Jewish-American striving towards normalization and security in America. Tevye, then, is the Jewish Pilgrim whose *Mayflower* has long since docked" (533).

Sholem Aleichem's original Tevye appeared in a number of short stories that, starting in 1895, nearly spanned a twenty year period. Five daughters trouble Tevye in the original stories; *Fiddler on the Roof* tells the story of only the first three: Tzeitel (who marries a young nebbish tailor instead of the well-established butcher to whom she was arranged to be married), Hodel (who marries an idealistic revolutionary) and Chava (who, against her father's wishes, marries a non-Jew). The two succeeding daughters' storylines, Shprintze and Bielke, are absent from the musical, though the daughters themselves do appear briefly. In the original, Shprintze, like Tzeitel, wishes to marry a poor man, but Tevye protests this time and the lovesick Shprintze kills herself. Bielke, in turn, finds only unhappiness after she is married to a rich man. She ultimately leaves for America with him. With the possible exception of the Chava story, all of the daughter's tales show that economic security and love quite often do not mix.

Unlike the musical, which ends with Tevye's departure for America, Sholem Aleichem's Tevye never crosses the Atlantic. Rather, he rejects the idea after Beilke's husband suggests it, noting his disdain for America with a colorful Yiddish proverb, "you can't make a fur hat out of a pig's tail."<sup>315</sup> After Golde's death (another event that *Fiddler* does not include), Tevye leaves for the land of Israel, but he does not stay there. Instead, in Sholem Aleichem's final tale of Tevye's history, the author meets his character on a train ride, finding him lonely, weary and nearly dejected, reduced to the archetypal wandering Jew. His spirits would be broken if not

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<sup>315</sup> Sholem Aleichem, "Tevye Leaves for the Land of Israel," *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*, 110.

for his ability to find spurts of optimism through his unyielding faith that God knows what he is doing. “Anyone can be a goy, but a Jew must be born one,” he says dejectedly as he rides the train. “*Ashrekho yisro’eyl*—it’s a lucky thing I was, then, because otherwise how would I ever know what it’s like to be homeless and wander all over the world without resting my head on the same pillow two nights running?”<sup>316</sup> If there is a message in the Tevye stories, it is that even in the world of 1914, the year of Tevye’s last outing in prose, a time when Jews have no nation to call home, and many were uprooting themselves from being outsiders in one country only to become outsiders in another, hope still exists. In the final lines of the Tevye stories, Tevye gives his author a mission: “Say hello for me to all our Jews and tell them wherever they are, not to worry: the old God of Israel still lives!”<sup>317</sup>

Though the stories investigate the economic dilemmas of *shtetl* Jews, the message of *The Tevye Stories* also is about the role of faith. For Tevye’s daughters, father may not always know best, but Tevye concludes that his Father figure does. As much as Tevye questions his hardships, he never loses sight of his firm belief that God does indeed care for His Jewish children. *The Tevye Stories* shows that, in spite of the economic and emotional difficulties that Tevye is faced with, at the core of Tevye’s identity is his faith in God. Though at first glance it reads as negotiating love against money, there is in fact a broader theme: it exposes the clash between faith and materialism, with faith winning in the end, heightened by the return of Chava, who

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<sup>316</sup> Sholem Aleichem, “Lekh-Lekho,” *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories* 130.

<sup>317</sup> Sholem Aleichem, “Lekh-Lekho,” *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories* 113.

leaves her non-Jewish husband Fyedka so that she can “return to her father and her God.”<sup>318</sup> Whatever security she had as a part of an outside, dominant culture cannot, she has realized, be compared to the value of family and faith. This is not to say that blind acceptance of scripture, culture and faith provide happiness. Rather, Tevye finds conflicting advice in the scriptures regarding how to treat his daughter when she returns. Nevertheless, Chava has returned. Judaism has provided stability, though Sholem Aleichem avoids the sentimental implication that all is happily ever after.

Faith, however, should not be understood to be distinct from culture. No separation between religion and culture can be made here. For Tevye, faith is as much a part of his lifestyle as bagels and lox are for American Jews. In other words, it would be anachronistic and erroneous to create a division between the man and his faith. Sholem Aleichem’s *Tevye’s Stories* presents a Judaism unaffected by Christian definitions of faith. The division of faith and ethnicity is a moot issue in *The Tevye Stories* because they are one in the same. In other words, when Chava rejects Judaism, she rejects *everything* about the lifestyle in which she grew up. Judaism is a symbiotic part of a cultural identity, inseparable from a Jewish identity.

Of course, the world of Sholem Aleichem is much different than the world in which *Fiddler on the Roof* was produced. Joseph Stein, Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick were reinterpreting Sholem Aleichem’s tales for an era in which Jews negotiated their identities within a Christian framework of religion and at a time when and Chava’s intermarriage was not as taboo as it once was. *Fiddler on the Roof* is

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<sup>318</sup> Sholem Aleichem, “Lekh-Lekho,” *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories* 129.

written for an American audience and, likewise, espouses American values through its ending. Tevye and his family head off to America and their story will eventually become our story. One message that *Fiddler* delivers is that American Jews are the inheritors of *shtetl* life. With the villagers of Anaktevka's departure to America, however, *Fiddler on the Roof* shows quite the contrary. The musical concerns itself not only between passing Judaism not only between father and daughter but also between the past and the present. In having Tevye come to America, we know the end result of his story, and likewise we are forced to ask what happens to those who did not follow Tevye to America. Unlike Sholem Aleichem's tales, *Fiddler's* Chava does not leave Fyedka, though she does return to her parents, albeit briefly, only to say goodbye to her parents as they are exiled from Anaktevka and depart for America. Chava and Fyedka, too, are leaving – but for Cracow – because they “cannot stay among people who can do such things to others.”<sup>319</sup> Tevye does not reconcile with Chava, as is the case in the original Tevye stories; he keeps his back turned to her, though with Tzeitl as mediator, he does wish that “God be with [them].”<sup>320</sup> What becomes of Chava? Most likely she shares the same fate as Hodl, who also stays behind with her husband, the Jewish revolutionary Perchik, imprisoned in Siberia. Chava, the daughter who abandoned her Jewish faith, and Hodl, the daughter who kept with it, will both most likely suffer the tortures that the Stalinist regime inflicted upon its Jewish citizens. Ironically, because *Fiddler on the Roof* ends with the idea that the fiddler will keep fiddling and the story will continue,

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<sup>319</sup> Stein, Bock and Harnick, *Fiddler on the Roof* 150.

<sup>320</sup> Stein, Bock and Harnick 150.

we are asked to look at those left behind as well. History shows that Chava will be labeled Jewish even if she has abandoned the Jewish tradition.

*Fiddler* portrays the idea of tradition through the manifestation of the body. Tradition is personified in a literal fiddler atop a roof, an image not from Sholem Aleichem's original tale, but from the paintings and stage designs of Marc Chagall. *Fiddler's* fiddler is symbolically conceptual: his body personifies the abstract notion of traditional belief and custom. Thus, as the Tevye story moves from Sholem Aleichem's tales to a lavish Broadway musical, the pulse of Jewish life changes as well. Tradition for *Fiddler's* Tevye is not rooted in sacred texts to the degree that it is for Sholem Aleichem's Tevye. Rather the contrary as the musical's Tevye deemphasizes the words of scripture. In original stories, Sholem Aleichem barely wrote a page without Tevye quoting "the Bible, Psalms, Rashi, Targum, Perek, you name it."<sup>321</sup> His Tevye is educated in the texts of his religion, and ascribes to them to the degree that his biggest trouble with his stubborn, underfed horse is that, unlike most Jews, he "can't be put off with some verse from the Bible[.]"<sup>322</sup> Although Tevye may quite often misquote textual authorities, his constant use (or misuse) of texts to explain away life's daily quirks and tribulations is a notable characteristic that is absent in *Fiddler*. Quoting text may have been a part of Tevye's tradition in Sholem Aleichem's stories, but it is not for the musical Tevye. While it is impossible to count the number of times Sholem Aleichem's Tevye quotes religious texts throughout the *Tevye Stories*, *Fiddler's* Tevye only quotes the Bible twice; yet the

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<sup>321</sup> Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories* 4.

<sup>322</sup> Sholem Aleichem 4.

words that Tevye quotes do not ring with any authority. The first time, Tevye moans about the lack of pleasure in being poor: “As the Good Book says, ‘Heal us O Lord, and we shall be healed’” but the words don’t do the situation justice and Tevye quips, “In other words, send us the cure, we’ve got the sickness already.”<sup>323</sup> The second, and last, time is in a soliloquy to God at the beginning of Act Two; there, the words aren’t even necessary: “As the Good Book says—Why should I tell You what the Good Book says?”<sup>324</sup> This is not to imply that Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye finds his Jewishness through scripture alone. Indeed, calling upon the words of sacred text is a part of Tevye’s routine, as daily as delivering milk. It is a part of the tradition that forms Tevye’s Jewish identity, even if Tevye misquotes more than he quotes correctly. Nevertheless, in *Fiddler*, quoting scripture is no longer part of that tradition. For the Tevye of *Fiddler on the Roof* is more limited in his approach to expressing a Jewish identity: words alone are too ephemeral. This Tevye needs a tradition that emphasizes performativity.

In the opening moments of the musical he tells the audience in the prologue, “Because of our traditions, we’ve kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka we have traditions for everything—how to eat, how to sleep, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. . . . Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do.”<sup>325</sup> In

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<sup>323</sup> Stein, Bock and Harnick 21.

<sup>324</sup> Stein, Bock and Harnick 104.

<sup>325</sup> Stein, Bock and Harnick 2-3.

essence, *Fiddler on the Roof*, through song and dance no less, defines constant religious devotion to God as being summed up by performed tradition. Through its emphasis of performed traditions over words of devotion, *Fiddler on the Roof* removes the authority of spiritual texts, ignoring where many of these traditions originate: “You may ask, how did this tradition start? I’ll tell you—I don’t know! But it’s a tradition.”<sup>326</sup>

Words of dedication to God are replaced by acts of dedication as they are embodied rather than spoken. In fact, as the opening musical number portrays it, Jewish life is performative, with each group of people – the papas, the mamas, the daughters and the sons – joyously singing about the roles that they must perform. In *Fiddler*, Jewish identity and religious devotion are defined by acts independent of the texts that many have found to be central to Jewish life, so much so that the Torah is conceived of as part of tradition rather than *evoking* tradition: in the Yiddish version of *Fiddler* performed in Tel Aviv, “Tradition! Tradition!” was not translated as “*Traditzya! Traditzya!*” but as “*Die Toyreh! Die Toyreh!*” (The Torah! The Torah!, i.e., the preeminent Jewish sacred text).<sup>327</sup>

By making the performance of tradition, and not the textual scriptures themselves, the overarching venue of Jewish devotion, *Fiddler on the Roof* creates a definition of religion that emphasizes the historical nature, and not the divine authority, of texts. Though Jewish tradition can be derived from written or oral law,

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<sup>326</sup> Stein, Bock and Harnick 2.

<sup>327</sup> Stephen Whitfield, “Fiddling with Sholem Aleichem: A History of *Fiddler on the Roof*” 108.

this Tevye shows a working knowledge of neither and still remains unabashedly Jewish, an appropriate construction for American Jews who have adapted to an American construction of a Jewish identity that separates Jewish culture/ethnicity from Judaism and views their religious identity as subsidiary to their ethnicity.<sup>328</sup> If census reports were any indication, what made a Jew a Jew was purely a religious identity; within this paradigm, a Jewish identity, accordingly, could be discussed with the same vocabulary as a Protestant one.

*Fiddler* recreates the symptomatic structure of an American Jewish identity in which ethnicity and religion have common, indistinguishable characteristics, a phenomenon that is in effect quite Jewish. Jacob Neusner has illustrated this point: “No one confuses the Catholic faith with the ethnic culture of Italians, Poles, Austrians, Spaniards, or Brazilians—Catholics all. To be a Lutheran is not necessarily also to be a Finn, Dane, Swede, Norwegian, or German.” However, for American Jews, the reverse is true: it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw a line between a Jew’s religion and his ethnicity. To be fair, Neusner opposes the American notion that Jewish ethnicity and Judaism are conflated to the point where the former

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<sup>328</sup> See, for example, Kosmin, et. al., *Highlights of the CJF [Council of Jewish Federations] 1990 National Jewish Population Survey*. Kosmin, et. al., show that of participants who consider themselves “Jews by Religion” (either born Jewish or converts to Judaism), only 49% of participants consider being Jewish to be a member of a religious group while 57% thought “ethnic group” was a clearer label and 70 percent thought “cultural group” was most appropriate. (Participants could select more than one response. Of participants who considered themselves “Born Jews with No Religion,” the results were similar: 35% chose “Religious Group,” 68% chose “Ethnic Group” and 80% chose “Cultural Group” leaving Stephen Whitfield to conclude from this survey that “the label of an ‘ethnic’ group was considered more accurate than a ‘religious’ group” (Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* 239).

controls the latter: “Judaism is not an ethnic religion, and the opinions of an ethnic group cannot serve to define that religion.”<sup>329</sup> However, where Neusner argues for a Judaism that separates itself from being shaped by American Jewish ethnic and culturally specific mores, his argument ultimately shows that the perception, if not the reality, of Jewish ethnicity and religion being inseparable does indeed exist. Ironically, but tellingly, through its depiction of *shtetl* life, *Fiddler on the Roof* dramatizes the interlocking relationship between ethnicity and Judaism still applicable to American Jews today. Because tradition is figuratively embodied in the fiddler, religion and custom seem inherently inseparable.

While Judaism shuns the idea of portraying religion through graven images, physicalizing Judaism is a means of showing that Judaism is more than a belief that can be adopted or discarded at will. The transference of Judaism to something corporal suggests that the essence of a person *changes* – not just spiritually, but physically – depending upon one’s acceptance of Jewish dogma. Belief, then, has physical components as well as mental, as shown through Paddy Chayefsky’s most famous play *The Tenth Man* (1959).<sup>330</sup> The play uses Jewish folklore as a framework for contemporary discussions of the Jewish faith but through its use of the *dybbuk*, the

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<sup>329</sup> Neusner, “Jew and Judaist, Ethnic and Religious,” *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity* 88.

<sup>330</sup> Criticism on Paddy Chayefsky’s drama is not vast, as his films have been given more scholarly attention. Only one full-length study examines his corpus of work. See John M. Clum’s *Paddy Chayefsky*. Leslie Field’s discussion of Paddy Chayefsky also focuses upon his stage work. See “Paddy Chayefsky’s Jews and Jewish Dialogues” in *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen*. After Chayefsky’s untimely death, the critical attention to his work seems to have dwindled with the exception of Shaun Considine’s biography, *Mad as Hell: The Life and Work of Paddy Chayefsky*.

spirit of the dead that uses living bodies as its host, demonstrates the effects belief – or in this case, disbelief – have upon the body.

*The Tenth Man* is a play that puts an American Jewish atheist's (lack of) faith to the test. Though it is based upon S. I. Ansky's *The Dybbuk* (1920), *The Tenth Man* is not a direct adaptation. Indeed, the departures that *The Tenth Man* takes turns the play into one that characterizes the role that faith plays in a Jewish identity. Ansky's original play is the most well known of all Jewish dramas outside of the Yiddish theater circle. Unlike *The Tenth Man*, *The Dybbuk* is first and foremost a love story between two eternal lovers in a Hasidic community in Eastern Europe: Khonen, a Talmud student who has a passion for the *Kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism), and Leah, the daughter of a wealthy businessman. Khonen dies from grief when he discovers that it has been arranged that Leah is married off to another man. On the day of Leah's marriage, Khonen's spirit becomes her *dybbuk*, that is to say he possesses her body. The two lovers are essentially of one spirit and one flesh. With the help of the Rabbi, who has had a dream that Khonen and Leah were fated to be with each other, a *minyán* of Jews – ten men – perform the cabalistic rituals to remove the *dybbuk* from Leah's body. Khonen eventually leaves, but not without Leah's spirit as well. She dies to join him in the other world where they can be with each other forever.

Ansky's *Dybbuk* is subtitled "Between Two Worlds," suggesting the tugs and pulls between what seems familiar and what is mysterious. To which world does love belong? Is love an earthly occurrence, or does it transcend the material world into a metaphysical experience that spans time and space? Likewise, *The Tenth Man* depicts two worlds, though the central question is not one of love but one of faith, as

several characters doubt the very existence of the *dybbuk* in Chayefsky's play. *The Tenth Man* takes place in a Long Island hole-in-the-wall synagogue inhabited by seemingly stereotypical *alta khakers* (old men) who try to one-up each other by complaining about their daughters-in-law:

ZITORSKY: My daughter-in-law, may she grow rich and buy a hotel with a thousand rooms and be found dead in every one of them.

SCHLISSEL: My daughter-in-law, may she invest heavily in General Motors, and the whole thing go bankrupt.<sup>331</sup>

Among the synagogue regulars there is a wide variety of religious belief, though all practice the Orthodox rituals particular to this synagogue. Even then, however, there are varying degrees of how one incorporates faith into daily life. Most do see ritual as independent of faith, including a young Rabbi who looks for new attention-grabbers so that young Jews will be attracted to worship. "I'm afraid there are times when I don't care if they believe in God as long as they come to the synagogue," he says.<sup>332</sup> Also included in the group is an elderly cabalist who sees mysticism as the central ingredient of Jewish life. Additionally, there is a "retired revolutionary," a self-avowed atheist, who is attracted to an Orthodox lifestyle because its existence proves that the Jews have survived the travesties of anti-Semitic Europe. He, like several in the congregation, laments the decline of the Orthodoxy in America.

"Where are all the Orthodox Jews?" he deplores, adding, "They have apostated to the Reform Jewish temples, where they sit around like Episcopalians, listening to organ

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<sup>331</sup> Paddy Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* in *The Collected Works of Paddy Chayefsky: The Stage Plays* 94.

<sup>332</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 142.

music.”<sup>333</sup> In fact, except for the Rabbi, himself an outsider in the small congregation, largely dismissed because of his youth, all the members of the daily *minyan* are looking backwards, bemoaning the state of modern Jewry by comparing it to Hasidic life in Europe:

SCHLISSEL: Well, look about you, really. Here you have the decline of Orthodox Judaism graphically before your eyes. This is a synagogue? A converted grocery store, flanked on one side by a dry cleaner and on the other by a shoemaker. Really, if it wasn't for the Holy Ark there, this place would look like the local headquarters of the American Labor Party. In Poland, where we were all one step from starvation, we had a synagogue whose shadow had more dignity than this place.

ALPER: It's a shame and a disgrace.

ZITORSKY: A shame and a disgrace.<sup>334</sup>

Enter Arthur Landau, the embodiment of the old men's lamentations over the state of Jewish life in America. Arthur, a scowling, depressed, alcoholic Jew who has little knowledge of (and no desire to learn about) his heritage, has been dragged off the street to be the tenth man in the *minyan* so that services may proceed. Arthur has agreed to attend because, as he says, “[A] little man stopped me on the street, asked me if I was Jewish, and gave me the impression he would kill himself if I didn't come in and complete your quorum.”<sup>335</sup> As they learn more about him, the daily attendees gape at him and quietly confer amongst themselves:

ALPER: To such a state has modern Jewry fallen. He doesn't know what phylacteries are. He doesn't want a shawl. He can't read Hebrew.

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<sup>333</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 112, 117.

<sup>334</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 117.

<sup>335</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 116.

ZITORSKY: I wonder if he's still circumcised.<sup>336</sup>

The play puts Arthur's dismissal of Jewish life to the test when he meets the lovely Evelyn Foreman, the granddaughter of one of the congregants who has been hiding her in the Rabbi's office because he fears that it is imminent that her parents will commit Evelyn to an insane asylum. Her grandfather is convinced that she is not mentally ill but possessed by a *dybbuk*, specifically that of Hannah Luchinsky who her grandfather disgraced in his youth. To say that Evelyn acts strangely is an understatement. When possessed, she adopts a "Russian accent," speaks with "archaic language" and introduces herself as the "Whore of Kiev, the companion of sailors."<sup>337</sup> Is she possessed by a *dybbuk* or is she simply mad?

Arthur takes an interest in the girl not only because of her beauty but also because both have spent many hours lying on a psychologist's couch. It is not the language of Torah, but the language of Freud in which these two find common ground, swapping stories about the trials and tribulations of psychoanalysis. The conversation is rather verbose; as Evelyn says, "Really, being insane is like being fat. You can talk about nothing else."<sup>338</sup> Arthur, too, reveals his neuroses in great detail. Recounting his repeated attempts at suicide, he concludes that life has become

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<sup>336</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 116. It is ironic, of course, that Chayefsky gives Alper the Anglo word "phylacteries" instead of the Hebrew word *tefillin*, which, among the company of his fellow Jews, he would most surely use. Chayefsky obviously recognizes that his audience, too, may not know what *tefillin* is.

<sup>337</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 106, 118.

<sup>338</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 131.

“unbearable” for him because he is “sensitive,” an odd conclusion for someone who takes a passive view of love:

ARTHUR: All it [love] means to me is I shall buy you a dinner, take you to the theatre, and then straight out to our tryst, where I shall reach under your blouse for the sake of tradition while you breathe hotly in my ear in a pretense of passion. We will mutter automatic endearments, nibbling at the sweat on each other’s earlobes, all the while gracelessly fumbling with buttons and zippers, cursing under our breath the knots in our shoelaces, and telling ourselves that this whole comical business of zipping off our trousers is an act of nature like the pollination of weeds. Even in that one brief moment when our senses finally obliterate our individual aloneness, we will hear ringing in our ears the reluctant creaking of mattress springs.<sup>339</sup>

Arthur’s lack of passion characterizes his observations, though he is not entirely without emotions. In the initial monologue in which he explains his sensitivities to Evelyn, the speech ends with Arthur having “to avert his face” so that he does not reveal “a sudden welling of tears.” True to form, however, he brushes away his tears immediately and dismisses the emotional response as simple histrionics, “As you see, I have quite a theatrical way when I want to.”<sup>340</sup> In fact, there is something very theatrical about the entire dialogue. It is as if Evelyn and Arthur are sharing their diagnoses with each other, using the very lines that they themselves have heard over the years, adopting the tone of, as Arthur calls it, “ironic detachment”:

ARTHUR: I can hardly believe you are psychopathic. Are you very advanced?

THE GIRL: Pretty bad. I’m being institutionalized again. Dr. Molineaux’s Sanitarium in Long Island. I’m a little paranoid and hallucinate a great deal and have very little sense of reality, except for brief interludes like this, and I might slip off any minute in the middle of a sentence into some incoherency. If that should happen, you must

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<sup>339</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 170.

<sup>340</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 134.

be very realistic with me. Harsh reality is the most efficacious way to deal with schizophrenics.<sup>341</sup>

Later, Arthur's analyst's words become his own. Before the exorcism of Evelyn's *dybbuk* is performed, she reveals that she is "very frightened" of the ceremony about to be performed. Arthur tries to be compassionate, but as has been the case throughout, his empathy is decidedly detached as he mimics his own psychologist:

ARTHUR: (*Rises*) Well, I spoke to my analyst, as you know, and he said he didn't think this exorcism was a bad idea at all. The point is, if you really do believe you are possessed by a dybbuk . . .

THE GIRL: Oh, I do.

ARTHUR: Well, then, he feels exorcism might be a good form of shock treatment that will make you more responsive to psychiatric therapy and open the door to an eventual cure.<sup>342</sup>

It is significant that during Arthur and Evelyn's initial conversation in the Rabbi's office, in which they swap diagnoses, the Torah service is being conducted in the sanctuary. At the conclusion of their conversation, the Torah service is concluded as well, with the Rabbi and his congregation speaking (oddly, not in Hebrew) the words that signify it so:

THE RABBI: (*Singing out*) "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hast given us the Law of truth, and hast planted everywhere life in our midst. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who givest the Law."

(*There is a scattered mumbled response from the old men in the synagogue. ZITORSKY now takes the Torah and holds it up above his head and chants.*)

ZITORSKY: "And this is the Law which Moses set before the children of Israel, according to the commandment of the Lord by the hand of Moses." (*The four men on the platform form a small group as*

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<sup>341</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 133, 132.

<sup>342</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 167.

*ZITORSKY marches slowly back to the Ark carrying the Torah. A mumble of prayers rustles through the synagogue. ZITORSKY's voice rises out) "Let them praise the name of the Lord; for His name alone is exalted."*<sup>343</sup>

Arthur and Evelyn's conversation taking place simultaneously with the Torah service is dramatically telling: on one side of the stage, Arthur and Evelyn have been recounting the words which their analysts have passed down to them, valuing them with the same reverence as the congregation on the other side of the stage which repeats the words of ritual and Torah, words that, also, have been passed down to them. In these parallel moments, *The Tenth Man* shows that for Arthur and Evelyn, psychoanalysis has functioned in the same way that religion has for the old men of the congregation, with the exception that psychoanalysis has made Arthur and, to a lesser extent, Evelyn, detached. *The Tenth Man* is the clash between an emotional reverence to religion and history and an unemotional allegiance to contemporary replacements for faith. The conflict between the old and the new is conflated with the collision between faith and reason, the mystical and the earthly, Judaism and science. Arthur possesses no passion for anything. "Life is utterly meaningless," he states. "I have had everything a man can get out of life—prestige, power, money, women, children, and a handsome home only three blocks from the Scarsdale Country Club, and all I can think of is I want to get out of this as fast as I can."<sup>344</sup> He is essentially searching for a higher purpose but the language of detachment, the very language passed down to him from the psychoanalyst's chair, keeps him from doing so. Even

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<sup>343</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 135.

<sup>344</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 134.

God is dramatically material for him. “I’m afraid I think of God as the Director of Internal Revenue,” he admits.<sup>345</sup> It is Evelyn, interestingly enough, who sees that he is missing a sense of spirituality. She tells him that she wants him to read *The Book of Splendor*, a Cabalist text, calling Arthur a mystic because she “never met anyone who wanted to know the meaning of life as desperately[.]”<sup>346</sup>

Throughout the play, Arthur doubts that Evelyn is possessed by a *dybbuk*, greeting the impending exorcism with great skepticism, if not resistance. Likewise, Arthur meets Evelyn’s love for him with unrepentant practicality. He states tenderly, but matter-of-factly, “I do not love you. Nor do you love me. We met five hours ago and exchanged the elementary courtesy of conversation—the rest is your own ingenuousness.”<sup>347</sup> All along, Evelyn has concluded that Arthur, too, is possessed by a *dybbuk* as well, one who locks a gate inside him to keep him from feeling emotion. On behalf of the congregation, Hirschman, the Kabbalist, concurs when he hears Arthur’s abhorrence of love. “The girl’s quite right. He is possessed. He loves nothing. Love is an act of faith, and yours is a faithless generation. That is your *dybbuk*.”<sup>348</sup> Arthur’s problem is diagnosed through physical imagery: his body is host to a *dybbuk* that clogs his ability to emote. His body, like Evelyn’s, is possessed. Thus, his lack of faith occurs because there is something wrong with his body. If the body is awry, it is part of a larger picture: Arthur’s spirituality is amiss as well. In

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<sup>345</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 130.

<sup>346</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 135-136.

<sup>347</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 169.

<sup>348</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 172.

fact, at the end of the play, when the exorcism takes place, Evelyn remains uncured and it is Arthur, the play suggests, who is literally exorcised of his *dybbuk*. As the stage directions read, “Arthur begins to moan softly, and then with swift violence a horrible scream tears out of his throat. He staggers one brief step forward. At the peak of his scream, he falls heavily down on the floor of the synagogue in a complete faint.”<sup>349</sup> When his body slowly recovers from the experience, one which he describes as “beyond pain,” Arthur realizes that the exorcism has brought spiritual, as well as physical, change. Arthur’s very essence has been altered: “God of my fathers, you have exorcised all the truth as I knew it out of me. You have taken away my reason and definition.”<sup>350</sup> While Arthur’s change of heart may seem dramatically dubious, that is precisely the point: it is easier to explain Arthur’s cathartic conversion by means of divine intervention than by psychoanalytic theory. Most importantly, it is a divine intervention that is staged through bodily imagery. In order to show that the soul has been cleansed, the body must be cleansed first. Arthur embodies his spirituality, both literally and figuratively. Here, Judaism is portrayed as something identifiably physical. Because the warped body represents misaligned faith, belief is shown to be inseparable from the body. Through American cultural norms have presented it otherwise, *The Tenth Man* conflates religion with more corporeal ways of identifying group identity.

*The Tenth Man* is not necessarily a religious play. It hardly proselytizes a belief. However, *The Tenth Man*, transforms Judaism into something tangible,

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<sup>349</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 184.

<sup>350</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 185.

something resembling the physical language on which multiculturalism is based rather than the language of belief. Once his body is cured, Arthur immediately becomes more “Jewish”: “Dybbuk, hear me. I will cherish this girl, and give her a home. I will tend to her needs and hold her in my arms when she screams out with your voice.”<sup>351</sup> This is a line that can only be directed at Evelyn, since it is her body that hosts the *dybbuk* that Arthur challenges. Evelyn’s body becomes the focal point of Arthur’s religious awakening. We don’t really know if Arthur believes that Evelyn is possessed, but he does believe that a *dybbuk* has possessed himself as well as Evelyn, metaphorically, if not in actuality. In the final words of the play, Alper concludes that Arthur “still doesn’t believe in God. He simply wants to love.”<sup>352</sup> Arthur’s desire to love is not sparked by belief, but by a willingness to accept Judaism as an embodied construction. Arthur has been lost, but the physicality of the body possessed, metaphor or not, makes the spiritual tangible enough for Arthur to accept.

In his next play, *Gideon* (1961), Chayefsky continues to portray religion through the language of the body. Like *The Tenth Man*, the body is once again the metaphor for faith. In *Gideon*, the play is a dramatization of the short Biblical story found in *Shoftim* (Book of Judges, 6-8) in which God chooses the simple farmer Gideon, far from likely to become a heroic figure, to lead the Jews into battle with the Midianites. In the Biblical story, Gideon is originally visited by the Angel of God, but after Gideon offers God an animal sacrifice and some unleavened bread, the

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<sup>351</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 186.

<sup>352</sup> Chayefsky, *The Tenth Man* 187.

Angel disappears.<sup>353</sup> As God instructs Gideon through his battle preparations, no mention of the Angel is made again. Chayefsky, however, uses the Angel as a dramatic device embodying God's words throughout the entire dramatization. Though the Angel serves as God's representative, he talks as if he were God, as if no channel between God and Gideon exists.

After meeting God/The Angel for the first time, Gideon's sense of purpose is altered. Following God's direction, he carries his people into battle. After his success, a victory that was only achieved because God wanted Gideon to succeed, Gideon begins to question the purpose of life if it means that he must live it solely for God:

GIDEON: I tried to love you, but it is too much for me. You are too vast a concept for me. To love you, God, one must be a god himself. . . . I saw myself and all men for what we truly are, suspensions of matter, flailing about for footholds in the void, all the while slipping back screaming into endless suffocations. That is the truth of things, I know, but I cannot call it truth. It is too hideous, an intolerable state of affairs. I cannot love you, God, for it makes me a meaningless thing.<sup>354</sup>

Gideon's discomfort with submitting his will to God is Chayefsky's addition to the original story and quickly becomes the focus of the play. Unlike Archibald MacLiesh's Pulitzer Prize winning drama *J.B.* (1958) and Neil Simon's *God's Favorite* (1974), the latter of which is discussed below, this is not a play in which God puts man on trial. In fact, as Chayefsky has said himself, "My play is not about

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<sup>353</sup> *Shoftim* (Book of Judges: 21), *The Holy Scriptures*, Jewish Publication Society of America.

<sup>354</sup> Chayefsky, *Gideon*, *The Collected Works of Paddy Chayefsky: The Stage Plays* 265.

God testing Gideon. It's about Gideon testing God."<sup>355</sup> The fundamental question that Gideon poses is that if man was created in God's image, why should he submit and live for God rather than desire to advance to become like God. Gideon wants more of a reason to live than to serve God. "Could I not pretend there is some reason for their being here? Pretend, my Lord, no more than that. Let me have at least some bogus value." God is gentle, but cool in his response: "I am truth, Gideon. I cannot vary."<sup>356</sup>

Part of the difficulty is that Gideon cannot comprehend what divine love means. Because he has no other language in which to describe it, Gideon cannot help but compare the love between God and man to that between man and woman. In fact, at times Gideon sounds much like a jealous lover:

GIDEON: Have you loved many men, my Lord?

THE ANGEL: I love all men. It is my essence.

GIDEON: I mean, men with whom you have truly commeced face-to-face as you have with me.

THE ANGEL: Five or six, perhaps.

GIDEON: Were they as pleasing to you as I am, my Lord?<sup>357</sup>

His love for God is nearly obsessive as he physicalizes the experience of divine love: "I thought of nothing but you the whole night. I am possessed by all the lunacy of love. If I could, I would cover you with veils, God, and keep you hidden behind the curtains in my tent. Oh! Just say again you love me, God."<sup>358</sup> Of course, veils and

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<sup>355</sup> Quoted in "Man and His God," 69.

<sup>356</sup> Chayefsky, *Gideon* 267-268.

<sup>357</sup> Chayefsky, *Gideon* 229.

<sup>358</sup> Chayefsky, *Gideon* 230.

curtains cannot keep other men from experiencing God, but Gideon can only understand God through physical presence. Gideon's inability to see God's love for him as something other than earthly, physical, even carnal, concerns God, who questions why Gideon can only talk of him as if he were "no more than . . . [a] dissolute lady" and later a "wanton lady" who finds Gideon to be "handsome and sends [him] into battle with her handkerchief."<sup>359</sup> Though Gideon may limit divine love to that of the physical, it is God who has created the analogy for him in that God has appeared in the human form of his Angel who, if not for the miracles he could perform, Gideon would have presumed to be nothing more than a stranger amongst the tribe. If God is troubled by Gideon's incapability to see God's love in terms other than the physical, it is because God has approached Gideon on those very terms. God has created the metaphor for Gideon, and is then frustrated that Gideon cannot envision divine love to be beyond the realm of the physical. Even when Gideon begs to be released from God's covenant, God falls back on the image of a marriage: "Are you suggesting some sort of divorce between God and you?"<sup>360</sup>

Gideon is sharp enough to reason that the inability to comprehend man's relationship with God is a human condition. Man will never be able to understand God through anything other than earthly images. Consequently, Gideon reasons that he cannot return divine love because it would mean that his life would be restricted to living on God's behalf with no opportunity for success on his own terms and no avenue to pursue individual ambition. If the love between God and man is equated to

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<sup>359</sup> Chayefsky, *Gideon* 229, 233.

<sup>360</sup> Chayefsky, *Gideon* 265.

that of a man and a woman, with God taking the role of a desired female, why should the man yield entirely to God? In the final scene, Gideon rejects God. Since God has constructed his relationship with Gideon through physical, bodily metaphors, Gideon pretends that God physically does not exist. If God is invisible, if he cannot be seen or heard, then the metaphor is broken. Even knowing that God truly does exist, he pretends that God no longer shows his presence. Feigning not to hear God's protests, knowing full well of the wrath that may follow, Gideon puts on a golden ephod, the richly woven garment which God had demanded for himself. As Gideon dresses in the fabric, he whirls about and cries out, "O God! I cannot believe in you! If you love me, let me believe at least in mine own self! If you love me, God!" God is sympathetic—"I love you, Gideon!"—but unyielding.<sup>361</sup>

The metaphor of God as a bodily figure is Chayefsky's own. It is a metaphor that is metatheatrical as well. The audience is taught to see God in physical terms since God appears before them in the form of Frederic March's body, as was the case in the original 1961 production.<sup>362</sup> As an audience, they – like Gideon – have understood divine presence through the God-as-a-body metaphor that Chayefsky has fashioned on the stage. The play ends with an epilogue that calls attention to *Gideon's* theatricality. As the Angel moves downstage, once again speaking God's words, he regards the audience seated before him:

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<sup>361</sup> Chayefsky, *Gideon* 270-271.

<sup>362</sup> The original actor cast in the role was Tyrone Guthrie, who directed the show as well. Guthrie had limited experience performing, having only acted once on stage when he was quite young. He eventually dropped the part and handed the role to March. Had Guthrie stayed with the role it would have heightened the metatheatricality of this play: the director playing God. See Considine 203.

ANGEL: Oh it is amusing  
God no more believes it odd  
That man cannot believe in God.  
Man believes the best he can,  
Which means, it seems, belief in man.  
Then let him don my gold ephod  
And let him be a proper god.  
Well, let him try anyway.  
With this conceit, we end the play.<sup>363</sup>

With God's epilogue, the play becomes strikingly contemporary, and just as Gideon had challenged God, the Angel challenges the audience – heirs to Gideon's illusion – to reflect upon God's role in their lives. This shift from the Biblical to the contemporary inspired Robert Brustein to write a scathing review of the play, worth quoting at length: "It would not surprise me if Chayefsky, before writing *Gideon*, had made a sociological depth study of upward cultural mobility among the newly rich, the growing religiosity in the suburbs, and just how much rebellion an audience is willing to tolerate before running for the exits. In his new play he has managed to unify all three columns of the questionnaire (*Yes*, *No* and *Undecided*) by combining secular sentiments with religious pieties, vaudeville effects with Herman Wouk metaphysics, and the titillation of revolt with the security of conformity."<sup>364</sup> As contemptuous as Brustein may sound, his review locates the Janus-faced dramatization of faith. With his "Herman Wouk metaphysics," Brustein alludes to a very Jewish predicament; Wouk has argued in *This is My God*, and has depicted in *Marjorie Morningstar* and *Inside, Outside*, that the anxiety of conformity has had a greater negative impact upon Judaism than persecution; American Jews in particular

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<sup>363</sup> Chayefsky, *Gideon* 272.

<sup>364</sup> Brustein 21.

have mistaken conformity for independence. While *Gideon* provides no answers, in its epilogue it is aware of itself as a performance, just as it links Gideon's performance with the audience's: man may have become more secular in his move away from God, even though he knows that God exists. Likewise, man has rejected something that has been made obvious by the play's unambiguous use of the body as representing God: God's existence is unquestionably identifiable. Man chooses to ignore God, a decision which, according to the logic of the play, has valued individualism over common sense. As the God of *Gideon* is physically manifested in the human form of the actor who plays him, it is clear that Gideon's decision to ignore God's presence dispenses with an obvious truth, even if we remain sympathetic towards Gideon's decision to snub God. Similarly, as God turns to the audience at the end of the play, they find themselves in an analogous predicament.

On the one hand, it may seem particularly "not Jewish" to embody God. After all, Judaism contains no pietas, no nativity scenes, no symbolic figure of Christ. The human body as a visual representation of God in art and iconography is simply non-existent in Judaism. However, Judaism is a religion centered upon the body: circumcision, digesting kosher food, an unwillingness to embrace celibacy. In Judaism, religion is mediated through bodily acts. Thus, it is not only God that is represented in the form of man, but also the equally abstract idea of faith itself. Gideon's turn away from God is a turn away from faith; the two are not necessarily the same thing, as one can have faith without believing in God. Gideon, however, rejects both. Before Gideon exits the stage at the end, Abimelech asks to hear more of God's victory over Midian. Gideon, however, replies, "A miracle? Why do you

call it that? Nay, my uncles, the war with Midian was not mysterious[.]” Gideon here does not only reject the idea of “God’s victory” but also the larger vision of a miracle, one dependent upon belief in forces beyond human control. Faith cannot explain this victory because, as he says before exiting, it was merely “the inevitable outgrowth of historioco-economic, socio-psychological and cultural forces prevailing in these regions.”<sup>365</sup>

Gideon is the fool here, as sympathetic a character as he may be, because Judaism *is* a literal body – how can a body’s existence be rejected? The body has become a simple way of representing the complexities of Judaism where form fits function: by representing faith/Judaism in a bodily form, it demonstrates that Judaism cannot be easily discarded. In fact, as is the case in Neil Simon’s play *God’s Favorite* (1974), faith leaves its mark upon the body in such a way that the body would look different without it. Of all of Simon’s dramas, *God’s Favorite*, a play that represents a test of faith through the deterioration of the body tackles religion the most directly.<sup>366</sup> It was written, according to Simon, as a cathartic response to his first wife’s untimely death. Like *Gideon*, *God’s Favorite* is a dramatization of a Biblical story, this time the Book of Job. However, the story has been modernized, chock full of seventies

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<sup>365</sup> Chayefsky, *Gideon* 271.

<sup>366</sup> Arguably, Neil Simon’s *God’s Favorite* is not his best work. Indeed, the play was a surprising failure for Broadway’s most popular playwright. Though critics generally panned the play, it does, however, demonstrate a shift in the Neil Simon dramatic canon, foreshadowing the more serious tone of the plays that mark his later decades. James Fisher has argued the importance of this play in the development of Simon’s dramatic technique and reconsiders the play in spite of its commercial and critical failure. See his essay, “A Perfect and Upright Man’: A Reassessment of Neil Simon’s *God’s Favorite*” in *Neil Simon: A Casebook*.

pop culture references, which today, even in its contemporary reinterpretation of Job, make the play seem dated.

Our contemporary Job is Joe Benjamin, a wealthy father of three whose story is one of rags to riches. The play begins with an attempted break in; after the burglar alarm sounds and Joe surveys the scene, Joe finds no trace of any trespasser. His family remains unconvinced, and imagines the horrific possibilities – a murderer? A rapist? – but Joe dismisses their nervous fantasies abruptly with more than a note of asceticism:

JOE: No one is going to cut our throats, steal our jewels or do the “other thing.” I guarantee it . . .but I can’t promise it! Because whatever happens, happens. How we live and how we die is in the hands of our maker. We go to sleep and pray we get up in the morning. But if we don’t, it’s because it’s God’s will . . . *God’s will*, do you understand? *Do you?*

ROSE: Yes, Joe.

BEN and SARAH: Yes, Daddy.

JOE: Then say it!

ROSE, BEN and SARAH: We understand! It’s God’s will.

JOE: Thank you! I hope you all feel better . . . Now let’s go to bed.

DAVID: And pray it ain’t ‘God’s will’ tonight!<sup>367</sup>

Joe’s source of frustration is his son David, obviously witty, but a hurtful rebellious, alcoholic young man who rejects Joe’s earnest faith for more hedonistic pleasures. Though David is slick in repartee, his humor is a cover for his struggles with a lack of self-confidence; he fears that he can never live up to his father’s pristine standards, but neither father nor son seems to realize this. Instead, David challenges his father’s religious convictions:

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<sup>367</sup> Neil Simon, *God’s Favorite, The Collected Plays of Neil Simon: Volume 2* 489-490.

JOE: Where is your faith, David? Have I brought you up without faith, or have you just lost it?

DAVID: If you want, I'll look in my closet in the morning . . .

JOE: I would give away everything I have in this world if I could just hear you say, "Dear God in heaven, I believe in you."

DAVID: Listen, I'm willing to discuss it with the man . . . You know his number, call him.

(DAVID gets a whiskey bottle, and heads back to the door.)

JOE: Oh, David, David. The son who doesn't believe is the father's greatest anguish. Do you know what it says in the Bible, David?

DAVID: Yes, Dad . . . "This book belongs to the Sheraton-Plaza Hotel."<sup>368</sup>

During the conversation that follows, David reveals that he can't stand being surrounded by material reminders of his family's wealth; the Benjamin family seems to have everything they want. In one of the longest monologues that Simon has written for any of his characters, Joe pleads with his son to realize that his difficult childhood forced him to learn the value of a dollar; he started out so poor that "the holes in [his] socks were so big, you could put them on from either end."<sup>369</sup> Growing up in an East Side New York tenement, Joe's father died young and his mother worked in a sweatshop to raise eleven children. Joe tells us she never complained because, as she said to him, "It's God's will." He tries to convey to David, if the house burned down tomorrow, "he wouldn't blink an eye" because it was God's will that it should be so.<sup>370</sup> Later, alone, as if he was Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, Joe looks towards the heavens and poses: "Am I wrong? . . . Is all of this too much for one family? If it is, then why did You give it to me? It's enough already, dear Lord.

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<sup>368</sup> Simon 494.

<sup>369</sup> Simon 492.

<sup>370</sup> Simon 492.

Don't give me any more. Just David. Give me back my David . . . If it be Your Will, dear God, that's all I ask . . . Amen!"<sup>371</sup>

While Joe's religious affiliation goes unspecified in the play and though his kneeling and hand clasping, prompted by his African-American servants, may complicate identification of his religion, it is clear that this is a Jewish family. In Martin Gottfried's review of the play in the *New York Post*, he writes, "Of course we know he is Jewish because of the way Simon writes people and their dialogue."<sup>372</sup> Aside from the fact, lest we forget, that Job was Jewish, the cadence of the Benjamin family's language bears a striking similarity to the frenetic punch line Yiddish-inflected humor that spans most of Simon's plays, a rhythm that marks Benjamin as unquestionably Jewish:

JOE: I'll turn the lights out.

ROSE: *No!* That's what he's waiting for.

JOE: Then I'll leave them *on*.

ROSE: So he can see better? Are you crazy?<sup>373</sup>

After his family departs for bed, the trespasser reveals himself; he is Sydney Lipton, an older New Yorker employed as God's messenger (literally) hoping to earn enough money so that he and his wife Sylvia can relocate to Florida. (Obviously, God's messenger is Jewish, too.) Sydney has come to inform Joe that the wealthy father of three is, in fact, God's favorite and that God has made a bet with the Devil (who, Sydney tells us, happens to look a lot like Robert Redford). God bet that Joe

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<sup>371</sup> Simon 494.

<sup>372</sup> Gottfried 148.

<sup>373</sup> Simon 489.

would never renounce Him in spite of any terrible misgivings that may come to pass. So that God may win the bet and prove the Devil wrong, God will inflict horrors upon horrors on Joe to show the Devil that no matter what, Joe will never abandon Him.

This is exactly what God does. After first burning down Joe's box company, followed by the mansion, the brunt of God's test takes its physical toll on Joe's body. First Joe is punished with an unreachable itch that moves around his body, followed by neuralgia, bursitis and tennis elbow, all at once. Act one ends with the worst pain so far: flaring hemorrhoids. When the curtain rises again, Joe has physically changed. The stage directions read that Joe is "bent over, half in pain, half because of an aging process that has made him old before his time. Even his hair has grayed. He is in tatters and rags, cloths wrapped around his feet. He is parched, shriveled and weak. His lips are cracked and when he speaks, it is with great effort and pain."<sup>374</sup>

Lipton tells him that more is to follow:

LIPTON: The previews. The coming attractions. Let me read you what's playing July tenth through August fourteenth . . . (*Reads*) A hernia, gastritis, a double impacted wisdom tooth, a root canal job, the heartbreak of psoriasis, constipation, diarrhea, piles, dysentery, chills, fever, athlete's foot, lumbago, a touch of gonorrhea and a general feeling of loginess . . . All this, mind you, is on the left side of your body.<sup>375</sup>

*God's Favorite* is a comedy, of course, and much of this is played for laughs. The audience is expected to laugh as Joe physically becomes more and more pathetically grim. However, there are many ways that Simon could have had God inflict his power upon Joe; frogs, vermin, locusts, or any of the other seven plagues are well

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<sup>374</sup> Simon 529.

<sup>375</sup> Simon 537.

established forms of torture. Nor does God demand an action from Joe – no performance of faith like asking Joe to bind his first born son for sacrifice at the altar. God could have killed Joe’s children as He does in the Biblical story. Instead, God goes wants more than a performance of devotion: faith in God must be represented through the destruction of the body. Joe’s body must bear the signs of devotion. Should Joe renounce God, his body will not receive the torture that his belief in God has brought it. The more he resists renouncing God, the more he is physically marked as a believer. As Joe is singled out as sincerely faithful, God demonstrates to the Devil that Joe’s words of devotion reflect the same permanency as his body’s shape and structure. Belief is not enough; a more tangible proof is necessary: it must be reflected in Joe’s physical make-up. If Joe is truly committed to God, then his body will wear the physical evidence that God needs to show devotion, not unlike Abraham’s circumcision, abiding by God’s command.

When Joe is unyielding, God starts destroying the offspring of Joe’s body as well and blinds David. Though horrified that his son’s body will become the new receptacle of Joe’s test of faith, Joe still is unwilling to say the words that would free them both from their torture:

*JOE: (Clenches his fists and shakes them at the heavens. His grief, his anger, is enormous) Is this Your work? . . . Is this Your test of faith and love? . . . You blind my first-born son and still expect me to love you? Punish me, not him! Blind me, not my son . . . Where is your love? Your compassion? Your justice? . . . I AM ANGRY AT YOU, GOD! REALLY, REALLY ANGRY! . . . And STILL I don’t renounce you! How do you like that, God?*

At that point, God yields: David is cured of his blindness, and Joe’s wife returns home having just, by chance, entered a TV game show studio and, wonders of

wonders, miracles of miracles, being picked to be a contestant – and won. (All her questions happened to be about Bible stories). Perhaps more miraculous, however, is that after the traumatic experience, David has changed for the better. He is less snide and sarcastic and, astoundingly, even volunteers to clean up a bit around the house. After the Benjamin family heads out, David is left alone and looks upwards, “Ok, God . . . If you got room for one more, count me in.”<sup>376</sup> The key here is that David’s transformation has taken place only after he has been physically transformed: if the body was refigured, the soul was refigured as well. David’s blindness was not permanent, but nevertheless, the physicality of the experience – like God’s use of Joe’s body to prove devotion – made belief more earthly than ethereal.

In all of these plays, because belief is demonstrated through the body, there are physical repercussions for being observantly Jewish, so much so that Judaism seems organic as well as spiritual. Partly because of the nature of theater, but also because of a Jewish-American’s negotiated identity, Judaism is represented as somatic. Thus, as these plays arrange it, there are tangible, corporeal differences that make a Jew a Jew: the very definition of Judaism as strictly a religion is uncertain if Judaism infuses the body with the spiritual in its conflation of spirituality with physicality. Theatrical performance blurs the characterization of Judaism as faith. This is not to imply that Judaism renders biological results (or vice versa), but that by conflating the Jewish religion with the Jewish body, Jews are positioned with a group cohesion that allies them more closely with multicultural definitions of race rather than with Christian-American definitions of religion. Jewish performance has

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<sup>376</sup> Simon 544.

adopted the language of racial difference in the presentation of Jewish identity as an identity grounded in physical difference. On the one hand, presenting Judaism through bodily difference has reduced difference to its most simplistic representation: Judaism is different because it is physically so. On the other hand, such a representation complicates the categorization of Judaism as a religious group. Through its emphasis on the body, religion and race overlap, dramatizing the fact that Jews do not fall into either of these two categories independently. Judaism has become, here, a troublesome label, an identity that just won't fit within pre-established divisions between race and religion. In this complex portrayal, because Judaism is physicalized, it is inherently different in construction from Christian religious identities.

## **Conclusion: Not Jewish Enough**

In a recent episode of *The Simpsons*, “Today, I Am a Clown,” Springfield’s most famous Jewish resident held his Bar Mitzvah. Walking through Springfield’s Lower East Side, Krusty the Clown discovered that the Jewish walk of fame did not include a six-pointed star with his name on it. When he demanded an answer from the Jewish agency, he was informed that since he was never Bar Mitzvahed he was never recognized as someone who was a good Jewish role model. Dejected and rejected by his people, he wondered if he could even be considered Jewish: “I thought I was a self-hating Jew but now I find out I’m just an anti-Semite.” Ultimately, with a little help from his rabbi father (voiced by Jackie Mason), who never gave his son a Bar Mitzvah, because Krusty never took his Jewish identity seriously, Krusty decides to have a Bar Mitzvah. True to form, however, he turns his Bar Mitzvah into a reality television show, complete with Jewish-inspired physical challenges, the Beach Boys singing the theme song (“Mezzuzah, Menorah, let’s all read the Torah”) and Mr. T as guest celebrity. But when he sees his father shake his head in the audience, Krusty realizes that once again he has made a mockery of his religion. He abandons the ratings gimmick and holds a traditional Bar Mitzvah. *The Simpsons* is one of America’s sharpest venues of cultural criticism and the fact that the Jew who abandons his identity is mocked is noteworthy: *The Simpsons* satirizes the Jewish

entertainer who has abandoned his Jewish identity in order to get ahead. Where once it was desirable to avoid seeming too Jewish in order to achieve success in the entertainment industry, *The Simpsons* twists the motif: Krusty is a Clown precisely because he has sold out. Krusty is not ridiculed because he is too Jewish – rather the reverse: he is not Jewish enough. Is *The Simpsons* a harbinger of things to come? Given the 2004 Democratic Primary where not only Joe Lieberman, but John Kerry, Wesley Clark and Howard Dean, each touted their close ties to Jewishness, this suggests a larger picture: it is “in” to be Jewish.<sup>377</sup>

Traditionally, when it comes to Jewish identity, Hollywood has continued to portray the same old storyline. Ben Stiller’s recent hit, *Along Came Polly* (2004), for example, regurgitates Woody Allen’s neurotic Jewish male *shtick*. After his Jewish wife cheats on him with a naked French surfer, Stiller’s character, Reuben Feffer, who avoids a risky lifestyle because he is obsessed with safety, finally learns to live life to its fullest when he meets Polly, a non-Jewish hipster. Thanks to Polly, Reuben gets a gay dancer to teach him the samba so that he can keep up with Polly, stands up to his mother, and in the film’s final scene, shows off his newly found masculinity in a symbolic nude scene as he walks with her down a Caribbean beach. This movie was shortly preceded by another neurotic-*schlemiel*-becomes-more-manly by-dating-a-gentile movie, *American Wedding*, the third in the *American Pie* gross-out teen comedy series. Jason Biggs plays dorky Jim Levinstein, who desperately hopes that

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<sup>377</sup> Early in the campaign, John Kerry discovered his grandfather was Jewish. Likewise, his brother is a convert to Judaism. Wesley Clark claimed to descend from a long line of rabbis and Judith Steinberg, wife of Howard Dean, is Jewish. Their children are said to have been raised Jewish as well.

his not-Jewish fiancé's parents will like him. Jim is played by Jason Biggs, himself an Irish-Catholic, but Biggs fits seamlessly into the overused trope that a nice Jewish boy needs a *shiksán* order to be manlier. That Biggs is not Jewish should come as no surprise: the title of the film, *American Wedding*, clues us into the Jim's role here. Like so many Jewish male roles before him, he plays everyman here. Biggs, as *schlemiel*, is a representative figure: full of wedding jitters, somehow feeling unworthy in the face of a self-perpetuated American ideal.

Thus, these movies are more of the same: whether it is Woody Allen, Ben Stiller or Jason Biggs, the *schlemiel* plot line has become a template. Though *The Simpsons* and the 2004 Democratic Primary may point otherwise, little change has occurred in the portrayal of a perpetuated Jewishness against an imagined ideal Americanness. But what of theater? Though throughout I have discussed Jewish performance on the stage within the larger context of popular culture, I have stressed that the theater is a special case for examining Jewish identity because the audience is disproportionately Jewish. What can be concluded from a study of Jewish identity in the theater?

Because much attention has been given to the anti-Semitic insinuations in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ*, the movie has overshadowed a less precarious, but quite complex controversy over how Jews are to be portrayed. On February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2004 a revival of *Fiddler on the Roof* opened – with a non-Jewish actor playing Tevye. In fact, Alfred Molina, who plays the dairyman, is not the only non-Jewish actor: his wife and his three daughters are played by non-Jews as well. (The actresses who play Tzeitel, Hodel and Chava all sport the last names, Murphy, Kelly and

Paoluccio, respectively.) The controversy began when Thane Rosenbaum argued in the *Los Angeles Times* that the revival of *Fiddler on the Roof* had the feeling “as if you’re sampling something that tastes great and looks Jewish but isn’t entirely kosher.”<sup>378</sup> Rosenbaum argues that Molina’s Tevye isn’t Jewish enough, teetering over into an Everyman status rather than a Jewish character who also happens to manifest larger issues of assimilation. This *Fiddler*, Rosenbaum argues, has “in some profound, perhaps even intentional way, an absence of Jewish soul.”

The response to Rosenbaum’s review was turbulent and set off a series of articles in the Arts and Entertainment sections of major newspapers across the country, most lambasting Rosenbaum for suggesting that this *Fiddler* was lacking a sense of Jewishness. The article infuriated the show’s director, David Leveaux, who was reported to ignite a backstage scuffle with critics over the growing meme that his *Fiddler* was not Jewish enough. Predicting the debate that would follow, Alisa Solomon writes in the *Village Voice* one month before this *Fiddler* premiered, “For thousands of years, Judaism has remained constant in its adaptability, as Talmudic disputatiousness and contemporary needs have urged multiple reinterpretations of ancient scripture. Nowadays lesbians get married under the chuppah, boys talk baseball at their bar mitzvahs, and Passover seders proclaim the rights of Palestinians. But one Jewish text has remained resistant to renovation, with strict prohibitions against any alterations to the practice it originally laid out. Call it the 11th commandment: Don’t fuck with *Fiddler*”<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Rosenbaum E1.

<sup>379</sup> Solomon, “Fiddling With Fiddler,” *The Village Voice*.

At its outset, the debate over *Fiddler* questions whether a non-Jew can play the signature Jewish role in American Theater. (Surely the impressive 1971 film puts to rest any quibbles over a non-Jewish director mounting a revival.) While there have been a countless number of non-Jewish actors who have played Tevye (indeed, the production is a hit in Japan, featuring an all Japanese cast), the four Broadway runs that preceded Leveaux's have all been headed by Jewish actors in the starring role (Zero Mostel in 1964 and 1977, Herschel Bernardi in 1981 and Topol in 1990). Leveaux's *Fiddler* casts a number of non Jews in the production; as is rumored, they allegedly held callbacks on Yom Kippur! Certainly we have seen non-Jewish actors playing Jewish roles before. Not too far down the street, Nathan Lane plays Max Bialystock in *The Producers*, a role also originated by Zero Mostel. However, this is Tevye, the character who, in my last chapter, I showed to be the pinnacle of Jewish memory. Tevye was supposed to be the figure that counterbalanced the assimilated representations of Jews; he was the link to a legendary, if not imagined past. If the debate over Jewish representation has always asked "Too Jewish?," this controversy is the flip side of the coin. However, where Nathan Lane adopts Yiddish *shtick* in his gestures and inflection (in *The Producers*, Lane mimics Mostel's "If I Were Rich Man" dance, a nod to the actor who originated Lane's role in *The Producers*) under Leveaux's direction, Molina has abandoned the *shtick* that has characterized *Fiddler* for decades. In an interview with *Time Magazine*, Leveaux argued that *Fiddler* needed a facelift. "There are a lot of hand-me-down expectations about the show," he says. "Some of the stereotypical gestures and exaggerations are no longer in the show. They have become so clichéd they're an advertisement for the culture, not the

culture itself.”<sup>380</sup> Thus, this Tevye does not clench his fists, shake them towards the sky and wiggle his belly during “If I Were A Rich Man,” nor does Molina mirror Zero Mostel and Topol’s howl, “There is no other hand!” when Chava reveals that she loves the gentile boy, Fyedka. Molina’s reaction is abrupt; as Richard Zoglin writes, “He’s not suffering for all Jews; he’s one man drawing an ethical line in the sand.”<sup>381</sup> Additionally, the 2004 revival ditches the Marc Chagall sets that helped turn the 1964 production into a mythic version of Jewish history. Likewise, it places the orchestra on the stage – an ironic choice, given the attention that the script gives to sole fiddler motif.

The debate over Tevye seems absurd at first: after all, these are actors. Shouldn’t a non-Jew be able to portray Tevye? However, the Tevye debate gets to the core of the central issue throughout my study: performing Jewishness is a process that embodies imagined cultural representations. Just as few Jews could be said to resemble the “Hebrew comics” on the American stage at the turn of the century – they were an obvious performance of a fictional Jewishness – who would be so bold as to claim that the gestures, mannerisms, vocal cadences and physical manifestations exhibited in representations of Jews in popular culture are universally Jewish? In the Tevye debate, I see a desire for control over who gets to define, let alone embody, Jewish representation. Tevye has manifested a history of Jewish identity; for that history – fictional as it may be – to be embodied by a non-Jew, one who has rejected the gestured “codes” of Jewishness that have become inseparable from Tevye,

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<sup>380</sup> Qtd in Zoglin 76.

<sup>381</sup> Zoglin 76.

suggests the fictional nature of nostalgia to begin with. The debate over Molina's performance as Tevye is not so much over the fact that he isn't Jewish, but that he isn't willing to continue in the tradition of performing an identifiably physical Jewishness. Non-Jews have played Jews before, of course, but those who have been said to have been convincing as Jews have been said to have "seemed Jewish." In other words, they have partaken in performances that have behaviorally, vocally and bodily identified with an imagined physical difference that distinguishes Jews from all others. They have translated Jewishness into something just as inherently different – suggestively biological – as race or sex. At the start of the twentieth century, Jewish performance may have viciously mocked the idea of Jewish difference by portraying Jewishness as physical, but today Jewish performance still clings to the idea that Jewishness is in part connected to the body just as our language of difference is largely of the body as well.

In fact, the emphasis upon the body as the heart of Jewishness connects nearly all of the plays that I have mentioned, which in turn are only a small representation of the number of plays that portray Jewish identity through physicality: be it adopting a black body to prove Jewish whiteness (Raphaelson's *The Jazz Singer*, Jewish minstrel performances), manipulating blackness to dramatize Jewish difference (Sackler's *The Great White Hope*, DaSilva, Leon and Rome's *The Zulu and the Zayde*, Uhry's *Driving Miss Daisy*, Gardner's *I'm Not Rappaport*), redefining beauty in order to represent Jewish difference (Stein's *Funny Girl*), paralyzing the Jewish body to represent prejudice against the Jewish population (Laurents' *Home of the Brave*, Miller's *Broken Glass*), putting the Jewish body in drag to challenge Jewish

masculinity (Molly Picon's pants roles on the Yiddish stage, Jewish comedians' drag routines, Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*), allowing the Jewish woman's body to speak, an act which in and of itself challenges stereotypes of Jewish masculinity (Wendy Wasserstein's works), comparing the Jewish body to the AIDS-stricken body in order to link the Jewish and the gay American experience (Hoffman's *As Is*, Kramer's *The Normal Heart* and *The Destiny of Me* Lapine and Finn's *Falsettos*, Kushner's *Angels in America*), rendering the Jewish body impotent as punishment for abandoning a Jewish identity (Miller's *Broken Glass*, Gardner's *Conversations with My Father*), punishing the Jewish body for a desertion of ethics (Miller's *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan*).

Bodies have the perception of being inflexible, yet Jewish American drama has shown their malleability. Ironically, the Jewish body is continually manipulated to imply that Jewishness is a permanent, physical trait, one permanent enough to give the impression that Jews should be placed along side groups that have more traditionally been seen as part of a multicultural establishment. The body allows Jews to enter into the inner sanctum of race, an emphasis that veers Jews away from being categorized solely as a religious group. Adopting the idea that the benefits of difference are realized through tangible distinctions, Jewishness is reconfigured towards something physical. Stage Jewishness is not the language of inclusion into the mainstream. Instead, Jewishness is the language of representation, taking on a race-like construct, if we are to view race not for its biological characteristics, but as a term that establishes group difference, a difference that is, in one way or another, an unalterable one. Just as anti-Semitic stage representations depict Jewish difference

through physical portrayals, Jewish playwrights have ironically inherited a similar tactic in order to reestablish Jews as an identifiable group set apart from mainstream America. The reshaping of the Jewish body so that it coincides with modern multicultural rhetoric and images to establish Jewish difference, ironically, the process is a very American one, as Americans have understood difference best in visual, tangible representations. In this way, presenting Jewishness as physical may, on the one hand, indirectly manifest Judaism's emphasis on the body, but on the other hand it Americanizes Judaism as well. Is it too cynical to suggest that America understands difference best in the most simplistic terms possible? Here the body denotes distinction. In this way, the performance of Jewishness will never become too Jewish because, by examining how the Jewish body has been constructed, it is a process which is all too American.

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